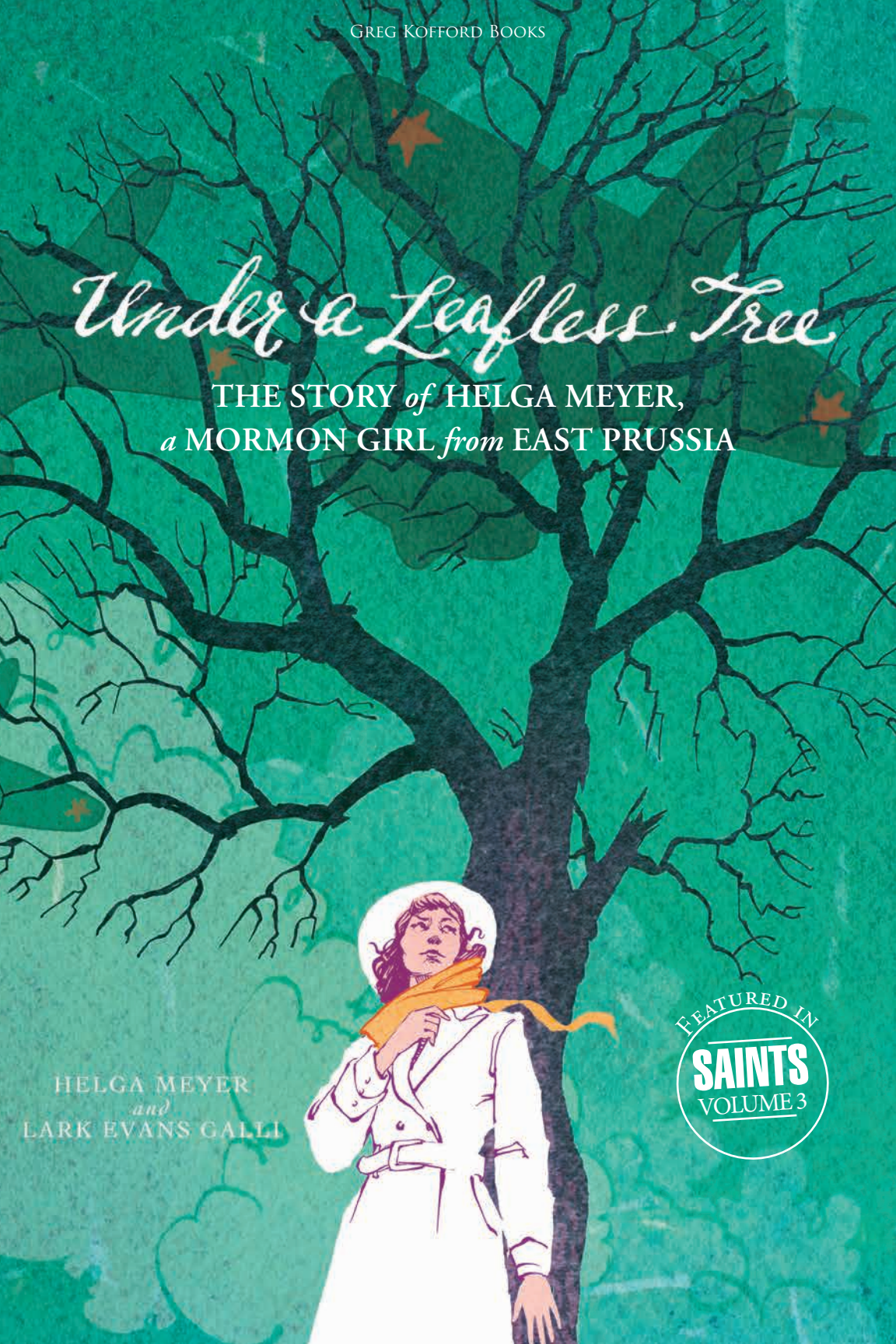
Greg Kofford Books

Under a Leafless Tree

THE STORY *of* HELGA MEYER, *a* MORMON GIRL *from* EAST PRUSSIA



HELGA MEYER
and
LARK EVANS GALLI

FEATURED IN
SAINTS
VOLUME 3

Under a Leafless Tree

THE STORY *of* HELGA MEYER, *a* MORMON GIRL *from* EAST PRUSSIA

Helga Meyer
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In remembrance of the loved ones and friends we lost in the war, especially my husband Gerhard; Kurt, Siegfried and Henry; my grandparents Berta and Eduard Wachsmuth; and my Aunt Nita. And with my deepest heartfelt thank you to my dear friend Lark. Without her, we could not tell our story.

Helga

For Craig, who in every way encouraged me, and for Helga and other good women whose stories want telling.

Lark

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Preface

Everybody has stories. There are so many stories in a story. This is a great gift to think back, to have a memory. And not only to think back, but you still recall the smell, or you have the feeling, and feel like it was yesterday. Is this not a great gift? You really want to hold on to every experience you have.

It's a burden because I think I'm not good enough in expressing my feelings. But then when I'm all by myself sometimes, thoughts come to my mind, and I have a feeling like somebody is pushing me inside with so much joy and urgency to tell a little more. Father in Heaven had better let me live, and be able to think.

On the other side it will be beautiful to learn what I gave to Lark. Maybe the wrong dates or the wrong stories! We may have to make a lot of corrections. But the feeling is still good. We don't have to correct the feeling.

Helga Meyer

Several years ago I first heard details of Helga Meyer's story. She described an aerial attack on Hitler's birthday, hiding from drunken Russians soldiers, and being near starvation. I urged her to write her history, but she was too busy sewing for a granddaughter's wedding, traveling, or gardening. When she was assigned to visit me in our local congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we began recording her memories.

Each time I pinned the microphone to her blouse, we prayed that she would recall what she needed to that day. Halting at first, soon her story flowed. It seemed to know just where it was going, and she faithfully followed every turn it took. I tried to keep up.

Helga's challenge lay in describing in English life in an East Prussian world. She charged me strictly with improving her "German tongue." I agreed to address grammatical errors, but refused to silence her German tongue. When we hear it, we hear Helga.

My challenge was to create scaffolding for her memories, then plumb her trove of photographs for the best images. We had many good laughs. Helga's ready laugh is beyond words.

The interview chairs in Helga's home.

Generous friends made transcriptions of our initial tapes, which I read back to her, asking questions of fact and clarification. With each draft, Helga gave me more gems: better words and phrases, and more details, which I wove into the manuscript.

While carefully cutting and pasting, I entered the sacred space of Helga's history, catching faint tunes from the bands in the Jakobsruh Park, glimpsing the waving hand of a departing young aunt. Grandmother Hoffmann, Gerhard Birth, and Tante Lusche assembled at my life's edge. Sometimes they were very close. I feel deeply honored to help Helga celebrate their lives and all but forgotten times, and I was blessed beyond words to have come to know my dear friend, Helga Meyer.

In addition to Helga and Craig, I thank our children, especially Hannah (for technical help); my mother, Vella Evans; Paul Werner; Clayton and Amy Thompson; Lani Twitchell, Lynette Sharp, Ann Cederlof, Shirley Jensen, Roger Minert, Ingolf Koehler of the Tilsit City Organization, Helga's children; and those, as Helga would say, "on the other side" for their encouragement and assistance.

Lark Evans Galli

PART I

Childhood

Helga, age 3 or 4. Where did Helga get all these photos? Early on, Onkel Heini was the principal family photographer. Then as a teenager, Helga used a little camera they called "the idiot box," which cost four Marks to buy. "I was always with the idiot box," she said. Tilsit Branch activity photos were often taken by missionaries, who had cameras and more time than missionaries do today. In Cammin, Brother Guzmann frequently took the pictures of fellow branch members. Helga calls him the "paparazzi" of the branch. In addition, Helga is in possession of both Tante Gretel and Tante Lusche's photo albums. Her treasured photos traveled in and out of bomb shelters in a suitcase and across the East German border in 1958.

