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Preface

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy reading about Katie Luther's life as much as I enjoyed writing about it.

You will perhaps find some of Katie's letters to her friend Ave more religious than the way that you write or talk to your own friends, but you must remember that almost all of her young life was spent in a convent where only religious conversations were encouraged. Then she married Martin Luther, who devoted his life to godly matters, so it is understandable that Katie would not find it hard to write about godly things.

As I wrote her story, there were times that I laughed at the surprising things her famous husband did. But I often had to stop writing to wipe away my tears as I relived her sorrows. As you read, I think you, too, will find yourself laughing and crying with her as God sends her both great joy and deep sorrow.

Katie's inspiring story is useful for us, her spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ; her life is an example of how to live our own lives, whether God sends trials or happiness and peace. Katie's story reminds us that God directs the lives of all his precious, chosen sons and daughters, strengthening their faith and preparing them for life with him in heaven. Katie did not have an easy life, but her faith in God helped her through some very hard times. Reading about her experiences and remembering how God helped her may help you when God sends hard trials into your life.

Letters from Katie Luther

I owe thanks to the many people who made Katie's story the book you hold in your hands today.

Thanks to Miriam Koerner, children's book coordinator at the RFPA, and to my developmental editor Stephanie Vink, who prevented me from taking any major liberties with the historical record other than those listed in the back of this book.

Thanks to Bob and Shelley Cammenga, to whom I owe much. When I first began Katie's story, I had only a manual typewriter and, because I am the world's worst typist, made and erased many mistakes, making for a very messy manuscript. When I gave it to Shelley to read and give her opinion, the dear girl surprised me by taking time from her busy family to retype the entire manuscript so it would look nice.

Thanks also to Tom Pastoor, who, when Katie's entire story suddenly disappeared from this new user's computer, got it back for me—not once, but twice. Thanks, Tom. Nothing scarier than to think I might have had to rewrite the whole story.

And thanks also to Tom's teenage daughter, Megan, who showed me that young people can understand more than I thought; her suggestions made this a better story.

A special thanks goes to Linda Van Uffelen who calls me the Grandma Moses of writing because I did not take it up seriously until I was in my eighties. This book would never have been published without her enthusiasm, tactful criticism, and many hours spent editing the manuscript. I am especially grateful to Linda for all she did to help Ave come to life.

Most of all I give thanks to my heavenly Father who gave me both the desire and ability to put my thoughts on paper.

Shirley Casemier

Character List

The Luther family

Magdalena (Muhme or Aunt Lena): Katie's aunt who also lived in Nimbschen and comes to live with the Luthers after Hans is born.

Wolfgang Sieberger: Dr. Luther's loyal manservant and the groundskeeper of the Black Cloister.

Johannes (Hans) Luther: Katie's oldest child, born in June 1526.

Elisabeth Luther: Katie's second child, born in December 1527. She lives to be just eight months old.

Magdalena Luther: Katie's second daughter, born in May 1529. She contracts a sudden fever in September 1542 and dies at the age of 13.

Martin Luther: Katie's second son, born in November 1531.

Paul Luther: Katie's third son, born in January 1533.

George, Cyriac, Andreas, Fabian, Elsa, and Lena: Dr. Luther's nieces and nephews; he and Katie take them in when the children's parents die of the plague.

Anna: Katie's accident-prone "niece."

Margarete Luther: Katie's youngest child, born in December 1534.

Katie's friends and relatives

Ave von Schoenfeld Axt (narrator): Katie's friend from the convent to whom she writes letters after Ave's marriage until the months before Katie's death. (Pronounced "Ah-vay.")

Hannah von Schoenfeld von Garssenbittel: Ave's younger sister who comes to Nimbschen with her and lives with Ave and her husband until Hannah marries Bruce von Garssenbittel.

Philip and Elsa Reichenbach: city clerk of Wittenberg and his wife, with whom Katie first stays after escaping Nimbschen.

