

PROLOGUE

For many years, I have read voraciously about the Second World War. I do so with great trepidation because I find it both intriguing and repulsive. Perhaps, my wish is if we ingrain the horror in our minds, we will never forget those who perished.

One night in a local restaurant, I discussed my dream of writing a historical novel about the French Resistance Fighters. It could just as well have been the Polish. To my amazement, a man at the table across from my husband and me disclosed he was a French Resistance Fighter. We became instant friends. Later, he sent me information and pictures of that time in his life.

VieVie La Fontaine is dedicated to John Pugliese, an actual survivor of the horrors which Hitler's Germany inflicted on so many. This is the fictional story of a French woman named, VieVie La Fontaine. Her story represents John's as well as hundreds of others who fought valiantly against a tyrant and a maniac.

May God bless all of those who are still alive today and must bear the scars of pain as well as family members who still mourn their losses. May we never forget you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My husband has endured my writing now for six years. He is my tried and proven stick of determination as to whether the book makes sense. Over and over, he listens patiently to my questions which occur day and night.

Ryan Tilley is my editor now for three years. Thank you, dear friend, for your hard work and brutal honesty.

This book would never have been written without the real *VieVie La Fontaine* who bid on my auction item for the St. Joseph Bay Humane Society. Her high bid was that a book be written about her. She was informed she might be featured as a saint or a prostitute. I can never be sure where the book is going. In this case, she is both.

Thank you, dearest friend, for your generosity in supporting the animals. You are loved and you are the catalyst for this work.

CHAPTER ONE

EXILE

On that day, long ago, when I entered my house laughing and happy from an average day of study, I knew. Something was very wrong. Mother's eyes were swollen and red. She appeared haggard and tired. Father never greeted me in the early afternoon like this. He worked each weekday right up until the dinner hour.

"Mark, please sit down. We need to talk."

At once, I realized pressing news waited for me. Sadly, Papa began to tell me about the rising star in the German party. Of course, I had heard of this man but didn't think Adolf Hitler would amount to much. Politics didn't interest me. I failed to keep abreast of the latest news. Law was the subject with which I struggled. It was difficult for me to keep my marks high in this perplexing study of precedents and old facts. Already, I realized although my father and grandfather thrived in this field, it made no sense to me. Aware I had made a terrible decision ever following in my father's big shoes, I struggled with how I might explain to him.

I hate the subject which he loves. You see, I desired to paint. I loved art as my mother. She was a well-known artist in a small area of Berlin. A good day for me was painting in her bright studio for the entire day. I never thought of myself as weak or feminine even though my father may have. As the sun streamed into the paradise which she made for herself, I stood at one of her easels in the gaily painted red room and

expressed my very soul. Mother loved color stroked with a heavy hand onto the canvases which stood in abundance inside her studio. She also loved laughter. Oh, the endless hours we enjoyed together inside her hallowed, red walls. How could painting come to me effortlessly while I struggled with the expected career of law? During the early fall of 1933 in Germany, my world was content as we struggled to return to life before World War 1. My family progressed as well as any at our recovery. Life appeared pleasant enough at last.

My mind raced over these facts as Father outlined his fears, hard times may once again call for us, "The people of persecution." I laughed.

"Father, don't be so dramatic. Have you seen him? Hitler is a joke. Not to be taken seriously!"

My parents lowered their eyes. As they clasped hands, a jolt of shock ran up my spine.

What do they know they aren't sharing? Something is wrong.

Before I could question them, Hans sadly stated.

"Mark, you must leave university and Berlin immediately! Your mother and I will remain here, in the city, until things improve. Then, we will bring you back home. You must do as instructed. There is no room for discussion on this. You must trust us."

Morosely, they glanced at each other. I could tell, my parents attempted to smile but were unable. Again the question raised itself.

What do my parents know that I don't?

As I prepared to protest, the magnitude of his words became apparent. They were offering me a way of escaping a world in which I did not belong. Never would I be an excellent attorney like father and grandfather. Then, he spoke the words which rang in my mind as “honey to the bees.”

"We are sending you to Paris. There, you will live with old family friends who reside close to the Eiffel Tower. You will love them and the great city which makes artists. We are providing you a way to start a new life. One of which we know you have dreamed. I realize you do not enjoy the study of law. We made a mistake, didn't we?"

Casually, he playfully ruffled my hair. After those words, nothing else mattered. Call me selfish; I was. This very action was what I prayed for each night. A way to save face at the university while living in a city which intrigued me.

Can this be happening?

It was like manna falling from Heaven. Without any action on my part, my most profound dream, no, my wildest infatuation was realized. Instantly, the sad, mundane words of my beloved father drowned into oblivion by my thoughts of living in Paris.

