

Same Moon, Same Stars

In September 1945, Frau Benz told me, “Renate, I am tired of living like this. I’ve got to find out where my husband’s unit went.”

One of the American soldiers, who had his laundry done upstairs, provided her with a lead. Although he had no definite information, he thought Herr Benz’s unit might be in Stuttgart.

On the 11th of September, Frau Benz left me with the two children and went to search for her husband. Early in the evening several days later, I put the children down for their naps and went to mail a letter I had written to my mother. Even though mail was still not moving between West Germany and East Germany, I wrote to Mutti every week with the hope that one day she would get one of my letters.

When I returned, I stopped to chat with a young woman named Marga Neumann, who lived upstairs with her parents. We were standing talking in the doorway when two American soldiers walked by and glanced our way.

We remarked to one another, “They may be going to town to look for girls.”

I had once been pretty naïve, but I now realized that these American soldiers liked to find willing girlfriends. At the end of the street, the Americans stopped, turned around and walked back toward us. It was the 14th of September 1945.

The one with blue eyes asked in German, “Why do you stand there?”

Shaking, I reached in my pocket before replying, “What is wrong? I have my ID card. See?”

“There’s nothing wrong,” he answered. “This is my first day in Germany and I want to practice my German.”

He seemed a little awkward, but nice awkward, not too sure of himself. The other guy never spoke a word. The soldier who was a little taller than me did all the talking.

“Where are you from?” I asked, attempting to make conversation as I tried to stop shaking.

“Texas,” he said.

When we studied geography in school, I had learned about the Gulf of Mexico and dreamed of seeing it someday. That’s where I recalled

seeing Texas on a map.

“Is Texas near the Gulf of Mexico?” I asked.

“Yes, you’re right,” he said. He seemed pleased.

“You speak German well,” I told him, although he used some words differently and his sentence structure wasn’t quite right.

He didn’t really seem to know what to say so he proceeded to tell me about himself. He lived on a farm in Texas and his family spoke only German at home, although he had learned to speak English in school. His great-grandparents emigrated from Germany to Texas, except one grandmother, who came to America as a small child. He had been drafted by the American government. He hadn’t volunteered to join the army. He had been in England before being transferred to Germany for the reconstruction effort.

I found him quite interesting, but I had little experience with men, let alone American soldiers. Was I curious? Yes.

Because of the strict curfew, at about 6 o’clock, Marga and I turned to go in.

Before we closed the door, the guy from Texas asked, “Can I talk to you again?”

I had no idea why he wanted to talk to me. I felt a little tongue-tied in his presence.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think so.”

“Well,” he said, “I would like to.”

When I went to mail another letter the following evening, I wondered if I might see him. Sure enough, he came striding down the street toward me, alone this time. Frau Benz still wasn’t home.

So we talked. He told me his age and told me more about his life in Texas.

“We have the same moon and stars in Texas as you have in Germany,” he said. I found that very interesting to me because I thought Texas was close to the South Pole.

After we talked some more, he asked, “Can I see you again? I want to practice my German.”

“I don’t think so,” I replied.

“Why not?” he demanded.

“I am married and have six children,” I told him.

“Where is your husband?” he asked.

“He’s a prisoner of war,” I replied.

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “Can I talk to you again?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. My answer was not a definite “yes” or a definite “no.”

The next night, Frau Benz still wasn’t home.

On the night of the 16th of September, this American guy turned up again.

I thought to myself, “He is nice to talk to. He isn’t like some of the American soldiers who are so pushy. He seems honest. I like him.”

“I don’t believe you have six children,” he told me.

“No, you’re right, I don’t,” I replied. “I have two children. If you don’t believe me, come upstairs and meet them.”

“I’m not allowed to,” he said, “but, yeah, let me see these two children of yours for myself.”

At the top of the stairs, a thin strip of light shining under the apartment door shocked me. I had left the apartment in darkness. When I opened the door, Frau Benz was sitting at the table eating. I hadn’t seen her return because she slipped in the back door that faced the train station.

“Oh my goodness,” I thought to myself. “Now this American guy is going to find out I don’t have any children.”

When Frau Benz saw a young man wearing an American soldier’s uniform behind me, she didn’t hesitate.

“Come in, please come in,” she said in English, smiling and making him feel welcome.

He took off his cap, shook her hand and introduced himself.

“My name is Harvey Meiners. I am pleased to meet you,” he replied in German.

It pleased me to see how respectful and well brought up he appeared to be. Frau Benz was all smiles.

