

Reinhard Bonnke:

Living a Life of Fire – an autobiography

English

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Dedication

For Hermann and Meta Bonnke,
true parents in life, and in the Lord.

And for Luis (Ludwig) Graf,
who obediently carried the gospel with the living fire
of the Holy Spirit to East Prussia,
and set the pattern for me to follow.

Part 1

A DIVINE APPOINTMENT

*Which thread should I choose, Lord? There are so many.
They hang before my eyes like strands of silk in a doorway.
Each promising that it will weave the finest tapestry of my life.
But it is not my tapestry. It is not my life.
So again I ask, which thread do I choose?
Which strand will pass through the very eye of the needle?*

Chapter 1

I sit quietly with an explosion building inside of me. I lean forward to the edge of my seat. My hands explore the cover of my preaching Bible as my foot taps a nervous dance on the platform. Every molecule of my body anticipates what is about to happen. I think you would feel the same if you were in my shoes.

It is a tropical night in Northern Nigeria. We are in the heart of Africa. The air is warm and moist and full of sound. A local gospel group performs a melody of praise

accompanied by a snakeskin drum. A chorus of birds, frogs and insects joins them from the surrounding trees. The vast crowd standing in front of me radiates heat and expectancy. Nearly 700,000 tribesmen have walked for many miles to this site. Many of them are Muslims. Their upturned faces draw me like a moth to a flame. 2,400,000 will attend in five nights of preaching. More than 1.4 million will accept Jesus as Savior at the invitations. Follow-up teams will disciple each one.

Anticipation makes my heart race. What about yours? As you begin to read my story, I wonder, are you like me? Does the prospect of seeing the Great Commission of Christ fulfilled drive you day and night? If not, then I pray that the story of my life will light a fire in you. A fire that will change everything. A holy fire that will convince you that nothing is impossible with God.

I see that some in the crowd tonight are crippled. Some lie sick on pallets. Others lean on crutches. Not all will be healed, but some of these crippled will walk. I must tell you, when they walk, I will dance with them across this platform! Wouldn't you? Some are blind, and some of those blind will see. I cannot explain why, but in Muslim areas I see more blind eyes open. I wish everyone could be with me to see it. Chronic pains leave bodies, cancerous growths disappear. These are but a few of the signs that follow the preaching of the good news.

I feel a low vibration. It is almost audible. Generators are purring inside their insulated containers nearby, feeding kilowatts of electricity to our thirsty sound towers and stage lights. We have imported our own power grid to this remote region. We are far beyond the reach of Marriott, Hyatt, Hilton or even Motel 6. Our team has installed a small village of trailer houses to shelter us for the duration. Cell phones are worthless. Satellites keep us connected. Few have even heard of this place. Yet more than a half-million are here tonight!

My throat constricts at the realization of it. Hot tears seek the corners of my eyes. This is joy beyond any I have known.

I smile and tilt my head up, looking into a sky of ancient constellations. I feel the Creator of the Universe smiling down on this corner of the world tonight. I breathe deeply. The smoke of cooking fires paints the breeze and brings me back to earth. I am a thousand miles from anywhere normal, and this is where I feel most at home.

We have found another forgotten state where few have heard the way of salvation. I am Reinhard Bonnke, an evangelist. Welcome to my destiny.

Tonight, events will unfold like a well-rehearsed dream. I will be introduced. My eyes will sweep the crowd knowing that we have all come for the same Jesus. My heart will open to the Holy Spirit and in my mind an image will appear. I call it “the shape of the gospel.” It is an outline that I will fill with an explosion of words that pour from my heart without rehearsal.

I must now make a confession. This has become an addiction for me. But it is an addiction I’d gladly share with you. Leading sinners to salvation en masse – or one by one – it is all the same. I eat it, I sleep it, I dream it, I speak it, I write it, I pray it, I weep it, I laugh it. It is my wish to die preaching this gospel. I am like a man starving until I can stand again with a microphone in my hand, looking across a sea of faces, shouting the words of His love into the darkness.

It is huge now. The results are huge. I am on my way to seeing 100 million respond to the gospel. More than 52 million have registered decisions since the year 2000. Without the decades of experience that brought my team to this harvest, we would be overwhelmed by these numbers. But we are not slowing down, we are erecting more platforms like this one in places you’ve never heard of. After reading my story I hope and pray that you will join me on each of those future platforms, sharing my excitement. If you are unable to be there in person, then I hope you will be there in prayer, in faith, in spirit.

In truth, I have done nothing alone. God has called me and has been my pilot. The Holy Spirit has been my comforter, my guide, and my power source. As you will read in these pages, He brought to me the perfect wife. He gave us our beautiful children and extended family. And He has provided a team that has grown with me through decades of working together. Beyond that, He has brought thousands to stand with us. They have supported us in prayer and in partnership. Our rewards in Heaven will be equal.

Oh! Excuse me. I have to go now. I have been introduced and there is a microphone in my hand. I stand to my feet and leap forward, ready to preach with the fire that I always feel in my bones. But just before I open my mouth I feel a holy hush descend

over me. It washes over the crowd as well, and I drop to my knees in humility and reverence, raising my face to the sky. For in the air above me I sense an invisible crowd that dwarfs the almost 700,000 Nigerians straining to hear my next word. I am speaking of Heaven's cloud of witnesses, a numberless throng upon whose shoulders I am carried. And from that heavenly crowd steps a man, a German evangelist who has gone before me. I know him by reputation. He is in many ways like these Nigerians, overlooked, except by Heaven. His life was sown in weakness and some say in defeat. Yet tonight, every soul born into the Kingdom will also be fruit of his ministry. The very words that I speak first poured from his heart.

Now I can begin.

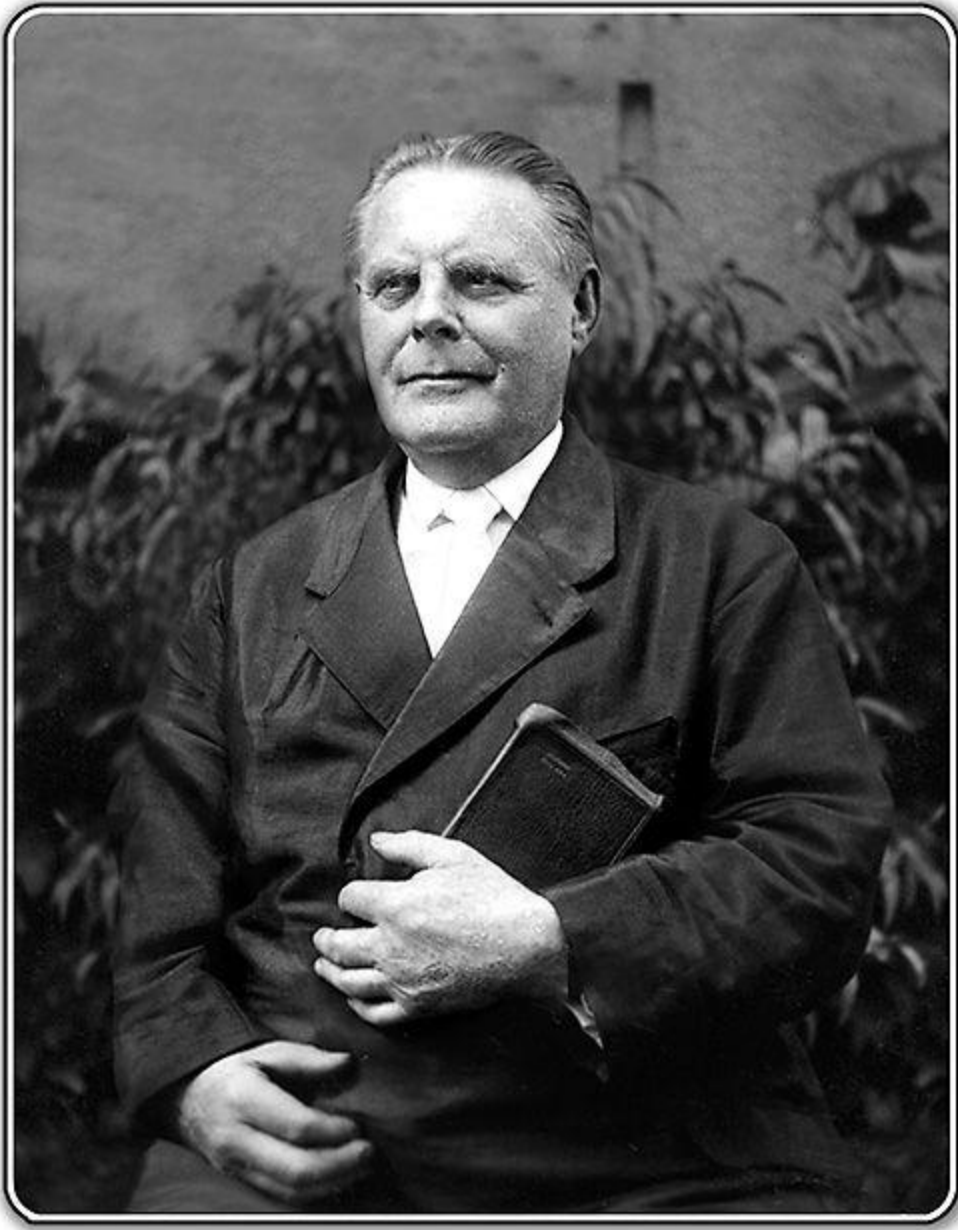
Chapter 2

As I begin the story of God's work in my life, I am flooded with wonderful possibilities. Too many to ignore. So, I narrow my search. I think specifically of origins. Not of His calling and His many directions to me along the way. Nor of the road that led to Africa and a harvest of souls beyond my wildest dreams. No, I first look back to Ostpreussen, to a time and place that is no more.

As I look there I feel a mysterious weight in a place near my heart. *What is this weight?* I ask. And then I know. I know that I know. It is the debt I owe to a man who died years before I was born.

How easily I might forget him. He is unknown. His life and ministry uncelebrated. If I remain silent no one will think of his name in connection to mine. But I would know. And I must not fail to tell his story. Each time I step onto a platform and look across a sea of faces eager to hear the gospel, I feel his gaze upon me from heaven's cloud of witnesses. I could not stand ablaze with the Holy Spirit today if this forgotten brother had not carried the flame to the Bonnke family so long ago.

I examine the weight that I feel, and I think it must be like the debt a great oak tree owes to the acorn from which it sprang. Or the debt of a giant spruce to the seed that fluttered to the ground and died that it might one day stand tall as a watchtower above the German forest. Yes, this is the debt that I feel. It is the weight of a debt I owe to a man named Luis Graf.



LUDWIG GRAF

One day, when I was still a very young man, I studied a chart of our German family tree. It was then I discovered the general ungodliness of our clan. I became amazed that my grandfather and my father stood out as men of faith in a spiritually barren landscape. I turned to my father, who was a Pentecostal preacher, and asked, "How did God break into the Bonnke family?"

My father's answer has marked my life and ministry to this day. He told me the story of Luis Graf coming to our village in 1922, 18 years before I was born. Luis was a German-born gunsmith who had immigrated to America as a young man. There, he had amassed a personal fortune through hard work and self-discipline. Following retirement, he returned to his homeland in the power of the Holy Spirit, after experiencing a life-changing baptism with speaking in tongues.

The longer I live the more I see the divine connections between myself and Luis, though I never met the man. So, as I prepare to repeat my father's story, will you please indulge me as I go beyond his words? I will share details that I have only recently learned about this servant of God.

The story of Luis Graf is more than a personal narrative. It is part of the history of an entire movement of which I am a second-generation preacher. The movement of which I speak is the Pentecostal Movement that began on the Day of Pentecost, blazed anew at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906, and then exploded across the entire world. Today it is the greatest modern force in Christendom, with more than 600,000,000 adherents in our time. To understand the story of Luis Graf, for me, is to understand this great movement more perfectly, and to see my place within it.

For these reasons I have done more than research. I have let myself enter a time machine. I have gone to a bygone era where I have entered the skin of another evangelist, probing his feelings and thoughts during a time and a place that are not my own. And I have been rewarded. I have come away believing that surely his story passes through the very eye of the needle. It is the first thread in the tapestry of God's work in my life.

