

My Life Untold

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Published by S.S. Gee Buro at Smashwords

ISBN 9781311963116

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****A note to our readers:** Certain names for the locations and landmarks in this book are not accurate for the time period in which it takes place. We have done this intentionally so the reader will be able to identify the places and landmarks according to their present day names.

Prologue

I do not pen this memoir as a confession or justification of my sins. It is neither to convince you, nor myself, that the life I lived held meaning and was fulfilling. I had been content to let the story I now write die with me and all knowledge of it remain untold...but the irony of this, my life, continues. At the park this afternoon a young man sat on the bench across from me and waited with the impatience of youth. He withdrew from his coat a silver plated pocket watch, checked its time and replaced it. He did this over and over, every few minutes, the sun reflecting from the polished silver and begging me to take notice. I found the symbolism, both figurative and literal, to be too much of a coincidence. It is not a pretty thing when a ninety four year old woman cries, and it hurts more than it does in youth, but it means you are still alive. I write this for me and I suppose in some small way for you.

Chapter One

My parents boarded a boat in Bremen, Germany headed for America in January of 1843. They carried with them a small inheritance and the hopes of finding the opportunity they were denied in Germany. When they stepped off the boat at Ellis Island, twenty-three weeks later, my mother unknowingly carried me, and my father carried the burden of being mute. They had befriended a man by the name of Klaus Stehn, a fellow German passenger from neighboring Kammerstein. The three spent many evenings easing their homesickness with tales of their motherland. Klaus was a cobbler and intended on opening a shop after he got settled and raised enough funds. He was also a petty thief. During the long voyage many complaints were made concerning missing valuables. It was not until the Captain's silver plated pocket watch went missing that a search of the immigrant's quarters were ordered. All of the missing items, including the pocket watch, were discovered in a burlap bag beneath my father's bunk. Two men from the ship's crew hauled my father onto deck where the captain waited. My father was shown the bag and vehemently denied ever having set eyes upon it.

"But it was under your bunk!" The captain said, his face red as he turned the bag over and thrust it toward my father.

"And it has Deutschland on it." The empty feed sack was marked with a large 'DEUTSCHLAND'. Below that was the name of a family mill with the town of Kammerstein beside it. My father searched the crowd for Klaus and spotted him at the back, watching the scene unfold with indifference. Before my father could point to the real thief, swift justice was given. They held my father down and cut out his tongue, flinging it into the ocean. The captain told my mother that they had shown him mercy.

"We could have marked him as a thief and left him with only one hand to greet America." They docked in New York a week later.

My mother found work at a cotton mill. Long fifteen hour days, six days a week paid her \$12.48 a month. My father was not so lucky, it was hard for any man to find work in New York, let alone a mute immigrant. My mother found a piece of slate in the alley beside our flat in the seventh ward. She bought a small box of white chalk and handed these to my father along with a kiss as she left for the factory one morning. He was at first defiant and refused to use the slate, but soon found that any communication, even that which is scribbled in chalk, was better than none. He spent the days roaming the city's docks and hanging around the factory gates hoping for a chance. He found odd jobs here and

there, but none lasted long and few paid more than half what the job was worth. My mother did not falter from her work schedule and never complained of aches or swollen feet. She missed her first day of work on February 9th 1844. The midwife who attended my birth was summoned early that morning and I appeared a few pushes later. The midwife was not new to America and took advantage of my parents, charging them an outrageous sum which they had no choice but to pay. For the price of her services, the midwife should have given them a chubby, pink skinned baby, instead she handed them me, a small, sickly looking infant who wailed day and night. My appetite was insatiable and my mother was forced to remain at home with me until I was six months old. I rewarded her efforts by gaining weight and showing signs of good health. Our neighbor, Irenka, commented to my mother about how fat I was.

“And her cheeks, they are roses! When do you let me watch her?” Her thick polish accent would become my constant companion. The next day my mother woke early, tied a bundle of nappies together and took me to Irenka. She did not return until she had convinced the foreman at the cotton mill to take her back. My parents stayed up late that night scribbling numbers onto the blank spaces of an old newspaper. An empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit tin was at the center of the table. My birth and my father's injury had cut into the money they arrived with, but not so much that they couldn't recover. They agreed that when there was \$950.00 in the tin, we would leave New York and go to the country.

The years were lean. We saved every penny earned and did without more often than not. After months of searching, my father had a stroke of good luck and found steady work at a loading dock. The owner of the company happened to be nearby when he saw my father writing on his slate. The man had a mute child and took pity on my father, hiring him on the spot. Both of my parents would leave before light and return home once darkness had settled in. Irenka cared for me and my days were spent listening to endless stories of her beloved New York City. She had arrived here as a young lady and had fallen in love with the city. Her eyes would light up when she recounted her youth, sometimes slipping into polish when her arsenal of english did not have the words to describe her adventure. I came to love her as any child loved a grandmother. She in turn doted on me, giving in to my every whim.