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A Dreaming Family

Before all my children were born, I had a dream. I was with many, many people in a train station. I saw my children. They were dressed very well. I could see even their coats. They were sitting on top of suitcases, and so many people were around us, especially around my children. I was a little bit away from them—not too far. People were around them, talking and talking and talking to them.

We are a dreaming family. My grandfather dreamed a lot, my mother and I too. I was blessed with dreams that came true, dreams about the future. My great-great grandfather Kristups Dwillies was almost like a prophet for his time. My grandmother always said he could tell how the future would be because of reading the Bible. People came from all around to hear him, because he knew how to read and he had Luther's Bible. My grandmother, Johanne Hoffmann Wachsmuth, was his granddaughter. She was a very religious woman. She first heard about the gospel in Ragnit, close to my hometown. Two young men came and talked with her. She was interested, but it seems like the missionaries did not have the time. They said, "You will hear from us later on." But they never came back.

Later, when my mother's family moved to my hometown of Tilsit, their neighbors were Mormons, and they invited them to go to church. My grandfather Eduard Wachsmuth was not really excited about it. His daughters were good looking, and of course, it was thought that the Mormons came because they had so many wives, and they would take the girls to America as a second or third wife, and he was not about to have that happen to his family! But my mother and her sisters went to "Mutual" anyway. Mutual was an activity night at the church for all the members. It was always on a Wednesday evening. They didn't go through their door; they slipped through the window so he wouldn't see them. And then later in the evening, my grandfather would come and check the beds to see if they were all there. He never caught them!

Just before she was baptized, my mother Minna Wachsmuth had a very serious case of meningitis. It lasted about a half year. She was not expected to live. It was so bad that she was blinded. Tante (aunt) Lusche took her to the doctor many times. The doctor said, "If she lives through it, she will have a very hard time when she is in the change of life." And

Helga's mother and aunts, 1918. Sitting: Berta ("Lusche"); standing: Anna ("Nita"), Minna ("Mieke"—Helga's mother), Marta, unidentified friend.

it happened; she had a hard time then. They took her to the missionaries. The missionaries gave her a blessing, and she got her sight back.

My mother was the first one in the family who got baptized as a Mormon. I think she was eighteen then. One after another, her mother, brother, and sisters joined too. Even my grandfather joined, but he wasn't active. If he had help in the beginning, maybe he would have been. They didn't cater to the new members then like they do now.

My grandmother didn't want her girls to marry non-Church members, but there were not many members. The young men my mother knew and really would have enjoyed marrying were not members of the Church. Once she knew a very nice man. He was a schooled and intelligent person, but he was not a member of the Church, and so she said, "No, I won't marry him," and she didn't.

My father, Martin Meiszus, was born in the Memel Territory in Lithuania not too far from Tilsit. It belonged to the Lithuanians then, but they were all German people living there.[1] His father had a fishery, and they

1. Place names in Helga's memoir reflect her times. Most of the German names for towns and cities have since been changed, as have national borders. What was German East Prussia in her childhood has been divided between Russia, Poland, and Lithuania. See the map of East Prussia on the inside back cover for the region as she

had farmland. As a young child, he helped his father with fishing early in the morning and late at night. He served in the army in the First World War.

My parents got married on November 19, 1919. My father was not a member of the Church either, but he got baptized shortly before I was born. My aunt told me that he even bore his testimony, but it seems like later in the war they always had people who were against the Church, so he never came to church as he should have, but only once in a while. That was always a little sad for me. He was a good father—and a good-looking one too! He was a tall and handsome man, and I always enjoyed going out with him when he was dressed and wearing his *blutblase* (blood blister) bowler hat.

He wanted to become a blacksmith, but he never did. This was at that time a nice occupation, and my father was a powerful and strong man. My grandmother said no for some foolish reasons. It was in his heart all his life that he couldn't fulfill his dream to be a blacksmith. So in the beginning he was working in a big factory called Zellstoff Fabrik. They made the most beautiful paper, all kinds of paper. We called it "silk paper."

knew it. The Memel Territory of her father's birth began on the north side of the Memel River, now part of Lithuania.

–2–

The Curly Hair

I was born when we had inflation. When you went shopping in the morning with a thousand marks for a pound of butter or milk or bread, and then you went five minutes later, it was already much more. People had to go back home to get more money! Then they had so much worthless paper money that instead of wallpaper, that they put money on the walls. I even saw some of the money.

My mother said I would be born on a special day, so I came on October 1, 1920 (a holiday in Tilsit, East Prussia) at 27 Deutsche Strasse. October 1 was our harvest day, *Erntedankfest*, and we didn't have school. We had a big parade in the city and good food. Dancing was a big part of it. The children and the youth enjoyed it especially. Even in the church we had a special program. We decorated the chapel with wheat stalks and pumpkins. As a child, I enjoyed this kind of excitement going on.

I was the first child and only daughter of my parents. I think my mother would have enjoyed having a boy first. She couldn't find girls' names, for some reason. Her midwife, Frau Ganat, was a neighbor who lived above us. I think she helped find a name for me when I was born because my mother had only boys' names. My name is Rita Helga.

At my birth I had no hair and must not have been the prettiest. My mother couldn't nurse because she didn't have any milk. My dentist said my teeth were soft because of that. And this is the same with me, too. I didn't have it even for my children. It runs in the family probably. But we were not that hungry because my grandfather was working at a mill, and by then my grandparents had a little bit more food to eat than other people. They could help many people. My mother realized that I was an independent child and not as cuddly as she had hoped for a daughter to be, and the curly hair was also missing, although I never felt I was not loved.

It was very hard, almost impossible, for young couples to find an apartment in those days. My grandparents had a nice apartment and said my parents could move in with them, but they could spare only one room. My Tante Lusche married that same year, and she had the same problem: no apartment could be found. So she and her husband, Onkel Fritz Brahtz, also moved in with my grandparents and had a room of their own. All three families used the same good-sized kitchen.

Wachsmuth Family, 1921. Seated: Nita, Heini, Grandmother, Tutta, Gretel, Grandfather; standing: Fritz, Lusche, Mieke, Martin with Helga, Marta, Marta's husband.

On January 27, 1923, my brother Siegfried was born, so we four were living more or less in one room. Siegfried was sweet and had the blond, curly hair. Living at my grandparents' apartment was a joyful time, and I remember it very well. We children had many friends there, and we always played fun games in the courtyard. As young as I was, I remember innumerable occurrences.

My parents took me as a baby to visit my grandparents in the Lithuanian territory on the other side of the Memel River. My grandfather passed away when Hitler came to power in 1933. But during the war, I saw my grandmother again. I went by train one Sunday, and then I walked and walked and walked through fields to visit her. I have never seen anyone as straight, as *erect* as you can be, as my grandmother Meiszus was. My word! That was the last time I saw her.

On my mother's side of the family, I was very close with my cousin, Tutta, who stayed sometimes with my grandparents. She was three years older than I was. Her mother, Marta, was the second child in my mother's family. Tutta has always been like a sister. She was always ready for some mischief. Being with her was never boring! One morning, I remember that Tutta and I walked in Tante Nita's high-heeled shoes to the store to buy milk.

Grandmother, Grandfather, and Tutta.

When I was about two years old, my grandfather Wachsmuth lost his eyesight because of the flour dust in his eyes from his time as a miller. He needed an operation. They said he had a cataract, but instead of operating on only one eye, they operated on two, and they damaged his eyeballs. They were leaking. They had to take them both out. Can you imagine? He was over eighty years old.

With all of us, there was not room for my grandfather to rest in his apartment, so Frau Ganat offered him a nice room upstairs where he went to recuperate. My legs were a little short, so when I went up to visit him, I fell *up* the stairs with the milk, not only once, but many times! I remember very well seeing him lying there. His eyes were bandaged. The linen was so white. You could smell the cleanliness. The washing was different then. In the summertime we put it on the grass and let it bleach. Then we wet it

again. It was white, white, white. In those days, we had white sheets and white walls.