Chapter 3

An army of clouds marched across the sky, dressed in shades of dismal gray. It was early spring in 1922, and the grip of a long winter was not ready to release the East Prussian landscape. A fine new Mercedes touring car eased along a carriage track through the forest. Its engine pattered like the cadence of a military drummer. Mud splattered its silver-white finish as it passed beneath the trees.

The car entered a large clearing. Across a field of deeply furrowed earth a farmer turned to stare. He leaned on his hoe beneath a cap of thick natural wool, his collar turned against the wind. The expression on his face was grim and hostile.

In this German enclave on the Baltic Sea an automobile was a rare sight after World War I. Russian armies had destroyed roads, factories, and cities before being driven back by the Prussian Army. The Great War and its subsequent inflation had depleted not only the bank accounts of the German people; it had gutted their very souls. More than 3,000,000 of Germany's best had perished in four years of fighting. The wounds of war were fresh and bleeding.

The Mercedes driver beneath his jaunty aviator's cap and goggles knew this full well. He was a German-born American recently returned to his homeland after the Great War. He understood that this poor farmer had nothing in common with someone who could afford to ride the countryside in a fancy touring car.

Still, the driver's heart remained tender toward the German people as he drove from one end of this war-torn land to the other. He gave a friendly wave to this farmer, hoping to at least spread some goodwill. Sadly, the man turned back to his hoeing as if he'd received an insult.

The driver turned his attention back to the road. It disappeared over a ridge ahead of him at the far end of the clearing. At that vanishing point, he saw great arms of sailcloth turning against the horizon. As his car topped the ridge, he could see that the flailing arms belonged to a large windmill working to extract power from the sky. At the base of the windmill sat a flour mill. Beside the flour mill, a large stucco bakery with white smoke rising from brick oven stacks.

The driver salivated. He had a kilometer to cover yet, but he could already taste the tortes, strudels, and hausbrot taken warm from the ovens. He might even stop to stock up on salted pretzels for the road. These, he recalled from childhood, were always folded carefully in a triad representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. He chuckled to himself. *I'm not in America anymore. I'm in the land where religion has twisted Scripture into a pretzel.*

As he came closer he could see a small village of a dozen or so houses. They lined both sides of the road on the far side of the bakery where the forest bordered the

clearing. He figured this small village would provide a welcome stop for a cold traveler who had lost his way. He imagined a warm fire. Perhaps he would pay for a bed for the night. The day was far spent.

He slowed the car and stopped near the bakery door, pulling the hand brake and cutting the engine. Immediately the aroma of fresh bread blessed his senses. He removed his driving gloves and opened the car door. Stepping out, he pulled off his goggles and leather cap. He stood for a while brushing flecks of mud from his cheeks and chin.

Globs of mire fell to the ground from the car's wooden spokes and pneumatic rubber tires. The stylized elegance of the Mercedes' fenders swept away from the main body of the vehicle like the wings of a swan in flight. But this swan had been grounded by the primitive roads of East Prussia.

A number of villagers stepped curiously from their houses to peek at the new arrival and his fancy automobile. The driver wore a fleece-lined leather coat with leather pants and boots. He was cleanly shaven, a distinguished-looking gentleman with wispy gray hair containing stubborn streaks of brown. A man perhaps in his fifties or sixties.

Meanwhile, a perfectly bald man with a full handlebar mustache emerged from the bakery wiping his hands on his apron. He watched the driver, who had now removed his neck scarf and was using it to wipe mud from the door panel. As he worked at it, a hand-painted sign on the metal surface could be seen emerging from beneath the mess. It read: *Jesus is coming soon. Are you ready?* The driver turned, noticing the baker for the first time.

"A good day to you, sir," he said, extending his hand with an energetic smile. "I am Luis Graf, a servant of God."

The baker slowly wiped his hands on his apron before taking Luis' hand. He spoke in a cautious tone.

"I am Gerhard, and we are all Lutherans here."

“Lutherans will do. Lutherans need Jesus. I was baptized Lutheran myself, but I have since met the Lord and received the second Pentecost. Have you received the second Pentecost?”

The man shook his head. He had no reason to know of such a thing.

“Well, I must tell you about that, because there is nothing more important to the times in which we live, my friend. But first ... I was on my way to Königsberg, and it appears I have lost my way. Can you tell me what village I have found?”

“This is Trunz.”

“Trunz. I’m not sure I’ve heard of it.” He chuckled good-naturedly. “I’m more lost than I knew. But that’s not a problem. I am sure the Lord has led me here to preach the gospel. Hallelujah!”

“I told you we are Lutherans,” the man replied coldly.

In the meantime, a young man on a bicycle had ridden up and was now inspecting the Mercedes with awe and curiosity. Luis felt a trembling excitement in his chest. He often felt this vibration when the Holy Spirit spoke to his heart. A still small voice told him that bondages would soon be broken in this place. He nodded to the baker.

“I can see that my preaching here will have to wait until you have been made ready to hear it. These are the last days, Gerhard. Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Tell me, is anyone sick in this village?”

“Sick? Are you a doctor, too?”

“No, I am a preacher. But I represent the Great Physician. Let me ask you something, Gerhard. If I pray for someone who is sick and you see them healed, will you believe that I have been sent here to preach the gospel? Will you listen to me?”

Slowly, the baker began to smile and nod.

“Yes. Yes, I would listen.” The baker knew something that Luis could not have known. Everyone in Trunz knew there was someone horribly sick there. And Gerhard was smiling because this naïve American was about to leave the village in utter defeat. He would never have to endure listening to his gospel sermon. “In fact there is

someone sick here,” he said. “Someone very sick. Listen.” He pointed toward the village and then cupped his hands behind his ears.

Luis did the same. At first he could hear nothing but the sighing of the wind driving the arms of the windmill above him. Then, after a few moments he heard it.

“AaaaaaAAAAAAArrgh!!”

He felt the hair rise at the back of his neck. The sound came from the far end of the village. It was something he might have imagined on a moonless night in the darkest wood. Perhaps a sound of demonic origin.

His first instinct was to leap into his car and accelerate toward another village. But he held his ground, rebuking the impulse of spiritual cowardice. The cry could be nothing if not the voice of a man. A sick man. Suffering as a man would suffer on a torturer’s bench.

“Who is that?”

“His name is August Bonnke,” Gerhard replied quietly. “He is the *Müllermeister* here. He owns this mill and bakery and is the leading man in Trunz. A great man who has been struck down by a terrible disease. Gout or rheumatism or some such thing. No one knows what it truly is. He has suffered for years, and the doctors can do nothing. He cries out in pain night and day.”

“AaaaaaAAAAAAArrgh!”

The terrible cry sounded again, but this time Luis heard it through ears of compassion. The elements of pain, desperation, and rage coming from the man in the house at the far end of the village were sounds translated in his heart by the Holy Spirit. Here was a soul trapped by Satan. A soul Christ had died to set free. Here was a desperate cry to God for deliverance. The kind of cry that would not be held back by pride or stoicism or German will power. This was the kind of cry God never refused. Luis immediately understood that God had arranged for him to become lost on his way to Königsberg for this divine appointment in Trunz.

“I would like very much to pray for Herr Bonnke,” Luis said. “Do you think he would allow me to pray for him?”

The baker shrugged. He turned and called to the young man who was still enthralled with the automobile. "Hermann, come here."

The young man picked up his bicycle and walked it to where both men stood. "Yes, Gerhard."

"Hermann, tell your father that a preacher is here to pray for him."

Hermann looked in puzzlement from one man to the other, obviously surprised, not understanding what was going on. The baker turned again to Luis. "What kind of preacher should we say that you are, Reverend Graf? A Lutheran? A Catholic? Evangelical?"

Luis thought for a moment. "Have you heard of Azusa Street? The revival in America? In Los Angeles?"

Gerhard and the young man shook their heads. They had never heard of it.

"It does not matter. Tell Herr Bonnke that I am a man filled with the Holy Ghost. When I pray for him it will not be like when a priest prays for him. I will pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and his body will be healed. Tell him that."

The baker turned to young Hermann and nodded that he should go and tell his father these things. The young man jumped on his bicycle and began to ride quickly toward the house at the far end of the village.

That young man on the bicycle was Hermann Bonnke, my father, just 17 years of age at the time. The sick man, August Bonnke, was my grandfather.

The Bonnke clan lived in an isolated area of Germany called *Ostpreussen*, or East Prussia. Our enclave had been created by international treaty at the end of World War I. It had been artificially cut off from the rest of Germany, and it faced the Baltic States and the Russian Empire to the east. Along our western border something called a "Polish Corridor" extended from modern Poland to the port city of Danzig on the Baltic Sea. Today, Ostpreussen no longer exists. Following World War II, all Germans were ethnically cleansed from this region.

In this isolated, cold, damp, and forested land in the spring of 1922, however, the flaming torch of the Holy Spirit would soon be passed. Luis Graf carried that fire, the fire of Pentecost that would eventually consume my life.

Chapter 4

Luis Graf entered August Bonnke's household like a blazing lantern in a dismal cavern. Cobwebs of religious doubt and stagnation were swept aside as he moved toward the bed where the *Müllermeister*, "the best man in Trunz," lay writhing in agony. He proclaimed liberty to the downtrodden, healing to the sick, and salvation to the poor needy sinner – Lutheran or otherwise.

He announced that the Holy Spirit had been sent for a demonstration of the power of God that could make all things new. Divine healings were signs and wonders to confirm the preaching of the gospel. He took the sick man by the hand and commanded that he rise and be made whole in the name of Jesus.

August felt a jolt of heaven's power surge through his body. He leapt from his sickbed and stood trembling like a criminal around whom the walls of a prison had just fallen. He looked at his arms and legs as if iron chains had just been struck from them. He felt his once swollen and inflamed joints, and they were renewed to a supple and youthful state. His wife, Marie, who had been at his bedside for years, began to weep.

He began to walk, then to run, then to leap, then to shout. He grabbed his wife and embraced her with tears running freely down his face. A moment ago he had been unable to endure the slightest touch on his skin. Now, he was a man set free of pain. He was free indeed. He could embrace life again. And embrace it he did! A new life of health and vigor had been given to a man condemned by an evil and tormenting disease. August Bonnke would never be the same and would never, until the day he died, fail to testify of what God had done for him that day in Trunz.

In 1922, Luis Graf did not see the great harvest he had hoped to see after the dramatic healing of August Bonnke. Spiritually, Germany was hard and bitter soil. Just two accepted Christ as Savior that day; August and his grateful wife, Marie. Luis led them in the sinner's prayer. Then he laid his hands on them, and they received

the gift of the Holy Ghost with speaking in tongues. The torch of Pentecost had been passed.

Two years later, Luis was invited to return for meetings at the local Pentecostal fellowship in nearby Königsberg. My grandparents traveled faithfully from Trunz to those meetings, which continued for four months. Attendance outgrew the church building. A city hall was hired, seating 800. Soon that was abandoned in favor of a stable at the fairgrounds holding 2,000. In all, 4,000 people were saved in the Königsberg meetings. This was an unusually large harvest in those days.

Hermann Dittert, a lifelong friend of our family and one who attended those meetings with my grandparents, later wrote, “Luis Graf was an evangelistic lawnmower.”

I found this quote only recently, and it is fascinating to compare this “lawnmower” description to the one I began using as our crusades in Africa became too large for any stadium to hold. Meeting in the open air with standing room only, we began to see crowds with more than 100,000 in attendance. Within a few years we registered conversions in the millions of souls. I could feel an evangelistic paradigm shift taking place, and I said, “We have entered the age of the combine harvester.”

I reflect now on the difference between a lawnmower and a combine harvester. It shows, I think, the difference between the era of Luis Graf and that of Reinhard Bonnke. In the 1920s the lawnmower was becoming a common tool. Through the following decades, the combine harvester was developed for the massive agricultural operations we see today. These two symbols also reflect a difference in faith horizons. In the 1920s, the Pentecostals of Germany were so marginalized from the mainstream of religious life that they only dared to see the harvest field as a lawn to be mowed. Today my team dares to envision an entire continent coming to Christ.