Lucas and Barbara Cranach: court painter to the electors of Saxony and his wife, with whom Katie lives after her time at the home of the Reichenbachs. Lucas Cranach later served as mayor of Wittenberg.

Jerome Baumgartner: a student at the university in Wittenberg with whom Katie falls in love.

Barcilius Axt: another student at the university who studies to become a pharmacist and physician. He and Ave marry and move from Wittenberg to Torgau in 1523.

Theobald (Theo) Axt: Ave's son, born in 1525.

Katherine (Kitty) Axt: Ave's daughter, born in August 1529.

Elisabeth Cruciger: a former nun who befriends Katie. She is a musician and writes several Lutheran songs.

Hans Von Bora: Katie's brother; he sells her the Von Bora family farm of Zulsdorf and is appointed to be one of Katie's primary guardians after Dr. Luther's death.

Dr. Luther's friends and colleagues

Herr Koppe: a man who smuggles tracts to Nimbschen and who smuggles the nuns out of the convent.

Nicolaus von Amsdorf: professor at the university.

Philipp Melancthon: professor at the university. He attends the Diet of Augsburg and comforts the Luthers as their daughter Magdalena is dying. He is also one of Katie's and her children's guardians.

Caspar Glatz: Lutheran pastor; Dr. Luther encourages him to marry Katie after her arrival in Wittenberg.

Justus Jonas: professor at the university. He attends the Diet of Augsburg and is present at Luther's deathbed.

Johannes Bugenhagen: pastor of the Luthers' church who becomes a professor at the university in March 1533 and preaches Dr. Luther's funeral sermon in Wittenberg.

Viet Dietrich: Luther's friend and companion at Coburg during the Diet of Augsburg.

Caspar Cruciger: professor at the university and husband of Katie's friend Elisabeth. He is assigned as Katie's secondary guardian after Dr. Luther's death.

Government and military officials

Duke George: Roman Catholic duke of Saxony from 1500–1539. He arrests anyone caught helping monks or nuns escaping monasteries and convents.

Frederick the Wise: Roman Catholic elector of Saxony from 1486–1525 who protects Dr. Luther.

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Charles V: Roman Catholic Holy Roman Emperor from 1500–1558 who issues the Edict of Worms against Dr. Luther and who ultimately condemns Lutheranism at the Diet of Augsburg.

Duke John: elector of Saxony after the death of his brother, Fredrick the Wise. He rules from 1525–1532 and lends the Black Cloister to Katie and Dr. Luther as a wedding gift.

Philip of Hesse (Philip I): Lutheran landgrave who calls for the Marburg Colloquy in order to unify the Lutheran and Zwinglian Protestants on their teachings of the Lord's supper.

Sulieman the Great: Turkish emperor of the Ottoman Empire whose threat to attack Vienna prevents Charles V's forces from attacking the Lutherans in Germany.

John Frederick: elector of Saxony after the death of his father, Duke John. He rules from 1532–1547, giving the Black Cloister completely over to the Luthers, and showing true kindness and concern for Katie after Luther's death. He is captured defending Wittenberg from Charles V's army in 1547.

Elisabeth of Brandenburg: Electress of Brandenburg who converts to Lutheranism from Roman Catholicism. She flees her Roman Catholic husband in 1538 and finds refuge at the Black Cloister.

Albrecht and Gebhard: two counts from Dr. Luther's hometown of Eisleben who ask him to settle a dispute about mining rights in 1546.

Gregor Bruck: Saxon chancellor who tries to persuade Elector John Frederick to prohibit Katie from purchasing Wachs Dorf after Dr. Luther's death and attempts to separate Katie from some of her children.

Character List

Moritz: Duke of Saxony who joins Charles V in his war against the Lutherans at the promise of electorship. He captures several cities, including Wittenberg, in 1546.

Christian III: king of Denmark who sends Katie money after Dr. Luther's death. Katie hopes to flee to Denmark in the spring of 1547, where she believes Christian will be able to protect her and her children from the dangers of war.

Other characters

Desiderius Erasmus: Dutch humanist philosopher who writes against Lutheranism.