So I grew up with a grandfather without eyes. But his hearing was *really* good! He sometimes helped my grandmother by peeling potatoes or with other tasks. One time, my grandmother was in the store. It was a hot day in the summertime. Tutta and Opa (Grandfather) were outside the store. Maybe he was sweating, sitting in the sun. He had his hat taken off and had the dark glasses and the bald head. The people thought he was a beggar. People gave him money! I don't know if Tutta took the money. I'm not quite sure.

—3—

The Poor Piano

In our family, we celebrated everyone's birthday. For parties, we had a lot of open-faced sandwiches, herring salad, *Kartoffel* salad, and all kinds of cakes and tortes. I will never forget the feelings I had thinking about all the food. What a spread it was! We think we have now a lot, but we had then a lot too. We were always together with the whole family because my grandparents had the nice, big apartment, and we filled the big table. We often had friends visiting, but there weren't too many children because we were only three in my family and Tutta and my cousin, Kurt, the son of Tante Lusche and Onkel Fritz.

I remember Christmas when I was two years old. My mother planted the seed for me one day to play the piano. Oh, she pleaded with me even later on to play the piano! So I got a nice-sized toy piano. I remember so well sitting on the potty, right between the french doors, playing the piano with my little toes. Later, my Tante Gretel rescued the poor piano and played some Christmas songs on it.

Christmas Eve was a big celebration; it was absolutely wonderful! I can still feel the atmosphere and taste the good food we had at Christmas at my grandparents' home before my Tante Gretel and Onkel Heini immigrated to America. My grandmother, my mom, and Tante Lusche were all good cooks. Tante Lusche had the best *Torten*.

Before the dinner, we had dried plum soup with apples and pears, dried fruit with dumplings in it, and a lot of apricots. That is what makes it so good. And of course, we had the red cabbage. Then we had a big goose dinner with nice, fat skin and potatoes and gravy. I think in November they made some special dumplings for the geese. They put them in their mouth and massaged them down. It must have been torture. This is why they were so big and so wonderful—the poor animals! Today they would put us in prison for cruelty!

Der Bunte Teller was always very special. It was a Christmas plate with all kinds of goodies—marzipan, candies, *Schokolade* (chocolate), nuts, blood oranges (they were so good!) and apples. How we enjoyed the marzipan! Goodies in my childhood were not handed out daily.

As soon as we were able to learn a poem, we had to recite it in front of the lighted Christmas tree. The boys bowed their heads, and the girls

Special marzipan from Kønigsburg was always on *Der Bunte Teller*. Courtesy, Archive of the Tilsit City Organization.

made a curtsey before and after the poem was given. The Christmas story was told, and we sang many Christmas songs. After the program, we could get to our presents. They lay open under the tree. They were not wrapped. They were in boxes like shoeboxes, with nice paper inside. We knew exactly whose was whose.

When we moved to Heinrichswalder Strasse, the Christmas celebration was a little smaller. Our parents decorated the Christmas tree. The doors were closed, and then the Christmas tree was lit. My mother put on the gramophone with the Christmas record, and then we could march into the room. The tree even had sparklers on it! Not only one sparkler: it was all over the tree: front, back, and side. It was beautiful. I still see it. It was lit up like a fireball! A live Christmas tree; can you imagine? Life has changed. Rules have changed.

I played the mandolin. My mother had a very good soprano voice, and Siegfried had a good voice, and we sang the Christmas songs. My father and Henry sang, but they didn't have good voices.

—4—

Kind und Kegel

As I remember, there were over 135 members in the Tilsit Branch of the Church. We had wonderful Sunday School, Primary, and Beehive classes for adults, children and teenagers. In the spring we had a big bazaar with food, games, and plays. And then in the fall, we had another one. Besides that, we had a very nice play for Christmas. My Tante Gretel wrote the plays before she immigrated to America. The children were cast as snowflakes or whatever. You got a big sack with goodies. I remember that very, very well. We had good, talented people in our branch. On New Year's Eve, there was a big party too.

They were big events, not only a half an hour. They were for the whole family and friends and neighbors and members who only came to church a little. They came with *Kind und Kegel*—everyone. It was a nice get-together. You dressed nice. Everybody made potato salad, cake and cookies, herring salad, and whatever the German people like. We had filled donuts and *Streuselkuchen* and *Pulverkuchen* and wieners, of course. We couldn't forget the wieners! I think everybody brought something. And you brought it because it was for the church. And then at the end of the party was always an auction with the leftover cakes. The Mormons did know how to make money! It was a good time. I don't know exactly what the money went for. I think it was for the Relief Society.

This is one of the very few things I do not agree with in America: when we have parties here and people come, they don't know how to have a good time. They come, eat, and barely watch the program, and then they are gone. It is not the feeling of "Oh, we are together and having a relaxed, good time!" I think we need to appreciate each other a little more. We do not really live in the present, not good enough. It is heartbreaking. I think President Monson said we do live too much in the future, thinking about this and this and this. We do not live in the moment. And in the end, what will count? Our appointments we have to keep? Maybe they are not that important.

Tilsit Branch New Year's Eve party, about 1934. Helga's cousin Kurt is back row, fourth from left in a hat; Lusche is second row, second from left.

We did a lot of singing in our branch. Everybody sang. My Onkel Heini was the choir director. Music was a big part in our family, too. The Wachsmuth family all had good voices. Tante Nita and Tante Gretel, they sang a lot, and Onkel Heini did. I don't know if my grandmother could sing.

–5–

At the New House

I was close to five years old, so it must have been late summer of 1925 when we moved from my grandparents' home. My mother was desperate to find an apartment of her own before my brother Henry was born. I remember very well that she was pregnant. She wanted to be close to my grandparents, so they looked on Deutsche Strasse down to the Memel River. We went from one apartment to another. I have the feeling I had as a child, how my mother was so sad that she cried because she couldn't find any housing. It hurts me even today thinking about it. We went into a basement apartment. It was smelly and wet. Basements here are different than they were there. And then they found one very small apartment but in a good neighborhood, and they were so happy that they found *something*, because everybody lived with their parents.

What a joy it was! It was a very nice place. Upstairs was a small apartment with a hallway, a kitchen, and one room. This apartment had been for one or two people who took care of the horses of rich people in the military—a little space for the servants—so it was really a small thing. Next to the apartment were storage rooms. More room was needed for five people, and my father asked the landlady, Mrs. Reich, if he could have one of the storage rooms and make it into another room. Mrs. Reich was a very kind lady and gave my father her approval for his request. The address was 37 Heinrichswalder Strasse. The apartment had a beautiful, large house on one side, in 10 Linden Strasse. A nice size of courtyard connected the two houses and the two streets. A very high-ranking officer lived in 10. At that time, Linden Strasse was *the* street in Tilsit.

One day, while my parents moved their belongings to the new place, my brother Siegfried and I stayed in care of my grandma and Tante Lusche. But I felt like taking Siegfried and walking with him to the new place. I had been there with my parents and thought I could find the way on my own. I didn't tell anybody I was going. Tilsit was a busy, active city. It was a *Garnisonstadt* (garrison town) and full of life. We had to cross many busy streets with streetcars running back and forth, and horses and buggies, all alone! Sometimes the horses took off without the coachmen and ran through the people on the sidewalks. Now we have car accidents, but then we had horses.

Siegfried and Helga.

We were halfway there when all of a sudden Siegfried, two-and-a-half years old, didn't want to walk any more. He threw himself on the ground and had a tantrum. All my encouragement for him to walk again didn't work. As I remember, some grown-ups came to my rescue. Before long, we arrived at the new place, to the shocking surprise of my mother, because I knew my way! I made it! They said, "What are you doing here? Where did you come from?" That was a sunny day, but all of a sudden we had rain—big drops. I still feel the big drops. We called it "sun rain." It is a blessing to think back and see it. There were children in the yard, and we became friends and played. I enjoyed people, even as a child.

The new house had two apartments. Downstairs lived a family by the name of Ramnitz, who were the *Hausmann*. Mr. Ramnitz had given his life in World War I, and Mrs. Ramnitz took care of the place with her two sons, the oldest of whom was Willie. Every Wednesday and Saturday, the sidewalks and half of both the streets had to be swept, and the big court-

yard had also to be kept clean and in order. In the winter (and we had long, hard winters), the snow and ice had to be cleared constantly from sidewalks and streets. Sand or ashes were used to prevent people from slipping. The snow didn't melt for months.