“You spoil her Irenka.” My mother would scold, but the smile on her face showed how delighted she was to have her child cared for in such a loving way.

When I was nine my mother came home in a flush of excitement.

“We will have enough with this.” She held their earnings from the previous week in her hand and we stood silent, unsure what was to be done. My father took the biscuit tin from behind the kitchen radiator and the three of us sat in our chairs while he emptied it onto the table. Two piles were made. One pile held \$954.33 in paper and coin money. This was counted twice before we moved on. The other pile was scraps of paper with our individual names upon them. Each Christmas instead of actual gifts, we would write down what we wanted to give. I joined when I was old enough to speak, and delighted in the game, as happy as any child that awoke to a stack of gifts on Christmas. On Christmas morning we would read what we were going to get. I loved when my parents read mine. My mother would place a hand over her heart and exclaim how perfect my gift was. My father would draw whatever it was that I had given him and my mother and I would laugh at his wild pictures. Now the promises of eight years lay before us. My mother sorted the stack of mismatched papers and placed a pile on the table before each of us. My pile was larger than my mother's or father's, and this seemed to make them very happy. We unfolded the papers and read what was written on each. My mother said that her and my father would pick one each, but I was to pick two. My mother chose the paper saying 'rose bush'. I had given it to her when I was six. I chose one that said 'kitten' and one that said 'puppy'. My mother sighed and looked at my father who shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He pushed his scrap across for me to read aloud. It was the gift I had written just this past Christmas. I read it aloud. “Pocket watch.” I smiled at him, delighted, but did not know the story behind his misfortune.

My mother and father had been in contact with Kristof Schweitzer, the owner of a fifty acre farm in

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for over a year. He had placed advertisements in several of the larger newspapers, hoping to find buyers for his investment properties. The house had been named Stone Croft by the Scottish immigrant who had built it in the early 1700's. The barn and outbuildings were in need of minor repairs, but the soil had a proven record of producing abundant crops. Kristof, being of strong German heritage, felt an immediate kinship with my parents when he heard their story. He too had left Germany for America, seeking out opportunity and finding many obstacles along the way. In the end he broke even on his Gettysburg investment, but gained a friendship that was as loyal and strong as any family tie.

We left New York at the beginning of spring. It was a tearful good bye with promises made to write Irenka. I wanted her to come with us, but knew she would never leave her dear city. I waved goodbye from the window of the train as it pulled out of the New York railway station and headed for Philadelphia. We took several different trains and carriages before reaching Gettysburg the next afternoon. We were exhausted, the dust and grit from travel clung to us and we had slept little. The boots I wore were purchased for the trip and pinched my feet and I longed to remove them and wiggle my toes. My dress was also new, but was made of a soft cloth that neither scratched nor poked. I decided that the dress made up for the shoes and did not complain of my sore feet. Mr. Schweitzer was there to greet us when we stepped out of the carriage in Gettysburg. He was in his early forties, red cheeked and plump. His hair had hints of grey, but was thick and stuck up where no amount of pomade could tame it. It gave him a boyish charm and I liked him instantly.

"You must be Jonas." My father stepped forward and they shook hands.

"And Edda." He held my mother's hand at the fingertips and she gave a small curtsy.

"And you." He moved in front of me and gave a deep, sweeping bow.

"You must be Magda." I smiled, feeling my cheeks blush, and stared at the toes of my accursed boots.

We followed Mr. Schweitzer to a small office with a large front window. 'Fritz & Greene Law Office' was painted in white on the glass. While my parents and Mr. Schweitzer signed papers and exchanged money I sat and waited on an overstuffed couch. I looked out the window, past the block lettering, and observed my new town. It was much quieter than New York and the streets were devoid of rubbish and sludge. The people were dressed in simple clothing and made their way at a slower pace. My eyes felt heavy and I let them close. My mother woke me sometime later.

"Come Liebchen, we are going to our new home." Her face glowed and her eyes were clearer than I ever remembered seeing them. She was happy.