Alexander Axt: older brother of Barcilius in whose home Katie and Ave stay after Elisabeth Luther's death.

Christian Doring: friend of Dr. Luther who assists in the publication of Luther's German Bible.

Jacob Luther: Dr. Luther's brother.

Anna von Warbeck: Paul Luther's wife.

George von Kunheim: husband of Margarete Luther.

THE LUTHERS' LOCATIONS



Prologue

Today I received a letter telling me my best friend has died. My name is Ave von Schoenfeld Axt, and her name was Katherine von Bora Luther. It is hard for me to believe she is gone. She was my friend for so very long, almost my whole lifetime. When considering how to tell her story, I thought, “If only she could tell you in her own words.” Then I remembered her letters to me, the letters I have saved all these years. I will let her tell you about her life through those letters. I begin with the year 1523, when we were both twenty-four. It was the year that everything changed for both of us.

The biggest change in our young lives came about as we tried to escape from a convent in Germany. A convent is a place where very religious women called “nuns” live. A nun is a woman who has taken a vow (a very serious promise to God) to live a life of prayer and study of the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings. She also vows to never marry and have children.

Katie and I felt nervous whenever we thought about escaping. Both of us were born into nobility, but even though we were of noble birth, our families had fallen on hard times and lost their fortunes. As so-called noblewomen, we would not have been allowed to work to support ourselves. In the early 1500s, ordinary women were allowed to work as shopkeepers or innkeepers, but the only way for a noblewoman to live was to marry or live with a male relative willing to take her in.

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So, you see, we had no idea what would await us after we left the convent. The possibilities were scary, but we had prayed about it and knew God was directing our footsteps. We would leave the convent trusting that God would take care of us.

Chapter 1

Escape

I remember opening the door to Katie's room slowly and carefully, hoping it would not squeak. I was sneaking her some of the fish we had had for supper, and I didn't want the abbess to hear me. If she or any of the other nuns caught me bringing food to Katie, I too would be sentenced to a diet of bread and water; plus I wouldn't be able to leave my room. Poor Katie. Other than a few morsels smuggled to her, bread and water had been her only food and drink for a whole week already.

The door creaked open. I froze. Then Katie whispered, "Who's there?"

"It's Ave," I said softly.

"Oh, Ave, you brought me some fish; I can smell it! Thank you."

"And I brought you something you will like even better. Look." From behind my back, I held out a small, folded leaflet to Katie.

"Oh! Another tract by Martin Luther!" she whispered as she read the name at the top.

"Yes! This one tells why it will not be sinful for us to break the vows we made when we first became nuns," I said.

This problem had been worrying Katie for some time. We were trying to think of a way to escape from the convent and get to Martin Luther. Katie did want to escape but was

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worried it would be a sin to break her vows. Our vows said we must remain at the convent until the day we died. We had also promised never to marry or to have any possessions beyond what the convent provided.

Actually, Katie was being punished because the abbess had found one of Martin Luther's tracts in her room. The abbess had been furious. She had taken the tract, burned it, and forbidden the rest of us to read anything written by "that heretic." Then she warned that if she discovered any other tracts that taught things contrary to the Roman Catholic Church's teachings, she would burn them too, and anyone caught reading the tract would be punished even more severely than Katie had been. Of course, I knew that Katie would continue to read any of Dr. Luther's writings she could get her hands on, in spite of the abbess's threats.

I remember the first time Katie read something written by Martin Luther. She had said, "He writes about all the things that have been troubling me. He says we don't have to do acts of penance to take away our sins."

"Confessing our sins to the priest will not take the sins away?" I had asked.

"No. And he does not think buying an indulgence can take away the guilt of sin either. He says we are saved by grace alone. We cannot do anything to pay for our sins."

Now as we talked about the new tract I had brought, the door to Katie's room began to slowly open again. Was it the abbess? No. Thankfully, it was only Magdalena. She slipped into the room; she had also smuggled some fish for Katie.