My brother Henry was born February 17, 1926, in the new apartment. Many years later, on April 20, 1943, in the cellar of 10 Linden Strasse, I was wounded. And later, on July 24, 1944, my grandparents and my Aunt Nita were buried alive there during an air raid.

I found many nice friends in my neighborhood. I think children enjoyed each other so much because they played together. We had a lot of toys: the beautiful porcelain dolls, and the boys had some horses. We played getting married, with a curtain as a veil. Do you remember marbles? We enjoyed designing big houses for ourselves with our fingers in the dirt. We had rocks as tables and chairs. We had a *Brummkreisel*, a little top. You put it on the ground and you had a string on a stick and you made that *Brummkreisel* spin and spin!

In 10 Linden Strasse lived a family named Nickel, and they had one son my age. His name was Hansi. His mother was *Studienrätin* (a school vice principal), and she wanted me to play with Hansi. We played with all his toys in his big playroom. Often they took me with them when they went places, especially to a café. Later on I saw that when he was grown up and in the military, Hansi was a handsome young man.

At Heinrichswalder Strasse, we had certain rules. The children had to obey them. From 1:00–3:00 p.m. was *Ruhepause*. It had to be silent because 10 Linden Strasse had their afternoon sleep. Children couldn't play in the courtyard. My mother made sure that we were well behaved, and she put us children down also for an afternoon nap. Oh, how hard it was for me to sleep during the day; it was almost torture for me! It must have been hard for my mom, too.

When my father worked at the paper factory, I remember a few times when the sirens went off. This was always trouble, trouble, trouble. As a child I knelt down, and I prayed, and I prayed, and I sang out loud, "Abide with Me, 'Tis Eventide." I sang it and prayed until my father came home. I also sang *"So nimm denn meine Hände und führe mich bis an mein Lebensende"*: "Take my hands, Father in Heaven, and guide me." We sang that all of the time.

–28–

I Should Go Home

I really didn't want to get married again after Gerhard. To this day, I am a part of his family. As the oldest of eleven children, Gerhard was a very obedient child. When he was small, they were living on the border of Poland. They had a place to sell merchandise, cheeses especially. Before he went to school, he helped his mom. Later on, they had a little grocery store beside their glass factory, where he helped his father.

Gerhard was very ambitious and well liked. He went to the highest school, the *gymnasium*, not only a middle school. He had his *meister's* apprentice even before he was drafted. He was quite young when he achieved that. So it was a giving, ambitious young man that Father in Heaven gave me. I would have had a good life. I couldn't wear high heels, but in the end it doesn't matter. Maybe I missed it with Ernst the first time. Maybe I got another chance.

After Gerhard died, my father-in-law begged me to stay and take care of the gallery business. I really enjoyed the business, but I felt like I should go home. My brother Siegfried was drafted, and my brother Henry was still quite young. My mother wasn't feeling too good. She was not able to visit Siegfried, who was in Insterburg, another military city, probably sixty kilometers away. From Tilsit, I was able to visit him every Sunday when he couldn't come home. And this was my big reason, to be close to my brother Siegfried. So I went back to my old job at Grund's. They wanted me back, and I was happy to be there.

I always said if I would have had a child with Gerhard, I would not have married again. His parents said, "You are young. You could get married again." I thought, *If I get married, it will only be to have children, and to be sealed to him*.[1]

After Gerhard died, my grandfather had another dream. He said, "Ernst is coming again to ask you to marry him." I said no to Ernst again after Gerhard died. It is something I don't regret—only in dreams sometimes. I still dream about him. When I dream about Ernst Braun, I have a good feeling about him, but I don't think about him. I will never forget

1. Living in East Prussia, Helga and Gerhard were unable to be sealed for time and eternity in a Latter-day Saint temple.

Gerhard, 1938 or 1939.

it: once Ernst came into Siegfried's delicatessen here in Salt Lake with his wife. He told the people, "I asked Helga to marry me, and she said no."

I just wonder if I would have been better off if I would have married nonmembers. When Gerhard got killed, I wrote Helmut Eckhardt again because he was a good friend, and he was very happy that he heard from me. He was in Russia. And then right after, he got killed. Later I met Franz Sturies at Grund's. He went to university in Bavaria. I would have loved to have married him. One time I gave him a Book of Mormon before he went back to the university. He said, "I'm not religious." When we saw each other again, he said, "The Book of Mormon is really not for me." This dropped it right then. This was not the right thing for me. Years later, I did visit him a few times in Germany. I gave him the book again and said, "Now I give you one more time a Book of Mormon, but don't give it back to me." It was always this nice, clean friendship with whomever I met. With Franz, Father in Heaven knew it wouldn't be right.

When I lived at the Births, I met Gerhard's cousin Hans Kindt, Walter's older brother. He was a soldier at the time. After Gerhard died, Hans came to Tilsit to visit me. This was quite far from where he was in the military. It was not only an hour or two. Over the weekend sometimes he had free time, but he didn't have permission that he could travel. So he came "schwartz," against the rules. It was a dangerous thing for him to do! I don't know how many times he came. Three times or something like that. We had a good time, and he wanted to marry me. He asked me in letters. He was really sincere.

If Gerhard had not said, "I want to be married when I come back," it would have been easier to say yes to Hans. I said no because who would I have been sealed to? Gerhard said he wanted to be married. I know Gerhard would have been good to me. It was meant this way. Is it not funny how you get guided?

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Beautiful to Have the Omen

I was injured on Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1943. People say, "Why do we remember Hitler's birthday?" How can I ever forget Hitler's birthday? On April 20, 1942, I received the news that my husband was killed, and the next year, I was injured. I always thought it was a special birthday present from Hitler.

I was with my grandparents that day. We were warned by the siren after work, and we all went into the cellar in the back of 10 Linden Strasse. There were over thirty people spread out in that basement. In an apartment house, they have in the basement certain rooms for bicycles or for things people cannot put up in their apartments. This was our only protection. It was not much protection anyway.

There were two doors, and they opened because of the pressure of the bombs. Then the shrapnel came and hit me. I got hit right in the back of my head, and I twirled around like a spinning thing, going in circles. I lost my shoe, one shoe. I got shrapnel in my stomach, but I didn't feel it at the moment. When you get hit, you are numb.

There was a very, very beautiful girl, maybe my age, maybe a little bit younger. Her father was a judge. And she was hit in her face. One side of her face was damaged very, very badly. And there was another man. He lived with our neighbors downstairs, and he was restless. He had a very bad feeling all day long or the day before. He felt that something bad might happen. I know that feeling, because when my brother got wounded, I had it too, for days and days. This man was sitting way in a corner somewhere, hiding. He was scared. A piece of the bomb went right through his heart, and he died right there.

It is beautiful to have the omen or to know that something will happen that's meant to be. I thought about it. This is what this man had. This is why indirectly he looked for a safe place, and it was a safe place for him to die.

When you are in a position to think you might die, it is amazing how your life flashes before your eyes. It is like a film, and it runs right through. You see everybody in your family very fast. You remember so many things. I could see that it's only seconds from heaven to earth. I could feel the connections from Father in Heaven to his children. And I was prepared to die. My last thoughts, because I fainted too, were, *My brother Henry and*

Deutsche Strasse destroyed by bombs, about 1944. Courtesy, Archive of the Tilsit City Organization.

my relatives will be sad, but my brother Siegfried will be very, very sad. Sad that I am dead, that I am dying. Then I thought, *Now I will see Gerhard*.

When I woke up, I was in the arms of Gerhard's brother, Nephi, so I wasn't dead. Nephi was on the way to Russia. He was a soldier. You know how it is when you are young; he admired his sister-in-law, and he wanted to come and visit me. And so he stopped in Tilsit. I think that the next day he had to leave. Later Nephi was killed, too. It was hard on my parents-in-law. They lost two boys in the war. And then they lost one daughter with typhus right after the war, a beautiful daughter. Beautiful dark and long-haired Eva.