Gay, exciting Paris, where freedom was grabbed with relish by those fortunate enough to claim it. Perhaps, a gorgeous girlfriend with long, blonde hair will stroll on my arm by the River Seine?

A smile the size of one of Father's law books spread across my face. Nothing else mattered! My dreams were coming true! All of this nonsense which Papa sadly spoke could never happen. Once they sent me to Paris, I would never return to Berlin. Not because of that weak man whom they feared, Hitler, but because in Paris, I could obtain my desires. No, they must visit me in my swanky apartment in the city of my dreams someday soon. At that point, I had no idea of the validity of my thoughts as my mind bounded forward into my new world. I *would* never return to the home which I adored and the people who gave their lives to save me. The unthinkable would not occur because of my actions but those of a group of evil men who were out of control!

The rest of that day filled with sadness for my parents. Maybe, they understood our eyes would never meet again at least not in this world. As Mother cried, I gaily packed large cases with my clothes. When Father entered my room sometime later, he became aghast at the volume of my luggage.

"No, son, we must not call attention to your departure. As Jews, we are still able to leave, but soon, this will not be the case."

Again, I laughed at the words of a paranoid old man. Still, I quickly packed only necessary items as Father explained he wanted me to purchase new clothes when I arrived in Paris. It was important I not “stand out” there. He told me it was vital I fit into the Parisian life. I laughed.

What an easy assignment!

I thought as vivid plans began to form for my new life as a famous artist.

What great fortune all of this is for me!

Maybe my parents were delusional and paranoid, but they were establishing my deepest desire. Someday, they would witness my success as a great artist, or so I believed at that point. At dinner that evening, few words were spoken. Mother occasionally dabbed her eyes which remained lowered. She appeared unable to look at me. It seemed Father's stare never left my face. Was he trying to remember me? I shook my head at my silly thoughts.

Am I becoming as sensitive and fearful as they?

Almost as though scheduled, as soon as the meal ended, someone knocked on our door.

"Ah, he is a little early. Abi, welcome Franz while I talk with Mark a moment." Sadly, Mother walked from the room with her head down. I realized she might be considering the fact she would never see me again. Her walk was of a doomed person. I smiled at her theatrics. After all of this Hitler

madness passed, I would take her to a lovely Parisian dinner when they visited me.

“Mark, you will be driven to Paris by this man, Franz Heldman. He will drive you to General La Fontaine's home. General La Fontaine is an old friend of your grandfather. You will like him and his wife, VieVie. Be careful of VieVie; she is a great beauty. This exotic creature destroyed the heart of many men who fell in love with her.”

His eyes told me, he was one of her victims. What was happening? My entire world was changing. Now, Father was confessing that once, he loved another woman? Who were these La Fontaine people? The breath left my lungs as I tried to breathe normally.

Things are coming at me too quickly!

After taking several deep breaths, I relaxed a little. All of these things were frightening to me. I could not understand the power of his words about using caution around the beautiful VieVie La Fontaine. I later wondered had he not said those things if I may have withstood her ways, but I will never know.

My drive with Franz lasted about nine hours and fifty minutes during which we exchanged few words. My driver appeared nervous as he frequently checked the rearview mirror and made little grunting sounds. This small man had delicate features. His advancement into older age left him with receded mostly gray hair. He drove huddled over the steering wheel as though he could not see well. His actions

made me uncomfortable. I had never seen him before. In fact, I would never again recognize another person in this new world which claimed to be mine. Later, I would wonder about the degree of worry and concern among the German citizens of which I had no idea. Of course, I could not know of any approaching danger, but many of my people seemed to feel the threat growing!

Our departure from Berlin occurred immediately after dinner around 8:30 pm. Arrival time, at the home of the La Fontaine's, was in the early morning about 6:30 am. The general opened the door with a startled gaze. General La Fontaine was a large man in midlife. His hair was blonde and very shiny as were his teeth. His startled look surprised me placing my nerves even more on edge. Had he hoped I might not come? If he had, there was no hesitation once he saw me. I reluctantly offered my hand which had not been washed all evening even after several stops in the woods to relieve ourselves. I thought about telling him he may not want to shake my hand but figured a general in the French Army would not care. Still, our new relationship started in a most loaded condition. Already, I felt like a beggar taking such hospitality from this stranger. Why would he offer to allow me to invade his home? What services would I be expected to perform for this grand family? I desperately wished I had questioned my father as to our relationship with these people. Racking my brain, I could not remember ever hearing of them. Already, my nerves caused me to perspire and tremble

a little. During my life, I had never felt subservient to another.