"Oh, Ave," Magdalena said, "I didn't know you were here. Now I can tell both of you at the same time that I have found a way for us to escape. I wrote a letter to Dr. Luther telling him there are twelve nuns in this convent who no longer believe

the things the church teaches and that we want to come to him. I asked Herr Koppe, the man who has been smuggling the tracts in here, to sneak my letter to Dr. Luther. I received his reply today. Dr. Luther has made arrangements to help us. The day before Easter, on April 4, Herr Koppe will make his usual delivery of herring here. Then at night, he will return and park under Katie's window at the front of the abbey. We can climb through the window and get into his wagon. He will take us to Wittenberg where Dr. Luther lives."

With my hand over my nose, I asked, "We won't have to get into those smelly herring barrels, will we?"

"I don't care if we do," said Katie firmly. "I'll do anything to get out of here. But do you think it is right to break the vows we took when we became nuns? After all, we vowed before God to spend the rest of our lives in a convent."

Magdalena replied, "I have read Dr. Luther's tract about this and am convinced it is not wrong."

"Yes, Katie," I agreed, "this new tract explains it all—read it!"

"Ave," Magdalena whispered. "If we stay here any longer, the abbess may hear us. We'd better go to our rooms. Katie can read the tract after we leave and can decide for herself if it will be wrong for her to break her vows."



Why were we in a convent?

My little sister, Hannah, and I had been brought to this convent in Nimbschen, Germany on the same day as Katie. At least I had my sister with me, but poor Katie was all alone. That first day, we were all scared. I remember clearly the plain room the three of us were taken into. It was not very inviting; the walls were painted gray, and there was hardly any furniture. I hung onto my little sister's hand and pulled her close to me.

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A woman dressed in a white robe with a sort of black apron over it and a strange-looking covering on her head came in. She was carrying some clothes over her arm.

“Welcome, girls,” she said. “I have brought you the kind of clothes we wear.” They looked just like the ones she was wearing, only smaller. She gave us each a hug and then said, “Change into these. I will be back to show you where you will be staying.”

At that, Hannah started to cry. “I don’t want to wear those clothes. I want to wear my own clothes.”

Because Hannah was younger than I, I often felt more like her mother than her sister. “Don’t cry, Hannah; it will be alright,” I said. “We’ll just do what the lady said.” Then I looked at Katie standing beside us and said, “I’m scared. Have you ever been in a convent before?”

“Yes,” she said, “when I was six, my mother died, and my father married a woman with children of her own. I know he owed the merchants a lot of money, so I suppose we were too many for him to provide for all of us. He brought me to a convent in Brehna. I lived there for three years. Now he’s brought me here to learn how to be a nun. I’m scared, too. Let’s try to stay together.”

I learned later that the abbess here was the sister of Katie’s mother. The other nun, who first greeted Hannah and me and who later joined me in smuggling food to Katie, was named Magdalena, and she was the sister of Katie’s father. Perhaps Katie’s father thought that these two relatives would take good care of her, but the abbess did not treat Katie any differently from the rest of us.

I liked Katie right away, so I agreed to try to keep our group together. After making our little pact, we changed into the scratchy, white tunics Magdalena handed to us. We were

Escape

told we would wear these tunics—they were called habits—for the rest of our lives. Habits were not very comfortable, but that was the point. Wearing them served to remind us that soft beautiful clothing would only distract from our prayers and religious life.

Next Katie and I were taken to a room with many beds, and we were both assigned a bed of our own. They took poor Hannah, no matter how hard she cried and clung to me, to another room for younger girls. I tried to reassure her that she needn't be afraid, but she could see that I, too, was afraid. And why wouldn't we be? Life in a convent was very different from life at home. Our new lives were ruled by bells, and every day was the same. A bell would ring at two o'clock in the morning to awaken us so we could quietly get out of bed and go to the chapel where we would recite prayers and psalms. There was scripture reading, and we sang hymns. We would then return to bed until another bell would summon us to breakfast at six. During meals, scripture was read to us, prayers were recited, and we sang hymns. Two more bells rang at four o'clock in the afternoon and at seven o'clock at night. When those bells rang, all work stopped, and we returned to the chapel where we would say prayers and sing more hymns suitable for the time of day. We prayed silently to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to some of the saints who were already in heaven.