They took me to the hospital because I was bleeding very much and could hardly walk. The hospital was filled with injured people coming from other places. They brought them in on stretchers. I looked at everybody to see if I would see my mother or the rest of the family or people we knew, but I didn't see anyone.

In some places that night, the city was burning. It was a beautiful sight. We had a film at that time. It was *The Golden City*, and it was absolutely beautiful. I cannot remember the story of it. I think it had something to do with Prague. The picture of the burning city reminded me of this movie.

Helga on the *Anger*, 1936.

Helga's grandparents at the Heinrichswalder Strasse apartment, 1939.

In East Prussia we had to have not only a fur coat, but also a heavy lining. This slowed down the piece of shrapnel. It was a little piece that went into my stomach. And if I wouldn't have had the fur coat and the heavy lining, the shrapnel would have gone into the intestines.

I wasn't long in the hospital, but I had a bandage around my head for a long, long time. Later on, I went to Dr. Rittberger. He was very, very nice. He said, "Mrs. Birth, by the width of a hair you could have been paralyzed." This was so close! I didn't realize that. The cut went all the way across the back of my neck. It was hard having sunshine on my head afterward for a long, long time. It was like some electricity in my body. It must have been because it was so close to the nerves. It took me at least a year or even longer to get over this funny feeling in my whole body. It was sensitive, sensitive when I walked.

I talked yesterday with Ursula about what we have gone through: war, bombings, seeing dead people, and having airplanes come deep down to shoot at us in the middle of the day. Sometimes when I hear the drama of a shooting, and everybody needs a counselor, it doesn't quite go with me. We had to do everything on our own. We fought for life. We were heartbroken. We cried, and we were sad, but we didn't need everybody to come to support us. Nobody was there. Nobody had time. We have gone through certain things, and we have the feeling of it. We know how it is when the bombs are falling, and something is burning, and somebody dies.

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Crying for Myself

My cousin Kurt got wounded in Russia in September 1943. Tante Lusche felt his head on her shoulder. She heard him say, "Mutti, Mutti, Mutti." She was shocked because, first of all, she thought, "He is here." Then she felt that he had been wounded, and soon she heard the news that he was wounded very badly. He came to a hospital in Aussig in Czechoslovakia, not too far from Dresden and the River Elbe. Tante Lusche went right away to see him. It was a long trip from East Prussia. His father Fritz didn't go because they said he was going home soon. But my aunt thought that he was not going home. She had a feeling that he wouldn't make it. She got permission to stay in the hospital to help her son. And she was there all day long, every day. She even helped other soldiers.

Everybody was concerned about Kurt. I went in September to see him. Tante Lusche had rented a room nearby. I was there for a week with Kurt, and then I went home. Waltraut and somebody else in the branch came in October. Tante Lusche didn't go home. She was there for all those months.

They thought Tante Lusche would never have a child. She had some problems with her female parts, and she finally got him after waiting for years. He was a miracle child. He was such a good son, such a good person.

In our family, we are dreamers, and Kurt had a dream the night before he died that he went home with his mom, but he went home in his casket. He died on the January 14, 1944, but he didn't die because of his wounds. He died because of blood clots—emboli. The train took fourteen days going from Aussig to Tilsit. It was a very, very cold winter. When Kurt came home, nobody was supposed to open the casket. The army didn't allow it. But the neighbors opened it anyway. They said he looked so beautiful. He had this blond, wavy hair. He must have been so cold that he was half frozen. He was buried on my brother Siegfried's birthday. This was a double sadness. Of course, Siegfried was a soldier, and he couldn't be there.

I think my uncle couldn't take it as well as my aunt. He was a member of the Church like my father; they really didn't have that testimony. Tante Lusche had that strong testimony of what life is all about and that life goes on, so she took it. The gospel made her stronger. The chief physician of the hospital had lost also a son. He said to my aunt, "I could comfort you, but you comfort me."

Kurt, circa 1942.

Kurt and I were very, very close. When he was little in school, and they asked if he had sisters or brothers, he said, "Yes, I have a sister." He came home, and his mother said, "Helga is not your sister. She is your cousin." We were always together. Always. You cannot really explain the love we have for people, can you? When Kurt died, I cried and cried, and then I stopped and thought, *I'm crying for myself*. In my family, my husband Gerhard was the first to die, and then Kurt was the second one.

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The War Is Over for Me

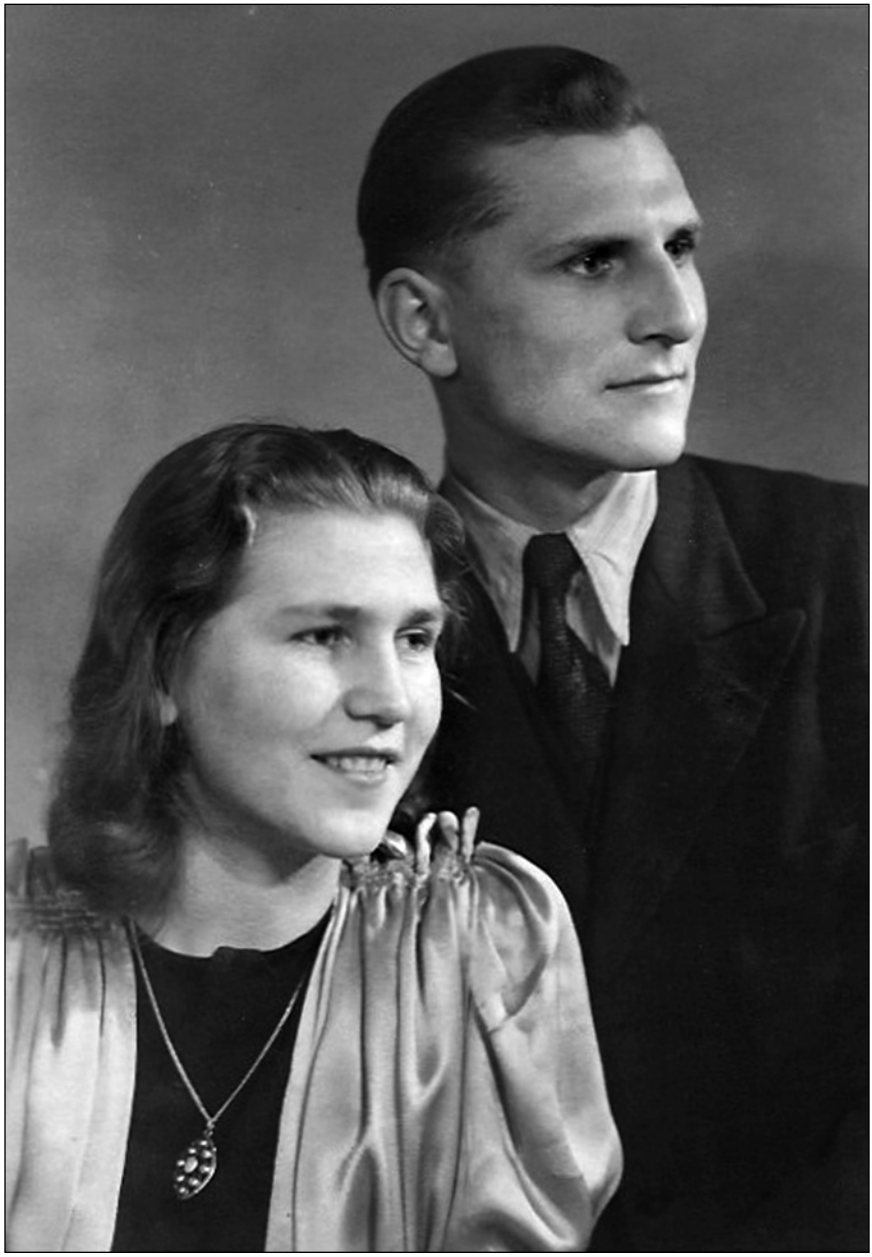
In April of 1944, I went to the spring district conference in Königsburg. Conference was always nice. We were quite a few people there for conference. Brother Klopfer was the mission president during the war because we couldn't have anyone from America. But he was a soldier, and so only his two counselors were at the conference. I learned he died later of starvation in a Russian camp as a prisoner of war. Brother Langheinrich, who was the second counselor in the mission presidency, was there. He said, "Sister Birth, how would it be for you to go on a mission?"