A great highway is built along the route of the pioneers who first blazed the trail. The spiritual trail blazed by Luis Graf in Trunz laid down a pattern for my life and ministry a generation later. Even more, that congregation of Pentecostal believers in Königsberg provided the rich soil of fellowship that nurtured the faith of my grandparents, and later, my parents, Hermann and Meta Bonnke.

Two years after the Königsberg meetings, at the age of 65, Luis sensed in his spirit that he should retire from all speaking engagements. The duration of his evangelistic effort was quite short. Merely four years.



Hermann & Meta engaged 1932

This remains a mystery to me. Nor can I relate to it. I am celebrating 50 years in active ministry and am more passionate to preach the gospel than ever. I cannot imagine retirement. But in 1926, Luis Graf took that step and the evangelistic lawnmower fell silent.

Nine years later, Adolf Hitler rose to power in the economic and political chaos that was Germany. As the world rushed toward the holocaust of World War II, Luis was called home to eternity at the age of 74.

Part 2

OUT OF GERMANY

Now I lay me down to sleep.

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I pray dear Lord;

keep Mommy and Daddy, my brothers,

and my little sister, Felicitas, safe.

And me, too. Amen.

Chapter 5

Peace and safety then sudden destruction. It was 1945 in Stablack, East Prussia. World War II was drawing to a close and Hitler's armies were beginning to collapse.

My comfortable childhood was shattered with the scream of artillery shells, explosions, and the drone of Russian planes. I had no idea what had changed. I ran to the window and looked out. The night sky flickered and glowed with the light of burning buildings. To my five-year-old mind, they seemed no more sinister than embers in a fireplace. No more dangerous than candles in a stained-glass window. Searchlights swept the clouds, and tracer bullets flew at the cross-winged silhouettes in the sky.



Bonnke family 1941

My mother, Meta, gathered all six of us children around her and began to pray. I snuggled together with Martin, the oldest at eleven years of age, with Gerhard, who was nine, and the twins – Jürgen and Peter – who were six. Mother held little Felicitas on her lap. She was not yet three years old.

Suddenly the door burst open. A soldier stood there. He was a foot soldier who had been sent by our father, Hermann Bonnke, an officer in the German *Wehrmacht*.

“Why are you still here, Meta?!” he shouted. “It may be too late. Hermann says you must take the children and run! Run now! Run for it!”

Mother sat on the stool of her beloved harmonium, her arms around us. She knew that she had waited too long. Day after day she had longed to see her husband again. She did not want to leave the secure nest they had made together in the military camp of Stablack. She simply did not want to accept that the end was so near for Germany. Hoping against hope, she had stayed in spite of the menace that grew each day. And now – this!

“Yes, tell Hermann we will go now,” she said, nodding to the soldier.

He turned and disappeared into the night, leaving the door ajar.

“Dear Jesus, preserve us!” Mother whispered.

Weeks earlier, quietly, out of earshot of the children, Hermann Bonnke had told his wife that the war was lost. “World War II will go down as horribly as World War I for Germany. The Allies are invading from the west. Here in the east, Stablack is surrounded. We will make a final stand, but Russia has built an overwhelming force, and they will prevail. We don’t know when they will begin the attack but it could come at any moment.”

He told her that he would have to stay with the troops. He might not be able to return home from the garrison to see her before the end. The army would make a final stand in an effort to allow refugees to flee. When all was lost he would be ordered to pull back to surrender to the British or French in the west, rather than fall into the hands of the hated Soviets.

He instructed her to sew backpacks for all of the children. We would use them to carry food and clothing. We would have to pack now and be prepared to flee at a moment’s notice. It was early spring and we would have to endure temperatures below freezing, day and night.

“You must take the road toward Königsberg then turn south. The road to Danzig is cut off. You will have to cross the Haff. It is the only way.”

The Haff was a frozen bay on the Baltic coast. Even though it was now February, desperate refugees were crossing the melting ice to reach Danzig.

Mother’s parents, Ernst and Minna Scheffler, had moved to Danzig soon after the war began. It was a German stronghold in Poland, on the southwestern border of East Prussia. It had an ice-free port to the Baltic Sea.

Hermann knew that the German High Command had begun the rescue operation code-named *Hannibal*.[\[1\]](#) Key military personnel and civilians were being evacuated from Danzig. The newly built German passenger ship, *Wilhelm Gustloff*, was currently in port loading for a voyage to the German city of Kiel.

“This will be your very best escape,” he said. “If you can make it to Danzig then your father can book passage for you.”

Before leaving that morning, he took Meta’s hands in his and together they prayed for our safety. Many times as they prayed my father could be heard speaking in other tongues, pouring his heart out to God in this desperate hour. Then they embraced and said a tearful goodbye. Mother knew this could be the last time any of us ever saw Father alive.

Mother had not only sewn packs for each of us boys, she had made them for each of the children of our neighbor. As the final Russian assault began, and after the warning by the soldier, she quickly called the neighbors to come join us. The time had come to bundle up for a long trip to Grandpa and Grandma’s house in Danzig, she said.

Like most Germans, we owned no automobile. We would have to go to the road and try to find a ride on a farmer’s wagon. There were eleven children and two mothers in our little refugee group. It was still the dark of night. We could not imagine the fears our mothers were dealing with on this journey. For us boys it sounded like a fun adventure. Something like a winter hayride.

Outside, we hurried toward the main road. In the distance we could see that the way was clogged with wagons, military lorries, and thousands of people on foot, all streaming west toward Königsberg. We joined ourselves to the stream.

Soon Felicitas grew tired. She began to cry. Mother bundled her in a blanket and carried her. In the darkness we did not manage to find a farmer’s wagon that had room for our entire group. So we continued to walk until daylight.

We boys soon realized that this trip would be nothing like a hayride. All around people were talking of the atrocities. Russian tanks were coming along the road behind us, and they were running over people. Soldiers were shooting women and children.

“And those are the lucky ones,” an old farmer said grimly, wagging his head as we quickened our pace. We heard the roar of an engine on the road behind us. Mother screamed at us to run into the ditch. All of the people scattered from the roadway.

But it was not a Russian tank. It was a military truck speeding past. A truck loaded with German soldiers from the battle front. They were fleeing for their lives, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

“Where are the Russians?!” screamed a refugee, as the truck rumbled on.

“They have taken Stablack!” shouted a soldier. “Run through the forest! Hide yourselves!”

“We cannot take these children through the forest,” my mother said, as she looked at her frightened neighbor and friend. “A farmer’s wagon is no match for the speed of a military tank. What are we to do?”

Another truck came by, and another. My mother was deeply distressed that she had not taken to the road much sooner. She now understood that she had made the danger greater for us by waiting until the last minute. Chaos was the order of the day. The possibility that we could be run over or gunned down by the Russian army was now her first concern.

“The next German troop truck will stop for our children,” Mother said resolutely. “They will see that I am a German mother. They will have mercy.”

The next time a truck sped toward us my mother stood on the side of the roadway hailing the driver. The truck swerved in order to go past. Mother leapt in front of it, and the truck slid to a stop in the mud. The driver cursed angrily.

“We have children! You must give us a ride!” she screamed.

“Frau, this truck is overloaded. I cannot stop.”

With that, the driver put the truck in motion again, leaving us huddled beside the road.

“Someone will stop,” Mother said with determination. “Dear Jesus, move the hearts of these men to take us to safety.”

She attempted to stop the next truck and the next. They did not even slow down in their headlong rush to save their own lives. Mud splattered over us from their spinning tires as they sped past.

As we walked on, Mother hatched another plan. This time she would have our neighbor stand apart with us children. We would remain 15 feet or so behind Mother's position. If she managed to stop another truck and engage the driver, our neighbor would not wait for his answer. She would begin to toss children one by one into the back of the truck. We would land like eleven sacks of potatoes among the soldiers. Last of all, the women would beg the men to make room also for the children's mothers, expecting that they would not want to have to care for the children by themselves.

This plan worked. Once inside the troop carrier the soldiers made room for us where formerly there was none. It was standing room only, but they pushed against each other to make a small circle in their midst. Finally, they pulled our mothers into the truck and deposited them on the floor beside us.

The truck revved its engines and began to roll on toward the Haff. Mother sobbed and hugged us, thanking the soldiers again and again for their help. But they refused to look at her. The proud Prussian military had failed to protect its homeland. All had been lost, and now it was every man for himself. Their eyes darted left and right searching for any sign of Russian troops on the move.

Not long after, the men began to scream and pound their fists against the cab. Someone had spotted a plane approaching. The truck lurched to a stop, and the soldiers spilled out like scrambling ants. Hitting the ground, they raced for cover in a nearby grove of trees.

Mother grabbed her boys and Felicitas as a fighter plane swooped low over the truck and then pitched up into the sky to position itself for a bombing attack. We had no time to leap from the truck or catch up to the soldiers. We were a sitting target.

Mother took us like a mother hen hovering over her chicks. She put us under her body, spreading her coat over us and began to pray.

"Heavenly Father, protect these children. Give us Your angels for a shield. Let no weapon prosper. These are Your children, Lord. Keep them safe, in Jesus' name."

She continued to pray as the hum of ballistic shrapnel filled the air, arriving faster than the speed of sound. This was immediately followed by the roar of the fighter's cannons drowning all other sounds and thoughts.

The truck leapt and shook with the deep impact – *thump! thump! thump!* – of bombs pounding the earth in rapid succession. Explosions of soil burst over us as the plane banked toward the east from whence it had come. We could hear small-arms fire from the grove of trees where the soldiers were hiding. The sound of the plane's engine died in the distance. Nothing had hit the truck. Nothing at all.

We looked up. Mother shook soil from her cloak. "Thank You, Jesus," she whispered.

When the soldiers re-entered the truck they were deeply shamed. None had looked to our safety. As seasoned fighters they had been sure when they bolted for the trees that there would be nothing to come back to. No truck, no refugees. They went to great lengths after that incident to take extra care with us. We became their prized cargo.

Darkness fell again, and we continued on through the next night. In the predawn darkness we stopped in a forested area near the Haff. Hundreds of other families huddled in the trees by bonfires. The soldiers carried us into the wood and told us to build a fire. With dawn breaking they would not cross the ice. The Russians were flying from their positions around Königsberg to bomb the refugees as they fled, they said.

I was happy for the chance to stretch my legs. The search for firewood in the forest was just what I needed. I began to hurry along, looking for scraps of deadwood that might burn. But the other families had done a good job. There were no scraps to be found. I went deeper into the woods, searching the ground diligently.

Suddenly I looked up and had no idea where I was. I ran to the nearest group of refugees. "Have you seen my Mother?"

"No."

I ran to the next group and the next. From bonfire to bonfire I hurried. No one knew me. No one knew my mother. All were strangers.

“Here is Meta,” a voice called.

I rushed toward the sound of it. A man pointed to a woman I did not know. “Here is Meta.”

“No!” I cried, and rushed away from them.

I had been suddenly wrenched from my sheltered life in Stablack. Now I was lost in a dangerous world full of nothing but strangers. All of the things that meant comfort and home to me had been snatched away in one frightful night. I began to cry like an air raid siren.

A kind lady came and asked if she could help me. Between sobs I told her that I had been looking for firewood and now I couldn’t find my mother. She picked me up and carried me from group to group until, at last, I saw my mother with a worried look on her face, searching for me in the distance.

I leapt from that woman’s arms and raced to Meta. I didn’t even thank the kind lady. Mother embraced me tightly. My heart was beating so fast with the release from fear that I could hardly calm down. It was Mother’s custom to hug her children once a year, only on their birthday. Her hugs were especially precious. On the brighter side, I had unexpectedly found a way to get an extra hug from Mother. It felt so good.

As morning grew in the sky, Mother and the neighbor lady lay their eleven children on packed bundles around a bonfire. We went to sleep hearing their prayers that God would provide safe passage for us across the ice.

Suddenly the soldiers were waking us up. They gathered us and loaded us quickly into the truck. We did not understand it yet, but God had performed an answer to our prayer. As we rumbled down the slope toward the Haff a thick bank of fog rolled in from the Baltic Sea. Soon we were engulfed in the most blessed whiteout conditions imaginable. This was the divine cover needed to hide us from the bombing and strafing Russian fighter planes.