Talking was rarely allowed, and right away Katie suggested we make up some hand signals to talk to each other. We were always very careful not to be caught.

When we were both sixteen, we decided we wanted to become nuns. We vowed to spend the rest of our lives in a convent living a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience. When a girl becomes a nun, she is given a small room of her

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own to live in, and she must have all the hair shaved from her head. This is so she will not become vain and proud of her beautiful hair. So, when we took our vows, our heads were shaved. It gave us a funny feeling to see the little piles of hair lying on the floor and to feel the cold air on our bald heads. We looked at each other and couldn't help laughing at how strange we looked.

Katie signaled, "Your head looks like a ball."

"So does yours," I signaled back.

Finally, we were given something with a funny name to wear on our heads. It was called a wimple, which we removed only when we went to bed at night. When we first decided to escape, we chose to let our hair grow, always careful to keep our wimples firmly in place around the abbess. Soon, our heads began to look like newly-mown grass. We still couldn't help but giggle when we looked at each other.



Modern ruins of Nimbschen convent



Escape

The route Herr Koppe planned to take went through the territory of elector Frederick the Wise. Elector Frederick was Roman Catholic, but he respected Martin Luther and his followers. However, the route would also take us very close to the territory of an elector named Duke George. Duke George hated Martin Luther. He arrested and hanged anyone caught helping monks or nuns escape. We all knew that leaving the convent was dangerous, but we hoped and prayed it would be worth the risk.

On Good Friday, the day of Jesus' death, the entire convent celebrated with a special service. Katie's punishment was lifted, and she was allowed to attend, although she was not allowed to speak to anyone. Still, she managed to sit next to me and when the abbess wasn't looking, we whispered to each other.

"I read the tract," she said.

"What did you decide?" I asked.

"I'm going with you."

I was glad. I did not want to leave my best friend behind. Still, worried thoughts of escaping only to be caught and hung as heretics kept me tossing and turning at night.

Easter Eve came, and twelve of us, including my sister Hannah, nervously crowded into Katie's room. We were amazed that we were all able to get there without being caught. Magdalena kept glancing out the window, watching for Herr Koppe's wagon. Finally, her excited whisper came. "I see him. He's coming!" It wasn't long before we could hear the wagon rattling down the road. Then he parked under Katie's window and moved into the back to help us as we climbed out.

One at a time, we went through the window. As if we were not nervous enough already, the first girls quickly realized

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how hard it would be for us to lift our legs high enough to clear the waist-high windowsill. We had not thought of that! At last, Katie whispered from behind me in the line, “Now is not the time to be modest! Lift your skirts above your knees.” Following her advice, ten of us made it safely into the wagon. Only Magdalena and Katie were left. Katie helped Magdalena, who safely dropped into the wagon. “Come on, Katie,” I said softly. “Hurry! We don’t want to be caught now.” She appeared at the window, looking back only once before she jumped and landed beside us.

“Is that everyone?” whispered Herr Koppe.

“That’s everyone,” whispered Magdalena. There was hardly room for all of us as we curled up together like spoons. Herr Koppe threw a heavy tarp over us and the empty herring barrels, then climbed onto the driver’s seat. We heard the crack of his whip over the heads of the horses. Then the wagon jerked, and we were on our way.

It was dark and scary under that tarp. We couldn’t see our hands in front of our faces, and the strong smell of herring was making my stomach, which has always been easily upset, threaten to betray me. To keep from vomiting, I repeated Philippians 4:8 from the Vulgate, the Bible version we had used in the convent, over and over to myself. “Whatsoever is true, whatsoever is chaste, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are holy, whatsoever things are worthy to be loved, whatsoever things are of good repute; if there is any virtue, if there is any praiseworthy discipline, meditate on these.”