I didn't need to give him an answer right then, but in the end I said, "Yes, I wouldn't mind." When the conference was over, I went back to Tilsit. Then came May and June, and I hadn't heard anything because it was very, very complicated to go on a mission. If you were employed, you could not leave your employment without permission. You had to find a replacement for yourself. You could not leave your city without permission and go to another city. And you could not go to a city without having a job there. You could not say, "I'm now a missionary." At the time we had ration cards. They were for a whole month—butter and sugar and flour, and if you didn't work, you didn't get any. So I needed special permission to go from Tilsit to Berlin on a mission, and this took quite a bit of work.

The other day, I thought about when Siegfried was in Russia on the front. That day I had a very uneasy feeling I cannot even explain. I had this pressure around my heart, an ill feeling. Sadness. I thought, *Something is going on*. I waited so badly for a letter from him. The store was always closed for two hours for lunch. Sometimes I went to my grandparents' apartment. I lived just around the corner from them, and every time I knew the mailman was coming, I always rushed over to my place because I was waiting for a letter from Siegfried to come. But there was not a letter that day.

This must have been when he got wounded. Thoughts are power, you know. You can transmit your thoughts to other people very strongly, because you are so close to them. You hear many stories about how the soldiers connected with their loved ones. It is nice when you have this kind of feeling, but it is hard, too. I can still see myself coming back from my grandmother's, walking on the Hohe Strasse, thinking about Siegfried.

Siegfried in uniform.



Helga and Siegfried, 1942.

A day later or something like that I got a letter. He said, "Helga, the war is over for me." He said he was wounded on May 31 from an airplane bombing. He was in Romania in an army hospital. His body was completely shattered. He had bad injuries on his left knee and his right hip. Kurt lost half of his leg and one eye, but Siegfried's whole body was shattered—knee and hip, and everything. They tried everything to keep him alive, but then my parents got the news. My brother died on June 8, 1944, in Romania, and he is buried there. It's terrible when you really think what our boys went through!

My brother Siegfried knew what he wanted. He was very, very smart. He really didn't have to study much, and he was well liked by the teachers. We didn't put it in words, but he was more the big brother, the brother I just loved. We were very, very close. My belief was always so strong that he was in a good place—a better place. But you have this longing when you lose a person.

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To Sing in My Bed

On July 24, 1944, we had a memorial for Siegfried and two brothers who also got killed, Heinz and Bruno Millbrecht, from our branch. My Tante Nita from Hamburg came to be with my grandparents. Ruth, Gerhard's sister, who was close to my brother and to my cousin, wanted to be there too. We all went together to the church. Tante Nita planned to go to Schneidemühl the next morning with Ruth. She was supposed to do some sewing for the Birth family. That night she stayed with my grandparents, and I wanted to stay with my grandparents too. Ruth went with Tante Lusche.

It was a beautiful summer night. It is quite light in East Prussia in July. Going home from the church, Tante Lusche usually went a different route, but this night she thought that she wouldn't see her sister for a while, so she walked us home to my grandparents' house to say good-bye to Tante Nita and to be with us a little longer. Then she said to me at the last minute, "Why don't you come and stay with me and Ruth overnight?"

I said, "No, I promised Tante Nita I would stay with her and Grandma and Grandpa. No, I am not coming." And I was convinced that I shouldn't go with Tante Lusche.

Then, at the last minute, she took me by my wrists and pulled me and said, "My *Yelchin,* oh, my girl, come home with me because I cooked so much pea soup, and we have to eat the pea soup!" Her pea soup was always so wonderful. Not the green peas, the whole yellow peas.

But it was not because of the pea soup that I said, "Okay, I'll come." It was just that somebody pulled me. I have still the feeling and see the sunset of that night. I remember all my thoughts.

And so I went home with Tante Lusche. Of course, we ate some pea soup, and then we went to bed.

All three of us were in one bed, and I sang. I used to sing in my bed. Our sleep was light anyway because we were always prepared to run into the cellar. And just in the middle of my singing, Tante Lusche and Ruth saw out the window what we called the "Christmas trees." The whole city was lit up with flares the pilots sent before the bombs came down. It was light, like daylight. And then the siren came, and we had to rush and find the cellar.

It was a silly cellar, a little storage room. We heard the bombs all around us, and of course, we prayed a lot, and we sang "Abide with Me, 'Tis Eventide" to give us a little bit of strength. We hugged each other and were close together. It was a very, very scary thing. The house was shaking, because the bombs came down not too far from us. We thought—so many times I've had the experience—*This time I won't make it out of the cellar*. But they didn't hit us.

There was a man, a prisoner of war. At this time, the French prisoners of war weren't in a camp. They could rent a private room. He was an optical technician, and he worked at Grund's. He was nice to me because when he came into Grund's, I had a smile for him. I always felt sorry for people when they were not very friendly or needed a little bit more kindness, and he could never forget that.

He always tried to do something for me. He made me a beautiful rose ring, but somebody who cleaned the house for us stole it. Every time we had an air raid, he wanted to see if I was safe. And so the next morning after this very bad air raid, he went first to my parents to check on me. Then he went to my grandparents, because I slept there sometimes. He saw that the whole apartment house had collapsed. He hurried to Tante Lusche's to tell the news. He said, "Come, come, come, come!" His German wasn't that good—maybe as bad as my English is! And so we ran as fast as we could, and we saw what happened.

It's a scary thing to think that a house can collapse and you cannot get out. Terrifying. There was a big yard. My grandmother had knitted so many blankets with the little squares, and when we came, they were all spread out over people who were just pulled out of the rubble. There was a daughter of our landlady, Frau Reich. I recognized her by the boots on her feet. Her brother was the doctor who told me that by the width of a hair I could have been paralyzed, and so by the width of a hair, I would have been one of them this time.

When my father came back from work that morning on a bike, it was blocked off. He wanted to go in, but they wouldn't let him. He should have insisted, because he knew where the cellars were. He could have helped them locate the victims. There were over thirty people killed in that house. My grandparents were far in the back of the cellar. It took them two or three weeks to find them under the rubble. They were the last ones taken out. My aunt they found a little bit earlier. Only one woman came out alive. She was the mother of a friend of my brother Henry's. But then she died of her wounds later on, so everybody in that building died.

Helga and Lusche.

Afterward, I had a dream that my grandparents and Tante Nita died right away, on impact.

And so Father in Heaven had something special for me, because I would have been in the same cellar with them. It was not my time.

When we had air raids, my grandfather usually did not go with my grandmother or whoever was with them to the cellar at 10 Linden Strasse. He stayed home in the little apartment on Heinrichswalder Strasse. But this time my grandmother must have said, "You better come." If he would have stayed home, he would have lived. That little house was not destroyed. My grandparents weren't ill. They paid tithes. My grandmother was such a faithful person. Why did they really have to die this way? They could have lived.

The Russians came to Tilsit soon after my grandparents died. People were not allowed to flee from the Russians when they still had time. This is why so many people lost their lives. My grandparents might have been captured or tortured by the Russians, or killed when they tried to escape. It would have been hard for the family to take care of our blind grandfather and then to flee. This would have been hard for my grandfather too, that his wife and his daughter were killed. So that night he went into

Lusche, Kurt, Grandmother and Nita knitting.

the cellar, and they were together. Sometimes you really have to suffer through something first before you see the beautiful purpose of it. When I really think about it, dying together in that house was probably the most humane way for my aunt and my grandparents to die. In eternity we will find out so many, many things, won't we?