Now, I do.

General La Fontaine smiled as he walked away from the door. I entered uninvited and followed him with trepidation as I carried my small, brown satchel down a long, winding hall. The house was exquisite and gigantic. I felt plain and small. Never had I seen such wealth and lavishness. At last, we walked into a brightly painted yellow room. The decor appeared polished. It shined beautifully.

Did Madame La Fontaine decorate this palatial home?

A dark maid worked quietly behind the counter. She nodded at me but did not smile or speak. Without inquiring, the General motioned for me to sit as he read the morning paper. He never even looked at me. I felt like a nonentity. Anne-Laure, the maid, placed a generous, piping hot cup of black coffee before me which soon was followed by a delicious looking croissant with a small container of French butter and fresh cream. My shaking hands finally resulted in the General looking at me. All I could think was I had made a terrible mistake in my dreams of being an artist in France. Was there no place or craft in which I could hope to find joy? It seemed I did not belong anywhere.

Admittedly, here in this city of Paris where everyone appeared welcomed, I might discover acceptance but maybe not? I almost cried but swallowed loudly instead. This action

caused the vague host to look at me as though seeing me for the first time. He put his paper aside and began to speak to me. To my surprise, the General spoke in fluent English which eradicated one of my fears. My English, surprisingly, was better than my French. At least, if anyone decided to converse with me, I could respond. My parents and I had often spoken fluently in this language which we enjoyed.

"I was excellent friends with your grandfather and deeply respect your father. Most of the other Germans are swine. You don't need to be concerned here. Think of this as your 'new university.' My wife has your quarters ready which include a large, bright studio. There is no need to be fearful or feel subservient. This place is your new home. Here, you may live your life as long as necessary. You are a man now so feel free to come and go as you please. In fact, we hope you stay here forever. You see, my wife could not have children. This fact has been a great cause of pain for her. I hate to tell you, but you are her 'new son,' at least in *her* mind. Try to accept the love she desires to lavish upon you. Such action will make her happy. Anything which pleases VieVie will also delight me. You see, she is my life. My wife will work with you to soften that heavy accent which you carry. All signs of the German man must go!"

He smiled the grandest smile which I still remember. His face was broad and pleasant with large green eyes. His skin was tanned and creased by the sun.

Returning his smile, I took a large gulp of coffee and devoured my roll. Immediately, the maid placed another of each in front of me.

Yes, if only my studio waits, painted in a bright French red as Mamas?

This had always been my dream. All worry dissipated as I studied my new home after finally receiving the welcome which I craved. Quietly, my host studied me for a few seconds. Even though I was intimidated by the large man, I liked his spontaneous nature and easy smile.

The General briefly excused himself while I breathed deeply. Finally, I began to relax as my mind thought back over the past fourteen hours. From the time I walked into my home so innocently after classes until this moment, my entire world changed. I thought back over the past few hours as I remembered exactly the way I felt before I became a Parisian.

During the early fall of 1933 in Germany, my world was perfect although my family still recovered from the effects of the First World War. In Berlin, our family received great respect and were well liked even by a few Germans although we were definitely Jewish. Success came quickly for my kind and gentle folks.

My ancestors had come to live in this place of changing political expectations back in 1671 after being allowed to

resettle in a city which expelled them in 1573 due to political issues. According to history, in 1510 some Jews were accused of desecrating and stealing from a church inside a village near Berlin. The arrest of one hundred and eleven Jews subjected them to examination. Unfairly, fifty-one souls received sentences of death. Thirty-eight of these people witnessed the agony of burning at the stake in the New Market Square. A Christian, at the same time, was also arrested. Later, evidence proved he was the only person guilty. Before this knowledge could be confirmed, all of the remaining Jews had been rounded up and expelled from the entire electorate of Brandenburg. Once again, the Jewish people were unfairly exiled from homes they loved. Years later, these innocents received complete exoneration at the *Diet of Frankfurt in 1539* through the efforts of Joseph Gershom of Rosheim and Philipp Melanchthon. In 1535-71 authorities allowed many Jews to return and resettle in the town of Brandenburg. Jews were also permitted to reside in Berlin once more in 1543 despite the opposition of some townspeople. In 1571, when the Jews again were expelled from Brandenburg, the Jews of Berlin were expelled "for-ever." For the next one hundred years, a few Jewish people appeared at widely scattered intervals. About 1663, the Court Jew Israel Aaron, a supplier to the army and the electoral court, quietly received permission to return. That was the time my family's presence flowered in a place which seemed to possess a love/hate relationship with the Jewish people, my people. Never could I understand why my relatives chose

to return to this place which had mistreated them and where many still harbored hatred toward us.