As the truck ran across the Haff the driver had to slow down and use caution. It was late in the season and pools of water on top of the ice splashed around our tires. At times we would slide sideways, nearly out of control. Sometimes the ice would groan

and crack beneath our wheels. February was normally too late to venture out here in a vehicle. But desperation and the provision of the life-saving fog drove us on.

Occasionally out of the ghostly mist we would encounter the dark circles of bomb holes. Bodies floated on the dark surface of the water. Thousands had lost their lives trying to cross before us. But we reached the other side in marvelous safety.

In Danzig we parted company with our neighbors. Soon Meta, with all six Bonnke children clustered around her, knocked at the door of Grandpa and Grandma Scheffler's second-story apartment. It was a tearful reunion. Mother's younger sister, Eva, was there, too. The first thing Mother wanted to know was if they had heard any news of Stablack, or any news of Father. No one could tell her anything. Communications had broken down.

Danzig had been under bombardment for days. As soon as the weather lifted, the bombardment resumed. We saw buildings burst into flames as planes and artillery hammered the city indiscriminately. Dozens of plumes of smoke could be seen around the apartment every day.

It was then that we heard the awful report that when the fog had lifted from the Haff the Russian air force had completely bombed out the ice crossing. That way of escape was gone for all the remaining Germans caught between Königsberg and Danzig.

"Oh, please God," Mother prayed, "show Hermann a way of escape. Don't let him be caught out there."

"And what about Grandpa August and Grandma Marie?" my brother Martin cried. "They are still in Trunz."

"We don't know where they are," Mother said. "But we will pray for their safety, too."

Grandpa Ernst seemed especially troubled. He wanted to get us out of the city as fast as he could to escape its fall into enemy hands. At the beginning of the war he had left his rural sheep farm near the Lithuanian border for a job with a woolen mill in Danzig. He was determined to stay until the end, but Danzig was no place for his wife, his daughters, or his grandchildren. Daily he would brave the bombardment

and go to the harbor. There he would jostle through the crowds seeking passage for us on a ship.

“What about the *Wilhelm Gustloff*?” Mother asked. “Hermann said that we might find safe passage on that ship.”

For a long time Grandpa did not answer. His face was a mask of seething anger. “She already sailed,” he said hoarsely.

Mother assumed he was angry because they had sailed without us.

His wife, Minna, knew he was troubled for another reason, and she could no longer contain her grief. She burst into tears. “Tell them the rest of it, Ernst.”

“Tell us what?” Mother asked.

“A Russian U-boat sank the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.”

Suddenly the gravity of the danger we were in became much more real. We had escaped from Stablack. But would we escape Danzig?

“Did anyone live?”

“There were 10,600 people on that ship. Almost 9,000 of them were refugees, the rest soldiers. Most of them perished.”

Mother looked at her mother. “Then we must pray. We will pray that God will lead Papa to find the right ship for us.”

“I will look for a ship that is not going to Germany,” he said bitterly. “A ship that is not carrying soldiers.”

Mother sat quietly for a while pondering. Might there have been a divine purpose in her delaying our departure from Stablack? Even under the threat of the Russian invasion? What if we had arrived in Danzig in time to book passage on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*? We would all be at the bottom of the Baltic Sea.

On March 17 the city was still being bombarded. We had left our home more than a month ago, and the Russians had increased their positions throughout the country. Grandpa came home that day with good news. He had been at the port as an old

coal freighter had docked. Visiting with the officers, he had obtained permission for us to ride along to Copenhagen the next morning. We would have to leave early.

He felt that this was an especially good vessel under the circumstances. It was not a military transport. He also thought that its destination bode well for an unmolested crossing. It was bound for Denmark, the country that had suffered less than others under German occupation. As the war ended, this seemed the best possible place for us.

That night Minna, Eva, and Meta fasted and prayed. Even though Grandpa Ernst had done his best for us, they were terrified. They wanted to hear from God about our journey on this ship.

After a while, Minna got up and took a small box from the mantle. She removed its lid. It contained hundreds of Bible memory verses printed on cards. She held it out to Meta and told her to take out a card. She believed that the card would contain a word from the Lord as to whether we should go on this ship or wait for another.

Mother reached out to the card box. She took a card and handed it to her mother.

“Isaiah 43:16,” Minna began, “Thus saith the Lord, which maketh a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters ...”

She could not read another word. Nor did Mother reply for a moment. The three women sat with tears streaming from their eyes. The Lord had spoken. He would be the captain of this voyage.

Now they burst out in praise to God. All of us came near to share the joy. We read the card again, and faith rose up in our hearts for the journey. Faith that God would see us through safely.

The next morning we packed our bundles for the trip. We walked down the hill to the shipyards. When we got there Grandpa was dismayed. Apparently others had seized upon the same idea. Thousands of people were packed onto the dock, ready to make the same trip. We were lost in the crowd. The ship could not possibly hold a fraction of those seeking passage. Our hearts sank.

Mother was determined she had heard from God. She took us children by the hand and pressed into the crowd. "Make way for children," she said, again and again, as we pushed our way forward.

Finally the press of the crowd became too great. We were within sight of the gangway to the ship but could go no further. Mother was fearful that one of us might be hurt. The people in the crowd were desperate.

Suddenly, someone began screaming and pointing to the sky in the east. A Russian fighter plane was sighted flying down the shipyard line, guns blazing, headed straight for where we stood.

People began to scream and run. Mother knew the children would be trampled, so she huddled us all together, telling us to get down and hide behind our luggage. Once more, as she had done on the military lorry, she shielded us with her body.

The air hummed again with the sound of ballistic shrapnel. Hungry bullets seeking flesh to destroy.

When the plane had passed over we were safe. Safe, but badly shaken. My oldest brother, Martin, to this day vividly remembers the terror of that moment. He said that he felt sure he would die from taking a bullet through his back. He was absolutely sure of it and found it hard to believe he was still alive afterward.

But we were not injured. Needless to say the crowd had thinned. My brother Gerhard remembers that Mother's sister, Eva, stood up at this point and began screaming at a ship's officer who stood near the gangway.

"Sir, look here! Here is a mother with six children! You must take them now!"

The officer turned his back to her, pretending not to hear. But she would not stop. She ran as close to the gangway as she could, repeating her demand.

More Russian planes were now circling above, seeking targets of opportunity. We grabbed our luggage and hurried after Mother toward the gangway. Eva continued to scream at the officer who seemed determined to ignore us.

Suddenly, without warning, he simply turned and opened the gangway gate to let us all in. In this way, God made room for us on that ship bound for Copenhagen. We turned and waved at Grandpa as we hurried up the gangway.

On board they hustled us beneath deck. Soon other refugees were crowded together with us. They filled the lower hold of the ship with as many passengers as seemed prudent. Then they withdrew the gangway. Many more people were left outside pleading for a place on board. But the great fog horn sounded, and the ship pulled slowly from the dock. Our voyage had begun.

Once on the open Baltic, the conditions below deck deteriorated fast. The sea was making considerable swells, and many were succumbing to motion sickness. The smell of vomit, feces, and urine began to reek in the air. In the middle of the night my bladder could hold no more.

“Please, Momma, I need to go on deck to pee.”

Mother could not let me go alone. She sent Aunt Eva with me, who took great care, making sure I held tightly to her hand. We reached the main deck and entered the cold night air. I remember the salty fresh smell of it. It invigorated me after enduring the stench below decks. After using the latrine I looked up into the starry sky. As I gazed at Milky Way, slowly tilting with the roll of the ship I heard the faint drone of a plane.

Suddenly my heart nearly leaped from my chest. On deck of this civilian ship anti-aircraft guns had been mounted and hidden under tarps. The covers were suddenly removed and the guns began blasting into the heavens at the approaching fighter. Aunt Eva screamed and dragged me toward the open hatch, but I broke free, fascinated by the drama in the sky. Before she could grab me again and drag me down the rope ladder I saw the fighter plane burst into flames.

“Look! Look!” I shouted, pointing to it.

For a moment both of us watched transfixed as the plane fell like a burning meteor, splashing into the dark and icy waters off to one side. The passengers on deck began to cheer. It had been a Russian fighter that plummeted from the sky.

As Eva hurried me down below decks she was thanking God that at least we had escaped the strafing that had targeted us on the docks in Danzig. I also recalled the terror of the bullets and bombs that had rocked the military truck as we sat helpless on the road. Incident by incident, the realities of this war were becoming real to my five-year-old mind.

Sometime after midnight, we were awakened by an impact against the hull. Staring into the darkness, all we could hear was the constant churning of the ship's engine room continuing on course. All of the passengers had heard of the fate of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. After some minutes, passengers began to panic as the ship listed hard to one side.

The crew rushed to the lower decks with gasoline-powered pumps. Either the ship had struck a mine or had been hit by a torpedo. Water was rushing in from a gaping hole in the hull. Soon the sounds of the pump engines could be heard below decks, removing the incoming water.

Mother called us to her side. Here was the supreme test of her promise from God. She began to pray, Minna and Eva joining her, reminding God that He was the God who had spoken, saying that He made a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters.

After some hours the ship began to right itself. The crew explained that the pumps had begun to work faster than the incoming water, and we were staying afloat. When the coast of Denmark appeared and we entered the harbor at last, everyone wept and cheered.

I looked at the distant shore without a clue as to what awaited us here. All I knew is that I wanted to stay close to the woman who had prayed us safely through the fall of East Prussia. Though I could not yet put it into words, in my heart I wanted to know the God she knew. And I wanted to know Him like she knew Him.

Chapter 6

Meta bundled Felicitas in a blanket and carried her in her arms. She gathered all five blond-headed Bonnke boys around her, and together we stepped off the coal

freighter into the freezing sleet of a Copenhagen spring. Eva held Grandmother Minna by the arm as they followed unsteadily down the gangway.

Other ships were unloading at the docks around us. Slowly we began to understand that we were but nine of a quarter million German refugees entering Denmark. 85 percent of them were like us – women with children.[\[2\]](#)

At first we were treated well. The Nazi-supervised Danish government did their best to feed and house us in empty schools, warehouses, and meeting houses. But in a matter of days, Hitler was dead, and Germany surrendered. The occupying German forces withdrew and everything changed.

The horrors of the Nazi death camps and crematoriums became headline news around the world, and we felt the hatred of the Danish people exploding in our faces. Some refugees were attacked by angry mobs who wanted to kill every German in sight. For our own safety we were removed to a military-patrolled detention center. It was ringed in barbed wire and hastily constructed guard towers, resembling those we'd seen at the prisoner-of-war camp in Stablack. The difference was that now we were the prisoners on the inside. This would be our home for the next four years as the world sorted out the terrible aftermath of World War II.

We shared a small bungalow with two and sometimes three other family groups. No one had money. We had a system of vouchers for rationed necessities like toilet paper, soap, toothbrushes, and clothing. We were fed en masse at a central kitchen. The food provided was unappetizing and barely nutritious. Many suffered from dysentery. In time, weaker adults and children began to die of malnutrition and dehydration.

For us boys, part of each day's routine involved helping to carry water and firewood to our cabin. Firewood remained in short supply, and getting warm and fed became the first goal of each and every day.

As the days and months passed, Mother nursed us through the normal fevers, colds, and bouts with flu, using home remedies and prayer. Doctors were not available. Only basic medicines and first aid could be found. During our first year in the camps, 13,000 died, mostly children under the age of five.[\[3\]](#)

Today, moss-covered stone slabs mark the resting places of these German children in nearly forgotten corners of Danish graveyards. In some cases one stone represents several children hastily buried in a single grave. I recall one I recently visited at the site of our internment. A single stone cross bears the names of George Kott, 3 months of age, Rosewitha Rogge, 3 months, and Erika Rauchbach, who died after four days of life. And the headstones go on and on like this, row after row, 7,000 in all. Even as the war ended, the tragic momentum of death it had spawned simply would not stop.

But of course, boys will be boys, even in a prison camp. My older brothers and I found ways to play our games as Mother, Eva, and Minna bore the full brunt of hardship. I vividly recall chasing a makeshift soccer ball through the camp. One day I chased it up to the barbed wire fence. Stooping to pick it up, I saw an armed guard in a tower. It reminded me that we were not free to run and play as we had been in Stablack.