My Tante Nita was a very intelligent person; I mean very, very smart. She wanted to emigrate in 1928 with Tante Gretel and Onkel Heini, but she only made it to Hamburg because she had something wrong with her lung, and there were very strict rules that did not allow you to emigrate when you were ill. She was married in Hamburg. When she left to come back for Siegfried's memorial, her neighbors in Hamburg said, "Why are you going there?" It was a long trip from Hamburg to Tilsit.

She said, "Well, if I have to die, then I want to die with my parents."

That night before we said good-bye in front of my grandparents' house, she looked like an angel. She really did. Later on, we said, "She had something heavenly around her." It was quite a heartache to lose three at once. Anyway, we took it. We had to take it. There was no other way. What can you do? You have to live. You have to go on. The next morning, my sister-in-law went on to Schneidemühl without Tante Nita.

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To Comfort Me

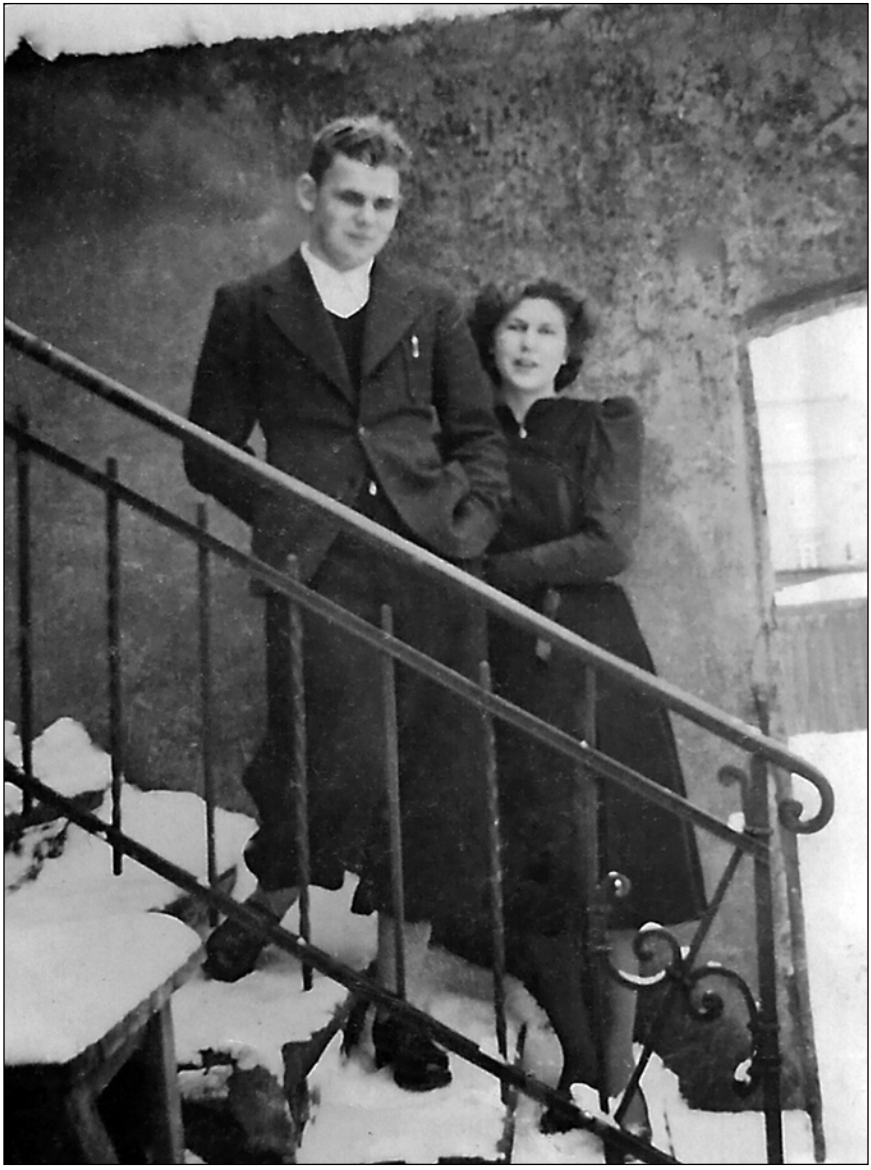
Tante Lusche's husband, Onkel Fritz, came from Danzig.[1] His relatives lived in Elbich in Marienburg. They invited us to stay with them after this happened to our family. When I was in Marienburg, I had my own room. I felt that my brother Siegfried was there for a whole week sitting next to my bed. It was not a dream. I felt his presence. I knew he wanted to comfort me because I hurt inside. I was longing for my brother, and he was there for a week with me. He was allowed to comfort me. I felt that so strong. The other side is near us. It was like a dream, but it wasn't a dream.

During that time, Königsburg got bombed very, very badly, and we could see that smoke there in Marienburg. Then I got the message that I could go to Berlin for my mission. I left Tilsit at the end of August. It was joyful for me to leave Tilsit to go on a mission. It never entered my mind that I might not come back again, or that I would leave everything behind me.

On my way to Berlin, I stopped at my parents-in-law's house in Schneidemühl to wait for the final arrangements. I was quite a few weeks there. They had in Berlin a sister in the Church who worked for the labor department, and she could arrange that I got a permission to be a missionary. I finally got my ration card. On October 13, 1944, I started my mission. When I came from the train station in Berlin, I had to go on the streetcar. I really didn't know where to go because Berlin was a large city. The conductor came and collected the money. She asked me if I was Helga Birth. She was a cousin to Gerhard's cousin. She had seen a picture of me, and she recognized me. She told me where to stop. She was very helpful to me. This was my introduction to Berlin before I went to the mission home.

The real mission home had been in Tiergarten on Händelallee Street, in the best area of Berlin. On my way back home after Gerhard was killed, I stopped there for a youth conference. But it was burned in

1. Now called Gdansk in present-day Poland.



Kurt and Helga.

November of 1943. So the Langheinrichs gave up some rooms in their apartment for the new mission home. That was where I went.

Of course, during the war we couldn't tract, so we worked in the mission itself. My job was in statistics. We had to put all the member cards in order. We had so many members of the Church escaping from different parts of the land because of the war, and we had to find out where they were living. At that time, missionaries didn't need to go two-by-two, so I went alone on the subway from the mission office to Brother Fisher's apartment. He was the mission secretary, and he had the statistics in his home, so I worked there for a few hours every day.

We got bombed in Berlin many times. I remember one day when Brother Fisher's wife and I had to go into the cellar because we had an air raid. We heard the firebombs hitting our roof. The whole house was shaking so very badly that we embraced each other and said, "Now we are going together to the other side!" Part of the roof started to burn, but because of the snowy and rainy weather, it didn't destroy the house. This was a close call. This was our daily experience.

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Wise and Good-hearted

At the end of the war, they drafted every man, the very young and the old. They called them *volkssturm.* This was like a militia. The *volkssturm* were there to protect the people who stayed at home in the cities. My father was not that young any more, but he was drafted to the *volkssturm* and went to Danzig.

Henry was a soldier then, and my father was gone, so my mother was all by herself. At Christmas in 1944, I didn't know what had happened to any of them. We couldn't get any mail. I was a missionary, but I felt like I needed to find my mother. I said to Brother Langheinrich, "I would like to go back to Tilsit to look for my mother." I was really sincere. I wanted to go to East Prussia to look for my mother, like a needle in a haystack.

He said, "No. We cannot let you go. If you go, you will never come back." Brother Langheinrich was very wise and good-hearted. He knew. And I would have perished somewhere on the way. One time we had a big district conference, and I had to speak. The lights went out, and so we had candlelight. I spoke in the dark without notes. Later Brother Lehnig wrote me a note that said, "I have seen angels standing in the dark." Is this not nice?

That winter, the people in Tilsit were leaving because they were worried about the Russians coming in. My mother left Grundswalder Strasse to stay with my grandmother's niece, who lived close to my grandmother's hometown. My mother was not that close to these cousins, but they wanted her to stay with them. I really don't know how she got there. A train didn't go to Augostlagen. She didn't ride a bike, and she didn't have a car or a horse and buggy. And she was not feeling well. They must have come to get her.