My father, Hans Lichter, worked diligently as an attorney in the law practice which his father, Abram, had established over seventy years earlier. Hans was a giant of a man but very kind and generous as was my grandfather. Father frequently told me, his only child, intriguing stories of this great man, named Abraham, whose attributes became legendary in the world of Berlin law. Both of these were my role models. I loved them beyond words.

My mother, Abigail, had many friends in the town which my small family loved despite unfair treatment of many of our people. Mother was gorgeous with long dark hair and eyes. Her hair was always braided perfectly and pinned on the base of her head. She loved beautiful things and dressed with a lovely flair. My father doted on Abi, his spouse. He believed a wife should be loved and respected as a princess. The love which shined from their eyes captivated me. My dream became one that someday, I would experience the special bond which they seemed to possess with a lovely woman of *my* choosing.

Many evenings as a young boy, I found myself alone with Hannah, our maid, while my parents enjoyed the opera or ballet. Both of them read voraciously and enjoyed the finer things in life. Never did I realize my time, compared to most of the other Jews in Germany, was unique. The few friends

whom I knew appeared to have the same circumstances as I. It would be years before I came to appreciate what my parents did to ensure my future and safety. If only I could have thanked them for the love and security with which they sheltered me, but I did not have the time. When I became aware of their selfless actions, it was too late. The maniacal hatred of one, Adolf Hitler, needlessly ripped them from my outstretched hands. The nightmares, which consumed my world for years, were a side effect of the ignorance of a generation of bigoted, evil thugs who destroyed the dreams of so many gentle and loving people. Much worse than bad dreams waited for millions, including my parents, as this monster gained a foothold in our world.

This time in 1933 was my first year of university study. I loved my new freedom. My parents had sheltered me all of my childhood. Never did I experience bigoted or hateful treatment because they rejected such actions. Many Jewish friends at the university lulled me into believing I had a right to enjoy life like the Germans who often stared at us and made insulting, rude remarks.

"What is their problem? Um?"

My friends and I dared to stare back at the Germans who faced us. Frederick laughed as he told me secrets of his German girlfriend. These bullies did not frighten or even interest us. Sure, we were aware of the hatred which seemed to surround us as a people but what specifically had *we* done? My family taught me always to be fair to others and to

treat all with respect. How could I understand this unfair, bigoted treatment? I could not.

Hitler's rise in Germany started in 1933. At that time, few people considered him much of a threat, but the constant increase in his popularity and of the Nazis allowed him to raise the Nazi State. Slowly and meticulously, he denounced individual freedoms and created a *Volk Community*. These actions transcended class and religious differences. Carefully, he worked while his actions went almost unnoticed by most. The Third Reich soon became a police state as the SS guards controlled the police. Maybe, a few people in Germany took notice at this stage, but still, nothing was done to stop him. It didn't take long for the SS to begin their intimidation and harassment of those they had targeted, mainly the Jews. The *Civil Service Law of April 1933* started eliminating the Jewish people from state positions and governmental agencies. Ever so slowly, the Nazis abolished the trade unions. In mid-July 1933, only the Nazi party remained. All others had been efficiently banned or disbarred themselves due to pressure or intimidation of these SS guards. We Jews began to despise the thugs who arrogantly acted as though they were superior to us. Most German people believed they were biologically destined for expansion Eastward while they pushed the belief they were a master race and should establish permanent rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Hitler began to encourage the "pure" German women to bear as many pure "Aryan" children as possible. With this, the framework was established to eliminate the "lesser" races such as the Jews and Gypsies as well as a few others. Our nervous stares at each passing Jew penetrated the streets. It was as though we looked at each other with a question.

What can we do?

Immediately after “elections” in March of 1933, the Nazis began their systemic release of anger and hatred against the Jewish people. Many of the Jews were molested or killed; some Jewish business destroyed. Now, this changing tide in Germany had progressed too far as all of Europe continued to live as though they would be safe. This blank process was denial which waited for many other countries as well.

Just wait France, you are not safe!

No one suspected how effortlessly France would fall.

Maybe, for all time, people will question the French officials who handed a city so beautiful as Paris to a tyrant without a fight. These things still cause me distress.

Of course, I had no idea at this time of the horrors waiting for a man so young and totally alone in this new world of French customs and styles. Forever, I will think of my dear parents with love and awe for all they did to protect me while sacrificing themselves. Although my story fills with horror beyond words, so many others were annihilated. Their stories are left untold. The only crime they committed was they were born Jewish. Eventually, I found joy again and peace in my world of a new land which welcomed one such as I.

May the others never be forgotten!