It slowly dawned on me that we were not like the other children who sometimes stood on the other side of the fence staring. Sometimes their parents stood with them and pointed at us, and sometimes they cursed us for what we had done to the world.

I slowly became aware that the army my father had served belonged to an evil empire. The truth about Nazi atrocities and Hitler's insanity began to make their way even into the conversations of German boys and girls at play in the camps. Our father's military rank, which had once been a source of pride for the Bonnke boys, now became something we kept to ourselves. We were sobered and saddened. My brothers and I longed to see our father and to know that he was okay, and to learn from him the answers to these terrible accusations.

Mother had received no official word about Dad, but she reassured us that God would take care of him just as He had taken care of us on our perilous flight from East Prussia. But for many long months we were under a dark cloud, wondering if he had been crushed beneath the wheels of the advancing Russian tanks.

In response to our questions, Mother finally sat us down to tell us that we would never see our home in Stablack again. That part of the world had been taken over by

the Soviet Union. She explained that the end of the war had caught us in Denmark and that in time we would be allowed to return to another part of Germany where we would build a new life. Until then, we would have to make the best of life in the refugee camp.

Carrying the full weight of parenting six children, Mother let the sternness of her Prussian upbringing come forth. No doubt her strictness was compounded by constant anxieties about our safety. We had to give account to her for our whereabouts at all times and get permission in advance to do anything or go anywhere with friends. She would tolerate no deviation from her every command. Nor would she allow other opinions to be expressed once she had spoken. To run afoul of her was to risk a *good hiding*, as she called it. The word had something to do with the tanning of an animal's hide, which meant the punishment would be sufficient to change the shade of one's skin, at the very least. She did not hesitate to spank or slap us with an open hand to make sure her authority was never taken lightly. And it seldom was. The threat was deterrent enough for everyone – that is, everyone but me.



Denmark refugee camp. The background was a wallpaper.

Somehow I earned more than my share of hidings. I might run off to play with a friend and forget to ask permission. Or, I might express an opinion contrary to her

rules, as if I had a perfect right to do so. I would become distracted while carrying firewood and end up playing soccer. On a sudden whim I might fashion a fort from the firewood I was carrying and engage in a furious chestnut fight with an opposing team of children. My clothes would become torn and filthy at the knees. At mealtime I might begin wrestling with a sibling and spill my food and drink. There seemed no end to the ways I could get into trouble. It got so that in the morning Mother would look at me and say, "You naughty boy! I might as well give you a good hiding right now and get it over with."

And she meant it.

As time wore on I began to feel that she was right; I was an especially naughty boy. No matter how often I was corrected it seemed I never learned my lesson. I wore my mother out. Often she would say, "I so wanted a little girl when you were born, but you were my *fifth* boy. Dear, Lord!" It began to dawn on me that I was a heavy burden to her, but I couldn't seem to rise above it.

Finally, it didn't seem to matter. Even when I managed to do everything right I still sensed an attitude of exasperation coming from her every time I was in the room. It was more than misbehavior that irritated her. I felt that it was me.

Not feeling well, my father Hermann Bonnke lay in his prison bunk staring at the wooden slats of the bed a few inches above his nose. He had been excused from work detail, which allowed him to spend some precious time alone in the British prison barracks. He thought of how many millions of prisoners had lain awake in claustrophobic quarters like this throughout the hellish war years. Victims of the Nazi regime. How many of them – millions of them – had died in horrible ways he wished he could erase from his mind.

He had only recently learned of Hitler's Final Solution. He was still in shock over it. The extermination of Jews appalled him beyond words. As a Pentecostal believer, he had regarded the Jews as the chosen people through whom God had revealed the Messiah, the Savior of all mankind. Knowing that he had served a government that had planned to exterminate all of them left him permanently shaken. It haunted his thoughts and even his dreams at night.

He wondered how the Stablack prisoners of war were faring. Those his men had guarded at the prison camp in East Prussia. They had been mostly Belgian and French soldiers. Some had returned to Europe with stories of even worse confinement after being liberated by the Russians.

How were his fellow German soldiers faring? How many had survived the final onslaught? He thought especially of those who had stayed behind in Königsberg so he could escape by sea. He recalled how they had sacrificed themselves.

“You are a father of six children,” the officer in charge had said. “You must return to build a new Germany with them.”

He had been given passage on the last mine sweeper to leave the harbor at Königsberg before the end. His fellow soldiers had held back the Soviets until his ship had made it safely into the open waters of the Baltic Sea. Rumors now had come that the men who had stayed behind had been marched away on the point of bayonets into the vast Siberian Gulag in Russia. They would never be seen again.

He raised his right hand and turned it over and over before his face. In the depths of his heart he wished he had never been the young boy who had raised a wooden sword in the village of Trunz, dreaming of glory in battle. Little had he known that the Prussian Cross he had so longed to wear would be hijacked from its godly heritage and twisted into Hitler’s swastika. How the descendants of the Holy Roman Empire could be transformed into the Nazi regime, he still could not fathom. But he had seen it happen with his own eyes, day after day, with a helpless feeling in the pit of his stomach. It had taken only ten years for Hitler to seize absolute power over his beloved homeland. He would never live another day without regretting being German.

Hermann had been in this prison camp for 279 days and nights. Every minute of every day he felt the pang of longing for his wife, Meta, and his children. He saw each of their faces in his memory now, as he had seen them last in Stablack. He prayed for them by name, asking that they be preserved alive and well, and that they be reunited by God’s grace in due time. He had inquired again and again through the Red Cross of their safety and whereabouts but had learned nothing. With each

passing day the gnawing ache in his stomach grew stronger, whispering that they had not survived.

Still, in his confinement, he did not feel persecuted. It seemed small payment for the mega death and suffering dealt by the German army over the last few years. The trials for Nazi war crimes were even now beginning in the city of Nuremberg. He would not have to stand trial because as an officer in the Reichswehr, he had never joined the Nazi Party. But he had served their cause in a terrible killing machine. He thought that if he were given the death penalty as a prisoner of war now, it would not be too severe. But alas, it could not atone for so many sins. The war's sweep was too massive and its evils too many for any court to ever set right.

But there was One who kept perfect count. Not even a sparrow fell without His knowledge. The hairs of the heads of every war victim, not to mention of every perpetrator, had been perfectly numbered and recorded in His divine Book. One day the Book would be opened, and everyone would stand before the Great White Throne to give account for his deeds. God alone could balance the scales of justice.

And He had done so. In heaven there was a second Book. The Book of Life. The members of the human race would finally not stand or fall based upon their deeds – good or evil. They would be saved if their names had been written in the Book of Life. To accept Jesus as Savior placed their names in this Book. This was Hermann's hope and the hope of every Christian believer on both sides of the war.

As he lay there, in his imagination, he saw a pair of scales weighed down to the floor with an impossible debt. A tank, a bomber, a field helmet, a bayonet, an Iron Cross adorned with swastikas. Then, placed on the opposite side of the scale, the old rugged cross. Under the weight of that cross the scales were balanced. This alone was the equation of divine justice. God placed on Him the iniquity of us all. [\[4\]](#)

Tears ebbed from his eyes as his heart reached out to this infinite God in prayer. *My heavenly Father, I am Yours for the remaining years of my life. No more military service for me. It is my heart's desire to preach Your gospel and to serve You alone, until the day I see You face to face.*

Across the empty barracks he heard a door quietly open and close. Someone began walking softly across the floor. The flooring softwoods creaked beneath every step.

Hermann thought perhaps it was a British guard coming to check on him. Or a doctor coming to see why he had reported feeling sick.

He rolled from the bunk and stood up to face him, and to his utter shock it was a man in white, wearing a seamless robe and Middle Eastern sandals. He was smiling as He moved toward him, hands extended as if to embrace him. His hair was long and His beard full, and when Hermann reached out to take His hand he saw that it was torn completely through from the force of a Roman nail.

“Hermann, I am so glad you are coming,” the Master said, then vanished into thin air.

Hermann fell to his knees. He could do nothing but weep for the rest of the day and night. How could the Savior be made glad by one so guilty? Returning to his bunk, he lay down, his soul overflowing with the peace of God that passes understanding. Until this moment it had seemed inconceivable that an imprisoned soldier of the Third Reich could receive the smile of the Lamb of God, and that the Savior would express God’s pleasure at his desire to serve Him as a minister of the gospel. The treasure of this encounter burned like a warming fire in his heart until the day he died.

What a day for us when the Red Cross delivered that wonderful letter! The first of many. Our father had found us at last! Mother’s tears fell freely as she read his words again and again, stroking his handwriting with her fingers, knowing that her beloved Hermann had miraculously escaped the war’s end. I jumped with joy as she gave us the news that he was alive in a British prisoner-of-war camp near Kiel, Germany. Kiel, she explained, was not far from Denmark, just across the narrow straights of the Baltic.

It would be years until we saw him, but just knowing he was alive and that he was that close to us in miles, was enough for now. Our entire family had been spared by the hand of God from the terrible end of the war. I watched the joy on Mother’s face and I reflected her happiness. I spent my time in the refugee camp with a new measure of purpose thereafter.

Days later, while at play, I noticed a serious look on the face of my older brother Martin. He was speaking to Gerhard, Peter, and Jürgen near the compound fence, and he seemed deep in thought. I came near and heard some of what he was saying.

“... Why didn’t God save the people on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*? They were Christians. What about the ones who fell through the ice on the Haff? Did God save the Bonnkes and not them? God didn’t send the fog that covered us. That fog was just part of the weather patterns. We were the lucky ones, that’s all. Some days the fog comes and some days it doesn’t. God didn’t do it.”

These were big ideas. Too big for my now six-year-old mind. Hearing them from Martin made me feel terrible, like someone had stolen my most prized possession. I walked away quickly, deeply disturbed.

Later, I found Mother alone. “Mother, God kept us safe from the Russians, didn’t He?”

“Oh, yes, Reinhard, He did.” I could see her face glowing with thankfulness as she spoke.

“And did He keep Father, also?”

“Yes, and Father, too. God is so good. We must praise Him every day and be thankful for His protection over our family. So many perished, but we were spared.”

My heart became peaceful again. Her faith was the solid rock that anchored my drifting soul. To this belief I would cling for comfort and joy. And in this way I began to walk a path separate and distinct from that of my older brothers. Our ways would eventually lead us to very different destinations.

After nearly two years in the camp, Grandpa Ernst Scheffler contacted Minna and Eva through the Red Cross. He had survived the fall of Danzig and had escaped to Neu-Ulm, Germany. The old sheep farmer was working for a branch of the same woolen mill that had employed him in Danzig. He had secured a home and had found a way to free his wife and daughter from the camp.

We were sad, and at the same time so glad when we said our goodbyes. We wanted Grandma and Aunt Eva to be free, but we did not understand why we were not given

our freedom at the same time. These were questions to which we could expect no answers. We were merely German war refugees who in the eyes of many deserved life in prison.

Meanwhile, we continued to receive letters from Father. These were the highlight of our remaining time in the camp. We would gather together and Mother would read them aloud to us, and we would feel connected again. We would dare to dream of a future in which we would be together with Father. It had happened for Grandpa Ernst, Minna, and Eva. It would surely happen for us.

I remember the day Father told us of his release from the prisoner-of-war camp. We shouted and celebrated and sang praise to God. He had been allowed to go to a city in northern Germany called Glückstadt. There he had found a room in a friend's house, and he had been offered a good paying job as a civil servant. He was preparing a place for us to come and live with him when we were released. We were ecstatic.

The name Glückstadt meant "Luck City." As Christians we did not believe in luck, but we certainly believed that it would be our very good fortune to live there with Father. Especially when we learned that he had found a little Pentecostal church in that town and had joined the fellowship. This would be our church home when we joined him. We were sure that our time of freedom was near. We began to dream of life in the house with Father in Glückstadt. But as we waited, the days turned into weeks and into months, until finally we stopped asking, "Mother, when are we going to live with Father?" The question brought tears to her eyes.

