

LAMB OF LEGACY

**A Child's Survival
in Hitler's Berlin**

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Chapter 20

Blood, Flesh, and Fire

The Soviets started their main offensive against Berlin on April 16, 1945, beginning with a barrage of continuous shelling to clear the way for the main attack; a half million shells were fired in just thirty minutes.³³ On April 23, General Helmuth Weidling was appointed commander of the Defense District of Berlin by Hitler, and instructed to fight to the last man. He immediately moved the 56th Panzer Corps into Berlin to defend its citizens.³⁴

Throughout the end and beyond, we remained on the first floor of Gottlieb-Dunkel-Straße, apartment number three. A single flight of stairs led to our door. The Russians had been shelling us for days when a German soldier knocked on our door, asking for water; he and his Panzer Tiger tank crew³⁵ had parked under a tree across the street. Of course, we gave him water. We didn't have much food, but Mutti also asked the soldier if he and his crew would like some soup. He happily said yes, telling her they hadn't eaten anything solid for quite awhile.

Mutti would usually come up with a soup bone, and green beans were still fairly easy to get. Sometimes she added potatoes, but that was rare since they were

hard to come by at this time. She would thicken it with flour, add salt and make a batch so we could eat from it throughout the day. This was part of our reserve rations and what was intended to sustain us through the Russian onslaught, but Mutti didn't hesitate to share with the tank crew.

She gave the soldier a pot and five spoons, asking him to bring everything back since we didn't have much cookware. As promised, he came back with everything, so Mutti filled up the pot again with more soup. I watched them eating, talking, and smiling from our apartment window. The oldest member of the crew was probably only in his thirties, but the rest were much younger. They looked terrible—tired, unshaven, and bedraggled.

I was on my way out to meet up with my girlfriend when Mutti asked me to check if the soldiers were done eating; she wanted me to bring back the pot and spoons if they were. I was going down the stairs of our stairwell, had reached the foyer of our apartment house, and was about to open the door to step outside when a Russian artillery shell hit. The pressure from the blast blew open the door and threw me backwards down the stairs into the cellar. I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I woke up, a very concerned Mutti was bent over me, slapping my face and calling my name. She thought I had been killed outside, but didn't find me so had looked in the cellar. My head hurt terribly, I was dazed and wobbly as she helped me back up the cellar's stairs, and as we reached the main floor, I saw that the main entry door of our apartment

house hung open at an odd angle. Mutti said, "Don't look outside." I didn't listen and looked anyway. As I turned, my eyes betrayed me. As I took in hell, I turned into a pillar of salt.

The tank was on fire, its tracks broken off, and there were pieces of human beings lying around it—a torso with no legs, no arms, no head. Body parts with shredded pieces of uniform still clinging to them were also hanging in the tree the tank had been parked next to; the only piece still identifiable was an arm hanging from one of the tree's larger branches. One soldier's body hung half way out of the circular commander's cupola on top of the turret, his head missing. What was left of his neck gushed blood. His back was on fire. Parts of the tree also lay splintered on the ground. It was a devastating sight. So much blood! Blood, chunks of flesh, and fire everywhere.

Mutti and I just stood there looking. Our minds wanted to turn away, but our eyes remained glued to the gruesome scene in front of us. Part of me could not comprehend what I was seeing. I was in shock, Mutti too. Just minutes before, all these young men were alive and eating our soup, and now they were beyond recognition. They were no longer human. I was no longer human.

It wasn't long before the police came and a fire truck put out the flames. The damaged tree was even trimmed. A bull dozer showed up later to remove the tank. Surprisingly, even with the Russians at our door step, there was enough infrastructure left for a concerted cleanup effort. When they had finished,

everything was washed away; it was as if nothing had ever happened. Only the charred, now sparse-looking half-tree remained a constant reminder; together we had all witnessed the butchery of war.

My head ached for days. I was alive, but hell was always nearby now.

As the Russians got closer, things worsened. Shelling was almost constant. Still life went on beneath the ground. One day I was taking a bag of garbage outside through the basement. I made my way through the basement corridors towards the rear entrance. As I got closer to the stairs leading up to the back side of our apartment complex, I heard a faint voice. It sounded like a child crying for his mother. I followed the sound up the basement stairs and out the back.

Towards the left of my building I stumbled on the source of the cries. There before me lay a Hitler Youth; his uniform disheveled. Curled up into a fetal position, he was a pitiful sight. He looked to be about my age, maybe even younger—just a boy. His beautiful blond hair was a sharp contrast to his mangled chest, splayed open wide. A massive shrapnel wound. Blood had already pooled around him. There was no blood trail; he must have gotten hit exactly where he lay.

While the image before me was horrific, it barely registered. What tore at my soul was that he was still weakly calling out, “Mama, Mama.”

I screamed for help. I was relieved when Frau Klein came running. She quickly assessed the situation:

A mortal wound. Only moments more to live.

She delicately sat down next to the boy, scooping his head into her lap then she did something amazing. As tears streamed down her face, she gently spoke to him, “Mama is here. Don’t worry, I’m here. Everything will be alright.”

“Mama, Mama,” he whispered.

“I’m here,” she choked out, stroking his face.

“Mama, Mama.”

This went on for a short while until his glazed eyes rolled back into white. His body shuttered and death stole him away. While he was still warm, Frau Klein and I wept bitterly for the wasted life of an innocent boy. Another lamb led to slaughter.

He had no identification on him. Somewhere in Berlin, another mother would never see her son.