Chapter Two

We turned off of Emmitsburg Road and started down the long lane to the house and barn. The fields had lain fallow for several years, dried weeds and ground hog burrows dotted them. The barn was large and the wide doors gaped open on their hinges, revealing several stalls and a hayloft. I saw Father take hold of Mother's hand, his knuckles white. The house was amazing. It was built of stone, and appeared much more imposing than its size suggested. The white chipped paint on the windows and doors stood out in contrast to the grey and blue stone. A railed porch wrapped around three sides of the house, with steps at the front and back. I hopped down from the carriage as Mr. Schweitzer spoke with my parents, pointing to the out buildings and barns as he talked. I walked to the house and laid my hand on the cool rock. It felt eternal. I took the steps up to the front porch and walked to a window, cupped my hands around my eyes and peered in. There was an enormous stone hearth in the front room, with two stuffed chairs facing it, to the right of the hearth was a stone wall that ran to the center of the room. I moved to the next window to see more. A plastered wall jutted from the stone at a ninety degree angle and ended at the far wall, creating a separate room in the otherwise open floor space. I moved right to peek through the next window, but was met with a door. A stone, with the date 1754 carved into, was above the entrance. I reached out, turned the knob and pushed it open. The smell of a long winter greeted me before mixing with dust and tickling my nose. I paused to sneeze

twice before stepping through the deep, two foot doorway. At the far right of the room was a large dining table, slightly warped at one end, with six chairs spaced around it. I walked to the two doors at the left of the room near the hearth. The one on the right was open and I looked into the kitchen; a wood stove sat at the far wall and a copper apron sink was set before a window facing the back fields. I stepped back and turned my attention to the other door. I had to push hard on the rusted thumb latch before the small metal arm lifted and the door opened. The smell of damp earth rushed up to meet me. I let my eyes adjust to the dark and could make out the dim outline of canning shelves against the back wall. I longed to go down and explore the underground room, but would wait until I had a lamp or candle with me. I shut the door, leaning against it with all my weight until I heard the metallic snap as it latched close. I walked back to the right of the front door to a small landing at the foot of a flight of stairs. I mounted the steps, careful to avoid the boards that appeared splintered and weak, and counted as I went. Fourteen. At the top of the steps, a long hall ran to the opposite wall, three doors evenly spaced led to the bed rooms. I walked to each and looked into the spacious rooms. Each had a large window with a sill big enough to sit in. There was a shallow closet in each room, adorned with pegs for hanging clothes and hats. I walked into the middle room and sat on the small rope bed. A puff of dust blew up and I sneezed again. A sturdy dresser stood to the left of the window and I got up and walked to it. A thick coating of dust covered the smooth top and I licked my finger and drew my name into it.

“Liebchen?” I heard my mother's steps on the stairs and walked out of the room to meet her. The hall was lined with windows, but directly across from the room I was in, was a door and beyond it a balcony.

“Mutti look!” I nearly ran into my mother in my excitement. She laughed and looked around her in wonder. I turned the knob and opened the door. A small deck jutted out over the side of the house.

“Be careful Liebchen, it may not be safe.” I reached out and tested the wooden boards with a thunk of my boot heel. They sounded solid. I started to go out, but my mother put a hand out and stopped me.

“I think it's better if I go first.” I gripped her hand as she stepped onto the balcony, confident in the strength of my nine year old body. I was watching her feet until I heard her gasp.

“Oh, it's beautiful.” I thought nothing more of danger and was at her side. The spring air was light and blew through my hair, sending tendrils floating around my face. I looked across the fields and beyond the woods to the mountains in the distance. The earth was awakening after its winter slumber and sprigs of bright green grass and white and pink flowers dotted the ground. The tightly wound buds on the trees looked ready to burst forth into new life. The birds wheeled and dove through the air, the sun at their backs as they chirped and called. My mother squeezed my hand and looked down at me.

“This is a good place my Liebchen. I feel it here.” She touched her hand to her chest and breathed deep. I touched my own chest, mimicking her.

“Me too Mutti.” She threw back her head and laughed as I had never heard her before, pure joy on her face.

The first few months at Stone Croft were spent settling in and exploring every part of our new life in the country. Mr. Schweitzer would stay at his town house in Gettysburg every few weeks and made it a point to visit us and help where he could. While my father worked day and night, repairing out buildings, fixing fences and preparing fields, my mother and I prepared the house for proper living. When the previous owners had moved out, they left the house some what furnished, so we moved every piece of furniture out of the house and into the barn. Once the house was empty, it was swept, scrubbed and polished. Stair steps were replaced and paint was brushed over every door and frame. Next we turned our attention to the furnishings. While they were by no means new, they were very good quality and needed only a good scrubbing and airing. The mattress casings were emptied of their molding straw, boiled in lye, then re-stuffed with sweet smelling straw. The wooden furniture was polished to a shine with linseed oil before being placed in their proper spots around the house. It was mid July before we were satisfied with the order and cleanliness of the house and my mother placed the

familiar Huntley & Palmer tin on the fireplace mantle.