After a while, one of the girls began to cry. “We’ll be caught,” she sobbed, “and we’ll all be hung.”

“Shh,” Katie whispered, trying to comfort her. “We won’t be caught. God brought us this far. He will not let us be

Escape

caught now. Let's pray, 'Please, Lord, help us to get away so we can worship in the way thou hast called us to worship thee.'"

"Amen," I said softly.

"Quiet back there," ordered Herr Koppe. "We're nearing the gates and the guard." Afraid to disobey, we fell silent. All we could hear was the rumbling of the wheels.

But suddenly, we stopped. "Who goes there?" a voice demanded. We were caught!

"It's only me," replied Herr Koppe, "returning from delivering supplies to the convent."

"Late, isn't it?" came the voice.

"It takes a long time to unload all those supplies," replied Herr Koppe.

My heart was pounding so hard I thought surely everyone could hear it. I held Katie's hand so tightly I thought my fingers would break. We hardly dared to breathe.

"Alright then. Be on your way," the voice said. What a relief!

We rumbled and rattled on through the night, getting more and more uncomfortable, squeezed in as we were on the hard, wooden floor of the wagon. It seemed an eternity before morning came and Herr Koppe stopped the wagon and threw back the tarp. After being in the dark so long, the bright morning sunlight hurt our eyes. As our eyes were still adjusting, we heard him say, "You are safe now. You may get out and walk around a bit before we go any further."

The day was April 4, 1523, a date none of us would ever forget.

"It's Easter morn," Katie said, "the day our Savior rose from the dead. It's almost like we too have been raised from the dead, to live a new life. We should give thanks." We all knelt on the hard ground, and Katie prayed. "Dear Father in heaven, we thank thee for letting us escape from what has

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become corrupt. We ask now that thou wilt protect us as we travel into the world of which we know so little.”

We were free! We could hardly believe it. We hugged each other, laughing and crying at the same time. “Alright girls, that’s enough celebrating for now,” Herr Koppe finally said. “It’s time to be on our way again.”

We climbed back into the wagon and rattled on again. At least now it wasn’t necessary to hide under that old tarp. The fresh air helped to settle my still-churning stomach.

We stopped just outside of a town called Torgau where the parents of three of the girls were waiting for them. My sister and I envied them their happy reunion. If only our parents would take us home again!

After a few more miles, we stopped at the home of people who were followers of Martin Luther and were willing to help us. It had been a long night and a long day. They gave us a delicious meal and, since we were very tired, we went straight to a room they had prepared for us. Some of the girls were so tired they did not even undress; they just fell into bed with their clothes on. What soft mattresses! Not at all like the hard mats at the convent.

By now our escape must have been discovered. I could imagine the excitement this must have caused, though I didn’t think too long on this before I was fast asleep.

The next morning our hosts gave us some clean, ordinary clothes to wear in place of our habits. How soft they felt! And such colors! If I could help it, I would never wear uncomfortable clothes again.

After thanking them for their kindness, we were back in our wagon again, on our way to Wittenberg. There we would be staying at a place called the Black Cloister. It was named

the Black Cloister because the monks who used to live there always wore black.

On the way, Katie, still somewhat worried about breaking her vows to be a nun, said, "I hope we are doing the right thing. I must ask Dr. Luther about it when we get to Wittenberg."

Poor Katie. She just wanted to be pleasing to God. We all did.

"Just think," she said, "we will soon be meeting Martin Luther. How brave he was when he stood against almost everyone in the church, even when they told him he would surely go to hell for teaching things against what the church taught. Now he is even translating the Bible into German, so everyone who can read will be able to read it for themselves. God is using him to show people the right way to worship him."

At last we arrived at Wittenberg. What a disappointment! The streets were muddy, garbage was piled everywhere, animals roamed freely through the narrow alleys, and it smelled awful.

Katie whispered to me, "This city is disgusting. But still, I'm glad to be here, because this is where Dr. Luther lives."