Although Harvey could soon tell that Thomas and the baby were not my children, he didn’t say anything about my lies. Thomas welcomed Harvey warmly so he lifted the little boy out of bed and played with him for a little while.

Before he left, Harvey asked me, “Can I see you again?”

Frau Benz answered for me. “Sure!” she said.

I shrugged my shoulders and the color must have risen in my cheeks. What would Harvey think? I knew what Frau Benz thought. We had heard that American soldiers always brought a big sack of groceries when they came to visit civilians in their private living quarters. That’s what she wanted.

So Harvey got into the habit of stopping by every night.

On the night of my 19th birthday, the 1st of October 1945, Harvey asked, "Can you sew, Renate?"

"Of course," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"I have been promoted to staff sergeant and I'd like you to put the new stripes on my uniform."

"I'll be happy to," I told him. While we sat and talked some more, I stitched.

When I finished and handed the jacket back to him, he said, "Whatever you find in the pockets is yours."

A bar of Camay soap was in one pocket. What a thrill! The only thing available at that time was floating soap, which wasn't real soap at all. I don't know what it was. How I treasured that bar of wonderful soap!

"Thank you, Harvey, thank you so much. This is the best birthday present I have ever had!"

He smiled, pleased his small gift had brought me so much pleasure.

The other pocket contained a package of cigarettes.

Frau Benz said, "Give me those cigarettes and I'll trade them for food."

And she did.

From then on, I mended whatever clothing Harvey had that needed attention. I didn't mind.

Harvey often brought something for Thomas even though the gift sometimes wasn't suitable for a child. It was his way. Sometimes he came with cigarettes, sometimes candy, but it was never enough for Frau Benz. She didn't seem to care that every month Harvey sent money home to his parents.

"That Harvey, he's a stingy GI," she told me.

I resented her saying that, but I let it go.

The first time I invited Harvey, that lonely American soldier, to eat with us, I fried potatoes in peanut butter. There was no bread to go with the peanut butter and potatoes. That's all we had. Harvey said he hadn't had fried potatoes since he left home. The children liked them and Harvey said he did, too, but I didn't.

The American soldiers were still warned not to fraternize with German civilians, but that didn't bother Harvey.

"I speak German and I know my way around," he always said.

Most of the American soldiers couldn't speak German, of course. They seemed to pick up a few words and phrases, some of which were

not too good.

When I told Mutti about Harvey, she asked, "What religion is he?"

When I said, "Lutheran," she relaxed.

So Harvey and I often stood outside the house where I lived with Frau Benz and we talked. Those were our dates because there were no restaurants, no entertainment, nothing. We always were mindful of the strict curfew, but one Friday night two or three weeks later, we had bad luck. An American military policeman on patrol with an MP band around his arm drove by and saw us. He stopped.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"We are talking," we told him. (Marga was there, too.)

"You are breaking the curfew. Come with me," he pointed to Marga and me.

Harvey couldn't talk the MP out of detaining us and Marga and I didn't dare argue. During the occupation, the word of the American army was law. The MPs had to keep order and enforce the rules.

The MP drove us to the police station in his jeep.

How terrible! Frightened, we kept looking at each other as if to say, "What are we doing here? What are they going to do with us?"

We didn't know what to expect.

It was unbelievable. I, Renate Macherauch, was being detained at the police station like a common criminal. What would this disgrace do to my family's good name? What would my father have thought? I made up my mind that nobody would find out. Even though I fingered my identification card in my pocket, I decided to save my family from that embarrassment.

As it got darker, the MPs brought in more and more people. At last, we were taken to a vacant schoolhouse set up as a dormitory with 10 other women. Marga and I didn't want to have anything to do with the others so we ran and found a bed together, but we didn't sleep well.

In the morning, we went downstairs where a German civilian recorded our names and addresses. I again gave my name as Lieselotte Saenger. Marga gave her real name because her mother knew she had been picked up.

In the early afternoon, the same civilian worker came back to the crowded room where we waited and leaned over to talk to me.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"My hometown is Bad Berka, but I live here in Eschwege now," I told him.

“Is your name Lieselotte Saenger? Now tell me the truth. We punish those who lie to us,” he said. Seeing my fear, he reiterated, “Tell me your real name.”

I started to cry and through my tears told him my real name. Then he wasn't so stern. He told me his wife came from Bad Berka. His first girlfriend had been a friend of my half-brother Wilhelm's. He invited me to visit him and his wife at their home. That made me feel better, but it didn't lessen my guilt at the thought of having a police record.