Another letter arrived that threw everything into tension. More precisely, the letter threw Mother into turmoil. Now that I am an adult, I can better understand it. In this letter Father asked if she would support him in a decision to turn his back on the secure income he would receive in a civilian job. He wanted to become the pastor of a small group of Pentecostal refugees in the nearby village of Krempe. He explained that Krempe was only five miles from the house where he lived in Glückstadt. He could ride there on a bicycle and become their preacher. He had great compassion for these suffering people, he said, and it was the desire of his heart to serve the Lord by serving them, rather than receive another kind of paycheck.

He reminded her of his promise to God in the prison camp and of the visitation from Jesus he had received there. These things had been communicated in earlier letters. He also reminded her of his dedication to God before the war, when he had gone to a soldier's retreat at Reinbeck Castle. From that day on, he had wanted to respond to the calling of the Lord to full-time ministry, but he had been unable to obtain a discharge from the Reichswehr. Now, after the war, all of that had changed.

Mother prayed and sought God for her answer. This would not be easy. She was the struggling mother of six, living for years in a refugee camp hoping for a better future. It appeared that the Lord had provided that better tomorrow in Glückstadt with her husband. Meanwhile, millions of Germans were unemployed. To give up an income with post-war security was like letting go of a life preserver after the *Wilhelm Gustloff* had gone down.

In addition to her financial concerns, Mother could think of one other hurdle that stood in the way. Hermann had made a promise to her father, Ernst Scheffler, in order to obtain permission to marry her. She wrote a return letter to Father, reminding him of the solemn pledge he had made. Had he forgotten? Could any preacher be a true man of God if he broke such a promise?

Chapter 7

Mother wrote a letter, reminding Hermann of a pledge he had made to her father Ernst. In order to marry Meta, he had promised that he would never become a preacher of the gospel. It had been Ernst's one condition. What was to be done with that promise? Could it be simply discarded?

My father's reply was basically, yes, it could be discarded. He would approach Ernst to learn if he was still holding him to the promise. Surely he was not. But if so, he would have to inform him that he answered to a higher authority. Hermann remembered how he had signed away his life to the German Reichswehr while still a young man in his teens. Years later, after coming to the Lord, and coming of age, he had changed his mind. He wanted to leave the military and enter the full time ministry. But the government would not allow it. Bondage to a youthful vow had led him to serve the most horrific regime in history. Lesson learned. He would not be

held to Ernst Scheffler's demand if it violated the call of the Man with the nail-scarred hands.

The question came back to the one between my father and mother. Would she support him if he followed this call? Once again she had to go to her knees in the prison camp, seeking assurance that God would supply for the family if Hermann made this change. At length, she received peace in her heart. She wrote Hermann back telling him that she would support him fully if he felt Krempe was the door God had opened for ministry. The promise he had made to her father could not compare to the visitation he had received from the Lord, confirming his calling. Besides, her mother, Minna, was a woman of biblical spirituality. She would help with any objections from Ernst.

Subsequently, our father was provided a bicycle by the pastor of the church in Glückstadt. He used it to ride the full five miles to and from church in Krempe each Sunday. Every letter from him from this time on was filled with stories of ministry. We learned of the extreme poverty among the refugees and how the town of Krempe had generously provided a hall for his meetings free of charge. Each letter contained information that made us feel a part of what he was doing.

Over time, Father's congregation grew to include 100 refugees. This growth forced them out of the free hall into a youth hostel that could accommodate the entire group. He told us of children in Krempe who would someday want to meet us when we came to join him in Glückstadt.

I tried to imagine what Glückstadt and Krempe looked like and what the other children in my father's church were like. All of the difficulty in the refugee camp seemed more endurable now that we had such a future before us.

Most of all I remember imagining my father in the pulpit. I was very proud to think that he was no longer a soldier but a preacher of the gospel.

Mother found ways to be a blessing in spite of the challenges of camp life. She managed to get access to a sewing machine and kept us well outfitted for the Danish climate. She organized a camp choir, copying sheet music by hand. When someone had a birthday in the camp she saw to it that they were properly celebrated in song. When anyone died she would conduct the choir as the chaplain said prayers and

read Scripture. At Christmas our entire family celebrated with a concert of carols and strolling minstrels.



Grandma Minna was a woman of biblical spirituality.

As I grew older in the camp I continued to earn her anger and harsh discipline. Often my misbehavior would reduce her to outbursts even as she was engaged in leading the choir or sewing clothes. No one in those days thought anything wrong with a parent acting in this way. It was assumed that parents were responsible for the actions of their children. Under this kind of thinking, I was bringing shame to her.

Nearly three years passed in the camp. On her birthday, Mother was allowed to take us to attend a local Lutheran church. When we arrived she was thrilled to see that this particular edifice housed a fine pipe organ.

After the service ended she approached the preacher with a special birthday request. Would he allow her to play just one hymn on the great organ? He graciously allowed it. When she played, the preacher received a revelation. No one in his parish possessed mother's musical skills. He quickly realized that such a talent could make a

marked improvement in the worship experience in his sanctuary. Now, he had a request for her.

“Would you please come back, Mrs. Bonnke, each Sunday and play for us?”

And of course, it was her great pleasure to do so and to bring all six of us to sit in the pews nearby. I remember how tall the vaulted ceilings were in that church, and how large the pipes on that organ. I recall the blasts of the various notes and instruments that seemed to explode from my mother’s fingertips as she played – notes that echoed back like pelting rain from a vaulted heaven. It was for me a loud and intimidating form of worship. That mighty music in that cavernous church left me with a feeling that God was huge and far away and indifferent to the squirming behind of a young boy imprisoned in a hand-carved Danish pew. Until she finished playing, I was nearly beside myself to be free of that place so I could run and play soccer in the refugee camp field again.

My four years of internment from the age of five until nine marked on my psyche the wonderful difference faith can make. Especially faith in a loving and compassionate God. My mother, more than anyone else, etched that lasting impression upon me.

As spring follows winter, as those who mourn will be comforted, so Meta’s music followed after the agonies of war. In my heart, and years later in my head, her performance on that great pipe organ became a magnificent anthem. Those great hymns like Luther’s *A mighty Fortress is our God* have a way of imprinting themselves indelibly in the memory. Watching the example of my mother, as both a musician and a refugee, I began to know that the compassion of our Lord flows like a river toward those in prison. Whether victims or perpetrators, His blood was shed for the sins of all. No cause or effect of human failure is beyond His reach.

Years later, as I began to read and understand the Bible for myself, I came across the words of Jesus as He quoted from Isaiah 61: The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. My heart immediately recognized this good news as a message from the very

heart of God. The God my mother knew. The God I longed to know, even though I was a very naughty boy.

Chapter 8

Pöppendorf! Pöppendorf! Pöppendorf!

This word puffed from the stack of the steam engine that pulled our train along the shining rails – or, so it seemed to me. Pöppendorf was the name of the prison camp to which we were traveling. It was the place where we would meet Father again.

I could not sit down. For weeks after learning that we would be reunited, I had seen myself running faster than all of my brothers – and of course, my sister, too – and leaping first into Father’s arms. While playing soccer in the camp in Denmark, I had secretly tested myself. I was sure that I could outrun them all. I was the swiftest Bonnke in the clan. By my own measure, at least.

As we rolled through the green farmland of northern Germany, I stood at an open window. I could smell and taste the sulfur-tinged exhaust from the coal-fired engine. The train took a long curve and I strained to see past the white trail of steam and cinder smoke. I was determined to shout, “Pöppendorf! I see Pöppendorf!” at the very first opportunity. My insides tickled like a balloon full of butterflies. I fairly bounced on my tiptoes with anticipation.

When last I had seen my father I had been 4. Now, I was almost 9. Mother told me that he would be very proud of how I had grown. I couldn’t wait to show him how tall and how fast I was, and to make him proud. There would be time enough for him to learn what a naughty boy I really was.

“Pöppendorf! I see Pöppendorf!” I shouted, pointing to a large platform surrounded by barbed wire. I felt so proud that I had seen it first.

The other children joined me at the windows as the train began to slow its chugging pace. Martin was now 15, Gerhard 13, Peter and Jürgen 11; I was 9, and Felicitas 7. The wheels beneath us began to scream with brake friction as we rolled slowly to a stop.

Meta remained calmly in her seat. She knew that the time for happiness would be the actual moment of seeing her husband. There were many, many procedures to endure first. We were still refugees. For some reason we could not simply be released even after being detained for so long. The international community had to inflict one last indignity upon us, forcing Hermann to re-enter a prison camp for our reunification. It must have been hard for him after enjoying recent years of freedom.

Father had been a prisoner of war, a captured soldier. When his military service records had been produced and examined by the British, they saw that he had never joined the Nazi party and he had been released. The irony for us was that, as civilians running for our lives to Denmark, we had been incarcerated for almost three years longer than he had. Such are the iniquities of war.

Finally, we were being transferred from Denmark to British control at Pöppendorf. There we would have all of our release paperwork processed. The officials needed to confirm that we were indeed the family from Stablack who had been separated from Hermann during the fall of Ostpreussen and that we were registered properly with all of the new West German government agencies.

In Denmark we had been released from the camp, issued new papers, and shipped across the Baltic straits to the port of Kiel. There, we had boarded this train under British guard and now arrived at Pöppendorf. It was the most famous, or perhaps the most infamous, *displaced persons camp* run by the British army.

In Pöppendorf, before we arrived, the British had confined thousands of Jews who had survived the Bergen Belsen death camp. These desperate people had tried to immigrate illegally to Palestine aboard a ship they called *The Exodus*. The British navy had turned the ship around and forced the illegals to return to Germany, confining them in Pöppendorf. The firestorm of world opinion that followed embarrassed the British so badly that they had hastened to release the Jews. This embarrassment had also accelerated something quite unanticipated. An event that would forever change the world – the formation of the Jewish state of Israel in Palestine.

Mother and Father had corresponded with excitement about this great event. Out of the horrors of the Holocaust, God seemed to be orchestrating the fulfillment of Old and New Testament prophecy. In many passages it had been written that He would

gather His chosen people from the ends of the earth and establish them again in the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We were seeing these words fulfilled in our time. It created a sense that ours would be the final generation before the coming of the Lord. I heard the words of Jesus quoted often, as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: *Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.*[\[5\]](#)

A year after the formation of Israel, it was our turn to pass through the gates of Pöppendorf. Once there, our papers were duly stamped and noted, our belongings searched. We were led to the section of barracks where they told us Hermann Bonnke would be waiting for us.

As the final barbed-wire gates to his compound were unlocked, I knew my time had come. I broke free of the others and sprinted across the common yard, searching among the other men who were waiting for their loved ones. Some of them were playing soccer and board games, others standing in groups taking in the sun. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me until I reached the wall of a Quonset hut on the far side of the field. There I turned, sides heaving as I gasped for oxygen. I had not seen my father. I had somehow missed him. I looked frantically right and left.

“Reinhard!” I heard Mother call, a familiar exasperation in her voice. “Reinhard, get back here now!”

When I turned to look back from whence I had run, there was my father near the gate on his knees, hugging all of his children – minus one – the fastest Bonnke in the clan. My disappointment was quickly overwhelmed by delight. I raced back and leaped on the pile, becoming the tipping point that threw the whole bunch of them to the ground.

Hermann lay for a while among his children, laughing and crying all at the same time. We each hugged an arm, a leg, his torso, whatever we could find for ourselves. We hugged and laughed and cried with him, unable to use real words to say just how we had missed him and how glad we were to see him again and how we loved him and a dozen other things we had been saving up to say for almost four long years.

He laughed and hugged us back because he could not help himself. And he cried, perhaps because he remembered that he was the man his buddies had put on the

last mine sweeper to leave Königsberg so he could be here now, with his wife and children, just like this. And those men had paid with their lives.

He hugged each of us then, one by one, and told us how proud he was of us, remarking at how we had grown. In the joy and energy of this family reunion I did not find an opportunity to show him just how fast I could run.

“You see, Reinhard,” Mother was saying, “you don’t listen. You always have your own ideas. If I had not been here you would still be wandering around looking for your father in all the wrong places!”

“I know, Mother. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Chapter 9

“Martin, you have grown so tall and smart. And Gerhard, you are not far behind him. Nearly as tall. I can hardly believe it is you. Walk on your hands for me, Gerhard. Let me see that trick again.”