My mother sent packages in cloth and potato sacks from the farm to my mother-in-law's house in Schneidemühl for me. She sent all my clothes that I had left in Tilsit. At that time, we wore a lot of black when somebody died, so we were always more or less in black. Later, after the death, you wore black and white. I needed my other clothes. She also sent a big smoked ham, which came from her cousin's farm. She sent a lot of money, too. My parents-in-law thought one day I would come to get them. They sent letters and said, "Helga, there are sacks of clothes

and food from your mother. This is so much money. Where did it come from?" They thought my mother must have robbed the bank! It sounds more reasonable that my mother had sent all her savings to me. But I never got those things from my parents-in-law, because they didn't come to Berlin, and I couldn't come to them. Schneidemühl was not that far from Berlin, but the brethren didn't let me go.

At the end of the war, my parents-in-law had to leave everything behind. The people in that town went into the Births' house and plundered it. They found the bags with all the goodies and a lot of money. Hans Kindt went back later and heard it from the neighbors. I never got any of that—not the clothes, not the ham, and not the money. So this is the story.

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A Kind of Peace

We had the coldest winter in 1944–45. Because of the bombing, we didn't have any glass in our windows in the mission home. We had them covered with blankets. We did not have any heat either. We had a bathroom and a bathtub, but we didn't have any hot water. Once a week I took a bath in the ice-cold water. I really did! Not up to the neck, but probably to the navel, sitting in icy water. But I never had a cold. We didn't get much soap, and the soap from the government felt like it was made from sand. It was horrible. But I had some from Tilsit from the *drogerie*. We had beautiful soap there. I bought a lot of soap when the war started. I gave it away and kept one bar for myself. It was a nice, big, good bar. I had this bar of soap all six years during the war. I only used it on Sundays.

That spring during the bombing of Berlin, the bombs came and came and came, and we could not escape from them. It was not an easy thing. Sometimes we couldn't even undress because the bombers knew when to go on our nerves. As soon it was time to go to bed, sirens went off, and we had to go and run into the cellar. We were many times in the cellar and we thought so many times, *Our end has come*, because we heard the bombs all around us, but they didn't hit us or the mission home. We are still alive, all five of us missionaries! And it's nice to remember the old times, and the scary times, too, when we went into the cellar.

Berlin was in a kettle. The Russians were all around us. They did not occupy the city yet, but we were under fire from the artillery. Early in the morning on Sunday, April 22, 1945, I was not feeling well because we had to get up so many times with all the air raids we had in the night, and because of the street fights. We did not know for sure how it would be to go to the church with all the fighting. It was an icky day. Our ward building from the mission house was quite close, so we could walk. The weather was very, very rainy, and everything came down from heaven. It was not very pleasant to go to church, but we all lived in the same house, so we went.

Besides Brother Ranglack, Brother Langheinrich, Brother Patermann, Brother Sadovsky, two sisters, and I, nobody else was there. We started late because we still expected a few more people to come. Brother Langheinrich gave a talk about faith, and it was very nice. Even though we were only a

Langheinrichs' apartment in Berlin was the temporary mission home during Helga's mission.

few people there, we felt the Spirit so very, very strong at that meeting. It reminded me again of when Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."[1]

Brother Langheinrich said, "Let's go and see how the members are doing, and if they have meetings today." The brethren decided to go and visit one of the branches, and they asked me to go. I was the only missionary who went with them. When we stepped out on the street, we saw the SA officers in their brown uniforms. They were standing there watching people, listening to what they had to say. Nobody could say, "We are not going to win the war," and we knew we weren't. If we had said, "The war is over," they would have shot us right on the spot.

It took us quite a long time to walk to the other branch. When we got there, the building had been bombed, and quite a bit of damage was done. We could see that one of the members had come to clean up, but they must have left it in a hurry in the middle of their work because of other bombings. We didn't find any people. The doors of the church were locked.

Then we had to walk over an hour back home. The Russians encircled the city. We were like cattle in a pen. And they came quite after us. From above, the airplane's artillery shot at us. You could even sometimes see the pilot, and the grenades went off in front of us, to the left, right, and back of us. We covered ourselves. Sometimes we went into buildings or under a doorway. We tried to hide under a leafless tree. Under a leafless tree! Berlin has a lot of water and many bridges, and they were very damaged, too. We had to go over a little strip of a bridge holding on to the railing. The brethren said, "Sister Birth, don't be scared. Come," so I did. We got it from above, and we got it from all around us, but not one hit us. I cannot believe that we did it.

As we walked back, I was really at peace because I had the brethren around me. We came home, and we were safe and sound. For me, this was quite an experience. I know I wasn't scared, because I wrote it down. It was peaceful—not that we were happy or fearless, but it was a kind of peace.

A week or two later, we heard very loud noises in the street underneath the windows. There were street fights between the Russians and our soldiers. This was more or less the end of the war. Later in life, it seems like it was a fairy tale.

1. Matthew 18:20.

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My Hiding Place

After the war ended, Brother Langheinrich went to the different apartments in the house to see if they could spare some room for members from the branches in Berlin. He wanted them to find refuge for a little while so we could be together. Some people took the members in because they enjoyed having the Mormons around. We had Sunday School, Sacrament Meeting, and even Mutual inside the building.

This was a dangerous time. Russian soldiers went from house to house to find women. So Brother Langheinrich made a big sign: "This is the American Consulate Bureau," and he put it on the entrance of the apartment building. And he locked the door. You were not allowed to lock your doors. They could have kicked them in. But we got rid of them for a while.

The Langheinrichs lived on the fourth level of the apartment house. In America, we would say the fifth level. One evening when we had our supper together, the Langheinrichs and Brother and Sister Patermann and some other members and I had just had our night prayer and gone to bed. The sister missionaries had two beds with two missionaries in each bed, and there was a chaise lounge with Sister Waldhaus and her son, Gunter, on it. All of a sudden we heard a bang, not only a knock on the main door. It was really like breaking into the house. Brother Langheinrich came into our room and said, "Girls, the Russians are here!" Then he and Brother Patermann went very slowly downstairs so we had time to prepare. It is not easy to do the right thing when you are so close to a really dangerous situation.

Everybody wanted to hide. They have a different type of bathroom in Berlin. It's actually called the Berliner bathroom. Behind the toilet is a special storage space, and it seemed like it was really a good hiding place. I always said, "If one day the Russian soldiers should come, I'm going to hide there," so everybody knew that was my hiding place. But I didn't have enough time, so I crawled under the bed. Everything went under the bed except my head. I must have been so nervous! Then I crawled back in the bed. We had featherbeds. We tried from the inside to straighten them out so they weren't bumpy. Angela laughed and laughed because she was nervous. I said, "Angela—don't laugh. Don't laugh!" And I went under the bed again. Then I went back into bed, and we were still. Sister Waldhaus and Gunter were clinging on the chaise lounge just in front of the bed.

Helga reunitng with her missionary companions in 2000. From left: Helga, Renate Berger, Angela Patermann, Ingrid Bendler.

They were just lying down, not hiding. She didn't have a featherbed to cover herself. And we were waiting for the Russians to come. They went from one room to another looking for *fraus*. I think there were three, and they were drunk. They had revolvers.

There were three doors to where we were. When we heard them in the entryway of the Langheinrichs' apartment, we thought, *Now our end is here. They will see the door*. But they didn't. There was a french door from the Langheinrichs' to a little storage room in between us with brooms and empty jars, and the Russians opened that. When they saw they couldn't go through it, they were quite mad. They slammed it so hard that we thought the other side would open, and they would see us. When we heard them back in the main hallway, we thought, *Now they will come into our room from the hall!* Of course we were breathless, but nothing happened. And then everything was quiet.

After a long, long time, the door opened very quietly, and we heard steps coming toward our bed. A voice said, "Girls, girls; you are safe." It was Brother Patermann, the father of Angela. He said that they had guided the Russians down the stairs. The Russians must have been blinded. They had not seen the doors! That was a scary, scary experience, and a miracle. Later on, Sister Langheinrich said, "Sister Birth, your hiding place—the Russians looked very much into it, to see if somebody was hiding there."