Father found a small graveyard, enclosed by a low wall of field stone, on the edge of the property near Pitzer Creek. A stone marker with the words *Cladh* was hung on the rusted iron gate. Mr. Quinn, from the town's mercantile, told us it was a Gaelic word for burial ground. When father brought mother and I to see the graveyard I stood before the simple sign and traced the word *Cladh* with my finger. The letters were cut with bold stokes into the rock that would take centuries to erase. I spent hours there reading the grave markers. Most of the names chiseled into the stone were Cadman and Docherty. Two stood out to me as odd; Isla and Lara Docherty, ages twenty-one and twenty-two, had both died on August 13th 1774. I puzzled over what may have caused the girl's demise and wove tales of an epic adventure that ended with their untimely death. My mother was drawn to a pair of markers for a mother and child. Ian Docherty had been a little over a year when he died. Beside his grave was a small stone with the name Ceana Docherty. She was born October 13th 1724, but no date of death was written, instead the words: *I have ceased to live before death has taken me*. I saw my mother before this marker on several occasions, a tear at the corner of her eyes. Father did not share our intrigue for the lives of those who had lived before us in Stone Croft. He would walk to the small graveyard with us and the next time I would turn he would be gone, back at a field or in the barn.

My mother came home from a trip into town and declared that I was to start school in a weeks time. She had met the teacher, Mr. Dawson, at Quinn's Mercantile and it had been arranged. I had not attended school in New York, the walk there was too much for Irenka and my parents did not trust the streets of the city with their young child. Instead, my mother had bought a new primer each fall and I would do my studies with her at the kitchen table each night.

"Can't I just learn here with you? Like we did in New York?" I asked for the hundredth time as my mother braided my hair for school.

"Liebchen, I have told you, the school here is different than the one in New York, and you will meet children your age." I looked at myself in the small hand mirror. My brown hair was flecked with red from the summer sun and the thick mass had been parted down the middle and braided into two long ropes. My brown eyes appeared black in the dim light beneath my ever furrowed brows. I had what my mother called a button nose, but I had not seen its likeness to a button. My attention was brought back to the constant foot steps of my father, who paced before the hearth, stopping every so often to look our way until my mother cleared her throat and shot him a look. He was as nervous about my first day of school as I was.

"There, all done. Now go get your composition book and pencil, I will get your lunch." I walked upstairs to my room and picked up the book of blank pages and the red pencil that lay sharpened beside it. I walked slowly down to where my mother waited for me beside the front door, lunch pail in hand. My father crouched down and gathered me into his arms. I buried my face in his neck, inhaling the scent of cherry tobacco and earth.

"Come now Liebchen." My mother said. My father released me and pulled one of my braids as he stood up, winking. I winked back then took my mother's hand. The school was a half mile away and I grew more and more nervous as we neared. When the small white building came into sight I slowed. There were around twenty children playing in the yard of the school house. Their laughter and shouts tapered off as we approached. A man in his early twenties came out of the school house and rang a hand bell. The children gathered hats, lunch buckets and books then made their way up the steps and filed into the building.

"Hello, you must be Magda." When the teacher smiled his eyes crinkled at the edges, giving him a look of mischief. My mother handed me my lunch pail and nudged me forward. I mounted the steps and was ushered into the school house by Mr. Dawson and began my first day of school.

Being the new girl was a novelty. Being the new girl and from New York City was something all together different. The girls in my class assumed I must be mature and worldly. My first day of school I had four invitations to visit the girl's homes after school and twice as many to share lunch in the yard.

I politely declined each request, preferring instead to eat alone and run home as soon as we were dismissed for the day. They asked again the next day and the next, figuring I must be shy and would have to accept if they persisted. After the first week the invitations dwindled. By the second none asked and before I knew it they had not only decided I was odd, but snobbish and deserving of their ridicule. Mary Beth Deem, the daughter of a successful banker, was the worst of the offenders. "There's Magda, I think she should go back to New Yawk." She would drawl the words out in a poor imitation of my accent. Her cronies would giggle as I walked past them, appearing indifferent to their goading. All I had wanted was to be left to myself and instead I became the object of their boredom and insecurity. If Mr. Dawson caught them at their torment he would scold them and once Mary Beth and her best friend, Theresa Sykes, were made to stand with their noses to the black board for half an hour. His attempts helped when he was present, but when he was not watching they resumed.

I began to eat my lunch and spend recess indoors, sitting in silence at my desk. One day after class was dismissed for lunch, Mr. Dawson placed a copy of *Moby Dick* on my desk. He smiled at me but said nothing as he returned to his chair and continued with his work. From that day on I was seldom without a book in hand. I became lost in the pages, discovering new lands, stepping inside the minds of heroes and villains. The girls taunting did not diminish, but it no longer bothered me. I had met scoundrels who would laugh at their attempts of villainy and champions who would not find them worth defeating.