Gerhard quickly tilted himself up and made his way from one wall of the room to the other, walking on his hands, his legs above his torso. At the far wall he turned and returned to the place from which he had started. It was something he had taught himself to do while in the camp in Denmark. Father laughed and clapped.

When I tried to do it, I fell awkwardly to one side. No matter how many times I tried to balance, I fell. But for Gerhard it seemed as easy as walking upright.

“Gerhard is the athlete of this family,” Father said. “Martin, you will soon be old enough to join the military, but you are named Martin for good reason. You will preach the gospel like Martin Luther one day.” Father went on joking with us and telling us what he felt we should become one day.

Night after night, eight Bonnkes were stuck in the single room Father had found after the war. We shared the house with several other families. Even worse, each night Father seemed stuck on the same topic. The happiness of our homecoming seemed to be sucked from the room as he talked about World War II.

“We fought for our country, which is a noble ideal, but our country had been taken over by Hitler and the Nazis. They took the greatest military the world has ever seen, and they wasted it for ego and insanity. They betrayed everything Germany stood for, and it is no wonder the world hates us. In the end, the Soviets overran us, and now an Iron Curtain divides Germany into East and West. It divides Berlin and most of Europe. This is what our war accomplished, boys. Your Grandfather August was killed by the Soviets when they crushed East Prussia.”

“Now Herman,” Mother cautioned, “do the children need to hear this?”

“My boys will soon be old enough to become soldiers. Boys naturally dream of glory like I did. They need to know the truth. When the Soviets overran Trunz they were filled with vengeance. Everyone ran in panic. Your Grandfather August was too old to keep up, and the soldiers kicked him and hit him again and again as he tried to take your grandmother to a train station. Grandmother Marie was beside herself. She could not make them stop. They did it just for sport, for vengeance. Still, Grandpa made it with her onto the train where there was hardly room to stand.

“As the train pulled from the station and reached full speed, he died from his injuries and fell to the floor. The passengers had no tolerance for a dead person on that train. Even our own Prussian people had become animals in the aftermath of the war. Some of them held Mother back as the others threw his body from the window of the train. This is how my dear father ended his days on earth. And now you can see what I mean when I tell you, war is hell!”

We were stunned to silence and deeply saddened. Felicitas was crying.

“Why didn’t God protect Grandfather?” Martin asked somberly. “If He protected us, why didn’t He protect him?”

It took a moment for Father to find his reply. “That is a very hard question, Son. I have wondered that myself. But for questions like this there will be no answers until we are on the other side and can ask God face to face.”

For Martin, this answer was not satisfying. He remained deeply troubled. My other brothers seemed to follow his cue. As for me, I embraced my father’s answer wholeheartedly. It became my own. One might say it was because I was merely ten

years old and my mind was less aware of the full tragedy involved. Perhaps so, but I will add that a great blessing followed my childlike faith. A blessing that has returned dividends for the rest of my life.

Twelve members of our family had been marvelously preserved through the fall of East Prussia. But for a reason none can explain, the patriarch of the clan, my spiritual ancestor, August Bonnke was lost. To magnify one tragic loss above twelve miracles of preservation would seem to tarnish the joy and meaning of my relationship to God. By embracing my father's faithful answer I could remain open and trusting toward a God who I believed had our very best interests at heart in spite of the things we could not understand.

I have never improved on my father's answer. To this day, the unanswerable questions I leave in God's capable and loving hands.

Every evening in Glückstadt we were jammed into that one room to sleep for the night. The Bonnke children shared blankets on the floor arranged around the one bed reserved for Mother and Father. We were crowded but happy to be together. At least we were out of the prison camp and breathing free air at last.

Glückstadt was a small port town near the mouth of the Elbe River. The river emptied northward from the tip of Germany into the North Sea. Its estuary was situated just west of the great peninsula that connected Germany to the main land mass of Denmark.



Arrival in Glückstadt

In fact, our city, whose seal depicted “Lady Luck,” had been founded in 1617 as the main trade center for the region. Fifty years before my family moved there, processed meat was shipped regularly from Glückstadt to America. This had kept the port viable for decades. But in the bigger picture the town had “run out of luck” in

direct competition with a huge trading center upriver. The little burg now had an inferiority complex. Especially as it compared itself to Hamburg, the city of 1,500,000 that dominated the region. Ships from the port of Hamburg churned to and from the North Sea every day, passing the docks at Glückstadt without a pause. Only a few local fishing vessels were ever tied there.

Perhaps I was especially vulnerable to the inferiority of Glückstadt. I began to feel it within myself. Not just because of the small city in which I lived and the painful poverty of my refugee family, and the fact that I was a very naughty boy – but for other reasons, too.

Our new life in Glückstadt held disappointments for me. First among them was my performance in school. As the Bonnke children entered the regular German school system, we discovered just how far behind we had fallen in the Denmark camps. Much of the energy I would rather have invested in playing childhood games now had to be focused on extra hours of study to make up for lost time.

Even so, I did not seem to overcome this setback as quickly and successfully as my older brothers did. They were energetic students. At the homework table they wrangled about the nuances of algebra, trigonometry, and calculus. They debated history and social sciences, biology and physics. And their improving grades reflected their efforts. Soon they won high praises from Mother and Father.

It was all endlessly Greek to me. My brothers seemed to soar academically while I plodded like an earthbound farmer sowing academic seeds that would not bear fruit for many seasons to come. Every class was hard work for me, but there was one class I detested above all others – English.

“Mother, Father, why should I have to learn English? I am German.”

They tried to tell me that it wasn’t for me to question why. It was a required course in all of Germany now. I had to do it, and I would be held accountable to do it well, like my older brothers.

Every day in school the teacher would dictate words in English. We obtained a standard workbook from the local bookstore and filled in the dictation on blank

pages. When the book was filled we were given a final test. Words were placed on the blackboard that we were to translate and write on our final page.

On the day of the test I wrote my answers in anger. In truth, I knew that I was guessing. I simply did not know the rules of the English language. So I wrote out of frustration and turned in my test before any other student in the room had finished. I then made a show of handing in my booklet to the teacher before any of the others and being allowed to go out and play on the playground. What a shallow victory, doomed to backfire and make things worse.

The next day I was not surprised to see my workbook filled with red marks. The teacher's commentary on my work was not complimentary. Even though I knew it was coming, I was crushed.

As I placed that book in my bag and began to walk home, I knew that Mother and Father would see it and I would have to answer for my failure. The more I walked the heavier that bag became. Finally, the weight of it slowed me to stop in front of the Glückstadt bookstore. That's when a wonderful thought came to me. I could buy a new workbook using my lunch money. I could exchange it for the old one. I would not have to answer to Mom, Dad, and my brothers for my mistakes. I took the workbook filled with the accusing red marks and threw it into a trash barrel. In this way, I became foolish like Adam in the Garden of Eden, using a fig leaf to cover the awful truth.

Every thought in my head about school hurt. It weighed on me like a heavy yoke. I could not succeed and I could not escape. Now my sinful whitewash made the burden of it seem even heavier.

Adding to the load, I soon discovered the intense scorn that Lutheran school children had for Pentecostal children. On a typical Sunday, our father would be gone before sunup on his bicycle, traveling to minister in Krempe. We could not afford another bicycle, so none of us went with him. We attended the local Pentecostal congregation.

The Pentecostal believers in Glückstadt met in a small school room behind the Lutheran church. When we were seen leaving our humble meetings in the shadow of the great Lutheran steeple, the news quickly spread that the Bonnkes were tongues

talkers. The teasing began. And it was more than teasing. Pentecostals were seen as primitive people, religious Neanderthals, a knuckle-dragging sect that only existed because of its ignorance. This gave the Lutheran children license to call us every name in the book.

As a boy I had no real argument to make in our favor. In fact, our faith did not spring from a seminary textbook, a baptism, a catechism, or a confirmation ceremony. Rather, both salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit came from a direct and powerful encounter with God. By that experience the Word of God became alive for us, and we were guided to the truth of Scripture through our spiritual relationship, rather than by the study of theology, or church history, or religious traditions.

Our kind of religion bypassed all that the Lutherans seemed to hold dear, and we were punished for it. We were considered unworthy of social standing. I remember how all of our women wore plain clothes and no jewelry and they never cut their hair, wearing it in an unstylish bun at the back of their heads. This was done as part of the holiness heritage that had been the cradle of Pentecostals worldwide. Holiness standards demanded that believers look and talk and act differently from the rest of the world as a testimony to the true nature of their faith. So, in the little town with an inferiority complex, we Pentecostals were below the bottom feeders. We were quite visible and gave the local residents something to look down upon.

My older brothers simply rose above it. They continued to excel in school winning praises from their teachers. Accusations of Pentecostal ignorance simply would not stick to them.

While they resented the teasing from their classmates, in their hearts they began to deal with even more difficult tensions. Pentecostal practice and the claims of education went to war in their souls. This meant that at church they might betray their academic beliefs under the influence of a guilt-inducing sermon. Then again, at school they might betray their Pentecostal faith when it seemed to fall short of the rational arguments of science.

This was a dilemma I came to understand much later in life because I did not share it at the time. Anything I encountered at school or from classmates or in textbooks that went contrary to my Pentecostal heritage was discarded without serious

consideration. I felt the pain of rejection keenly, but in those days I never responded to it by considering that anything about Pentecostalism could be wrong at all.

Father's congregation in Krempe began to grow, but they were still a group of poor refugee families who could leave little in an offering plate.

It seems the new chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, had passed a law allowing soldiers of the Reichswehr to retire early and receive a pension for life. At the age of 44, my father had taken advantage of that law, believing that was the provision of God to fund his ministry in Krempe.

Mother thought it all sounded too good to be true. She did not trust the government to follow through on its promise to pay the pension. How would they raise enough taxes to support such a thing after the war?

On a day I shall never forget, the postman arrived with exceedingly good news. He handed her a government envelope containing the first pension check for 799 deutschmarks. She ripped it open, shouting praises to God. She danced around the room and insisted on giving the postman two deutschmarks as a tip. I had never seen such a display of generosity in my life.

Almost immediately, she sat down and wrote a postcard addressed to her parents, Ernst and Minna, now living in Neu-Ulm. She was very eager to announce the good news. Tensions between the Bonnkes and the Schefflers over Father's choice to enter the full-time ministry had grown in recent months. Objections centered on the lack of a reliable income to support a family with six children. Now, that objection was gone. We would be able to move from the one room that we shared.

Mother reassured her parents that regardless of the amount of salary the little church in Krempe could pay their pastor; Hermann would be supported for the rest of his life because of his long-standing service in the Reichswehr. Something that had been a heavy burden for him had been transformed into a blessing. Mother gave all the glory for this benefit to God.

As a result, something was introduced into the Bonnke household with which I had little prior knowledge. Money! And soon, to my ten-year-old mind, money became nearly synonymous with chocolate.

This money-for-chocolate relationship began when I accompanied Mother to do her shopping one day. I saw her take a portion of Father's money from her purse to pay for meat, bread, vegetables, dish and laundry soap, and a small amount of chocolate candy. The money, it seemed to me, was like the ration coupons we had used in the camp in Denmark, except that the choices in Denmark had never included chocolate.

Mother brought all the groceries home and cooked them for supper. Then for dessert, with a glow on her face, she carefully rationed a portion of chocolate candy to each of her six children. This was like getting Christmas in July! Such luxuries had simply never been afforded since we had left our home in Stablack.

As I bit into the chocolate I experienced a revelation. What marvelous sensation was this? My taste buds had never been so turned on. The flavor went all over me with a sense of delicious well-being. Life seemed to consist of many things that were difficult and dull and tedious, like school and homework and chores. But now there was chocolate. I simply needed to have money to have more of it.

The solution became quite clear to me. Mother had plenty of money in her purse. Money was now readily available to our family. And it was free. She had given away two deutschmarks to the postman, hadn't she? A portion of chocolate would cost even less. She would not miss such a small portion of money from her purse.

Though I was merely an average student, I immediately became motivated to achieve at math. Well, at least the kind of math necessary to calculate the proper amount of deutschmarks necessary to buy an individual portion of candy. Once I had this figured out, all I had to do was wait until Mother had abandoned her purse in the bedroom and retrieve the exact amount from her change wallet. A little here, a little there.

Once, twice, three times over the next several weeks I managed to find the right amount of change. Just a few pennies. It resulted in a trip downtown to obtain the pure joy of a very intense and personal chocolate experience. Oh, how I savored it! And how I was filled with a sense of being wealthy. And finally, the day came when I took a full deutchmark from her purse.

In my heart I knew I was wrong. At the store, as I finished my chocolate pleasure, I began to feel a sense of guilt gnawing at my insides. I walked from that place, and I

made a guilt-born vow: "One day I will repay Momma 100 deutschmarks to make up for the money I stole. That is what I will do."

How do mothers do it? How do they know? Where do they learn the exquisite art of timing? My hand was well into her purse when I heard her voice behind me in the gloom of the bedroom.

"Reinhard, what are you doing?"

I withdrew my hand as if a mousetrap had just snapped on my fingers. "Nothing, Mother. Nothing."

This was technically not a lie since I had emerged from her purse with nothing in my hand. Somehow, however, I knew that what I had been doing was much more than nothing, and it was very, very wrong, and I was about to get the hiding of my life. Which I positively deserved. I was hopelessly naughty.

Mother turned the light on in the room. She stood there thoughtfully for a long moment deciding how she would handle my transgression. Then slowly and deliberately, she came to sit on the bed. Every moment of this process was pure torture.

Opening her purse she looked inside. The change wallet was open.

"Reinhard, have you been stealing money from my wallet?"

"No, Momma. I don't know what the others have been doing with it." I wanted to pass the blame onto my brothers.

Patting the bed beside her, she indicated that she wanted me to sit down. I did.

"Look at me, Reinhard."

This was much worse than a hiding. I looked into the eyes of the woman I most loved and respected in the world and knew I had betrayed her. My pulse raced. It pounded in my temples, fueled by the foul vinegar of shame.

"Reinhard, you know that you have disappointed me again."

"Yes, Mother. I know."

“I have been missing money from my wallet before. Have you done this before?”

It took just a bit of mental reviewing to properly get this reply to come out of my mouth. I heaved a sigh. “Yes, Mother.”

“I am so disappointed. But now, I am even more worried. It is one thing to misbehave, but it is another to be a sinner. Do you know that what you have done is a sin before God? It’s called stealing.”

Actually, I hadn’t thought of it quite as stealing. I had seen it as a way of getting – well, sort of “sneaking” chocolate. But now that she mentioned it, there was no denying that what I had done should be called stealing. I had taken her money. Purely and simply. I nodded.

“Thou shalt not steal. It is one of the Ten Commandments.”

I nodded again. I had memorized the Ten Commandments. I knew them by heart.

“When we break God’s law, it is sin, Reinhard. You are a sinner, and I am worried about you because sinners go to hell for all eternity.”

The pain of my transgression grew heavy indeed.

“Do you know this is why Christ died on the cross?”

I had never thought of His death as applying strictly to me. In church and in family devotions when we had heard about it, I had always thought of the sins of the whole world as causing the death of God’s Son. Suddenly, my own sins were before me, slashing like a cat-o’-nine-tails into the flesh of the Lamb of God. The taste of stolen chocolate turned completely foul in my memory. It seemed to cost so much more than money now. I couldn’t calculate the price. The death of God’s Son. I began to cry.

“Jesus died to save sinners, Reinhard. He died so you would not have to go to hell for your sins. Would you like to receive Jesus as your Savior and be forgiven?”

“Oh yes, Momma, I would.” In truth, I felt the awful reality of being lost. This was more than a life lesson. It was an eternal life lesson. One that marked me for the rest of my life and ministry. Only the Holy Spirit can accomplish this knowledge in the

heart of a sinner. I did not want anything in my life ever again that cost God the death of His Son. Nothing! I wanted to please Him in every way. And I wanted to be forgiven.

I repeated a prayer after her, acknowledging that I was a sinner and accepting Jesus as my Savior. When we finished, she hugged me. It was a birthday hug and more. It was my new birthday. I felt as if a thousand pounds had been lifted from my shoulders. It was the last time in my life that I ever stole anything.

“There is something else, Reinhard. The Bible says that if you believe in your heart and confess the Lord Jesus with your mouth you will be saved. Do you believe that you have been saved?”

“Yes, Mother, I do.”

“If you have believed it then you need to confess it. Sunday, when we are at church, I want you to stand up and confess to the other believers what happened here today. That will be *confessing with your mouth the Lord Jesus*. Will you do that?”

I was happy to say yes. And I did it. The people of the congregation welcomed me as a new member of the body of Christ that Sunday morning.

When I confessed the Lord Jesus, something further happened in me. I knew that I belonged to the Pentecostal Church. It was no longer just the church of my father and mother. It was now my church, too. They had welcomed me into the family of God. They were now my brothers and sisters. I felt affection for them. I began to love those who loved them and despise those who despised them. Needless to say, I had even less regard for the Lutherans in Glückstadt thereafter.

Soon we moved into post-war public housing. It was something called a Town Council Apartment. At last we had a space we did not have to share with other families. We had more than one bedroom, with a kitchen and bathroom of our own. Father's pension had made that possible and Mother was highly motivated to once again create a home that reflected her personality.

A harmonium was obtained. Musical instruments and lessons began for each of us. I learned to play the guitar and sing. I was told that I had a wonderful singing voice as

a lad. We became the musical Bonnke household again, as we had once been in Stablack, singing and playing hymns of praise to the Lord.

I remember time after time, during this period, Mother would suspect money was missing from her purse again. The first place she came to inquire was to me.

“Reinhard, did you steal money from my purse again?”

“No, Mother, I swear I did not steal anything.”

“There is money missing. You have been a thief. Do not lie to me. Did you steal money again from my purse?”

My eyes were flashing as I replied, “No, Mother. I did not steal money from your purse.”

She looked deeply at me and lowered her tone of voice. “No, I can see by your eyes that you did not steal it.”

Even so, the burden of my original sin haunted my innocence. I could never walk away from Mother feeling that she would not again suspect me of stealing. Sin had begotten the death of trust between us. How it pained me!

But even a sinful boy finds moments of reprieve. One Sunday, another boy my age at church invited me to explore the woods behind town. He said that he had seen a mother deer with twin fawns out there, and he might be able to find them again. We got permission from our parents and spent an hour following game trails without seeing anything more than tracks in the mud.

The bees were busy pollinating flowers, and the tall grass was buzzing with insects in the warm sun. As we walked and talked we forgot about the deer. We both decided that when we grew up we wanted to be preachers. The idea occurred to us to practice our preaching skills on the surrounding trees.

This became a regular Saturday activity for a number of weeks. We even took a Bible with us so that we could properly read our text before beginning a sermon. As time went by, however, I began to notice that my friend Hubert was a much better orator than me. His voice was stronger and his sermons more eloquent. Though I loved

Jesus with all my heart, I found it difficult to express my heart in words that matched his.

This was a source of discomfort for me. After being born again I thought that I should be able to do better than this. Again, I felt inadequate. Deep inside I suspected that God knew what a troublemaker I was for my mother. In my immaturity I felt that somehow my salvation must not be as genuine as my friend's.

Though she had married the Preaching Major, and attended a Pentecostal church, Mother too, felt inadequate. She had never received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues. She had wanted to know God in this way but had not found it happening no matter how she prayed. Discussions about it between her and Father were a normal part of our family experience. Now that Father was a Pentecostal preacher, she felt the need for the experience even more.

I remember Mother reading Scripture on the subject. In the book of Acts it described that the people heard the sound of a rushing mighty wind, then tongues of fire descended on the heads of all those in the room and they began to speak with other tongues. Somehow this image of the tongues of fire jumped out at me.

I read the scripture with her, and I could almost see the flames in the Upper Room. God blessed His people with fire. I wanted my mother to have this experience.

"Mother, did the fire hurt the people? Did it burn on their heads?"

She heaved an exasperated sigh. "No, Reinhard. It was like the burning bush Moses saw. The fire of God did not burn up the bush. It's not like a normal fire."

"What kind of fire is it?"

"I think it was a signal fire. It was a sign to the Jewish people in Jerusalem to say that the Day of Pentecost had been finally fulfilled."

"Will you have a flame of fire on your head when you are baptized with the Holy Ghost?"

"No, Reinhard. I don't think so. The Bible says that we will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. With just human strength it is impossible to do what God commands. His Word says it is *not by might*,

nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord. [\[6\]](#) So when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will receive power to preach.”

“I hope you will have the fire on your head, too,” I said, “just like in the Bible.”

In my heart I began to ponder the idea that what I needed, like my mother, was the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Perhaps this was the power that would make me able to express the gospel that so dominated my heart.

Not long after this conversation I attended a life-changing Sunday service. On this particular day, a husband and wife missionary team had been invited to speak. I do not remember much about them because as they were speaking the Spirit of God spoke to me in my heart. It was as if He said very clearly, “Reinhard, one day you will preach My gospel in Africa.”

Until this moment I had been a boy born in Germany with very little exposure to the larger world. My mental picture of the continents was not well-schooled. But in my heart it was as if Africa had been suddenly written there.

When we are born again it is like this. Our names are written in heaven, and our eternal destiny is sealed there. But we can also receive an earthly destiny from our heavenly Father. That is what I received as a mere boy at ten years of age.

I have often wondered if the country of Africa had been suggested to my mind by those missionaries who spoke that morning. Germany had a historic presence in Africa during the colonial era. I had certainly heard of it, but nothing had been made personal to me concerning the Dark Continent. Perhaps this couple had been working in Africa and had shown pictures. I frankly do not remember. And little does it matter. What matters is that I heard God speak in my heart so clearly.

This was something I simply had to share with Father. I could hardly wait until he pedaled in from Krempe that day. I waited for him on the street. As I sat there, I knew he would understand the voice of God I had heard inside. He also had heard from God. I recalled that Jesus had even visited him while in the prison camp when he had decided to become a minister. Surely my father would become as excited as I was over my call to Africa, and he would confirm this great day in my life. When I saw him I raced to meet him.

“Father, Father, God spoke to me in church today and said I must preach the gospel in Africa!” I must have appeared to him like a bouncing puppy yapping out my excitement.

He did not seem to understand. He dismounted from his bicycle and asked me to repeat it. Then he looked at me with a puzzled and somber expression. “Your brother Martin will be my heir, Reinhard. He will be the preacher of the gospel in this family.”

It was like a shower of cold water. “But Father, God has called me to preach in Africa.”

He scowled. “How do you know that God has called you?”

Disappointment darkened my heart. His tone of voice spoke louder than his words. It told me he was in deep doubt about my claim. I thought he would understand how important it was that I had heard directly from God.

My mind searched for a way to explain to him the reality of it. What evidence did I have? Jesus had not visited me personally. Nor had I selected a scripture from a box of promises like Mother when she received a word from God about our crossing from Danzig to Copenhagen. Nor did I hear an audible voice. All I had was the evidence of my heart, and I was not eloquent enough to put it into words to please him.

On this day I began to understand that I had two fathers. An earthly father and a heavenly Father. Until that moment, I had assumed they spoke with one voice. After all, my father was a man of God. A minister of the gospel. Jesus had appeared to him in person. It was nearly crushing for me to realize that God might speak to me and my earthly father would not know it. But it happened that way.

In the months that followed I brought it up again and again. Each time, my father responded in the same way. He doubted me. He quizzed me about how I could know the voice of God. Each time I had to deal with my deep disappointment, and a gulf began to grow between us.

Though today I understand his caution, back then it was as if my father and I knew a different God. In reality we each had a relationship with the same God. A relationship that was as unique as our individual fingerprints. This is, of course, how

God delights to relate to each of us. The very hairs of our head are numbered. He reads the thoughts and intentions of our hearts perfectly and designs our paths accordingly. Jesus pointed this out to Peter, who had asked, “What about John?” Jesus replied, ... *what is that to thee? Follow thou me.* [\[7\]](#) The steps my father took in his journey with the Savior would not be my steps. God does not make spiritual clones; He raises up sons and daughters.

End of this sample Kindle book.

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