“Please, please, don't notify my mother,” I begged him. “She will be mortified.”

“Don't worry about it. You didn't do anything wrong,” he said.

What I hadn't counted on was Harvey getting word to Frau Benz that Marga and I had been picked up. When Frau Benz came to check on me, they told her no one by that name was being held, but she insisted there must be some mistake. She knew the military police had picked me up the night before.

Before Marga and I were released, blood samples were taken to check us for venereal disease. Social diseases were running rampant with so much unprotected, casual sex between American soldiers and German women.

It was such a relief to get home to Frau Benz, Thomas and the baby, and of course, to see Harvey again.

Frau Benz had located her husband when she went to Stuttgart so she was waiting to join him. On the 15th of October, he told her to cancel the rental agreement with the lady who owned the house.

Frau Benz was so glad to get out of that icy cold room. The authorities had denied her request for coal. Why? Perhaps she didn't have enough money to buy it on the black market. Frau Benz and the baby moved in with Frau Johannes on the third floor, while Thomas and I stayed with Marga's parents for a few days. We slept in Marga's bed because she was not home at the time. As soon as a civilian vehicle became available, Frau Benz and the children were moving to Stuttgart where the family would be reunited.

Frau Benz said, “Renate, come with us and help me. I expect we will be doing lots of entertaining and you can look after the children.”

By that time, Harvey had been transferred. He had no idea where he would be stationed. I was neither surprised nor disappointed. Wartime friendships were temporary, especially between German civilians and American soldiers. Harvey's departure left me feeling sad, though, and

unsure of what I should do.

Perhaps I could get a position as a helper in a pharmacy scheduled to start in January 1946, although who knew if that would happen. Perhaps nursing school would start again in the new year? Again, no one knew.

What I did know was I had had no word from my mother for four months. Was she alive or dead? I had no winter clothes and the weather was getting cooler and cooler. I had nothing to eat. I had no place to live. I made up my mind that I would go home to Bad Berka. That meant I had to make an illegal crossing from American-controlled West Germany to Russian-controlled East Germany.

Marga did laundry for Harvey's friend, a soldier, who promised Harvey he would look out for me. He went in and out of the apartment upstairs and often sat in the kitchen visiting. Sometimes I talked to him.

"How can I cross the Werra River?" I asked him.

"I know of somebody who might take you," he said.

I had no food so I traded the last package of cigarettes that Harvey had given me for a big jar of pickled herring and half a pound of butter. I wanted to take the jar of pickled herring home to my mother. The bread and butter Marga's parents had given me were soon gone. All I had left in my knapsack was my jar of pickled herring.

I dressed in a wool pleated grey and red skirt and a top that I made from part of my shirt. I had knitted a short sleeve sweater for the front of it and, of course, I wore a coat. Though it was wartime, I was a young woman. When I knew I looked nice, I felt better about myself and the chaotic world in which I lived.

The soldier dropped me off near the border at a guesthouse that was not open for business, similar to what my mother used to run. By then, my pickled herring had been eaten.

"Goodbye and good luck," he said. "The milkman who delivers between East Germany and West Germany will be coming along soon. He will put your knapsack in one of his big milk cans and sneak it across the border. He will also give you an address where you can pick it up after you cross the border."

I went inside and the old couple who lived there fed me well. They were so kind. They tried to talk me out of attempting to cross the border.

"No, no, you must not try to go to East Germany," the woman said, very agitated. "The Russians killed three people the other day. Why must you do this?"

"I have to. I have to," I told her. I was frightened, but very determined.

When the milkman knocked at the door, I gave him my knapsack as the American soldier had instructed me to do. A short, dark haired older man, he seemed a caring, fatherly type of person. He reassured me that my knapsack would be safe with him.

I stayed with the old couple for three days trying to figure out what to do. How far away was the border? I couldn't see it so when night came, I took a walk to the river bridge. I noticed the steep bank and the little American guardhouse, a temporary looking structure, next to the bridge.

Looking around, I thought to myself, "This is so open. No wonder the Russians shot those people. I can't cross in the daytime, but at night? Yes, perhaps."

I made up my mind to try in the evening of the third day. Since I had nothing to carry, my hands were free. I made my way to the bridge in a roundabout way and crawled down the embankment to wait for the right moment. When it got dark, a light came on in the little guard hut on my side of the river. I could see the soldiers sitting around the table laughing and talking.

"Help, help," I cried out to the Americans using the English I had learned from my tutor. "Help me get back to the Russian side where I came from."

I didn't speak any Russian so I knew if they challenged me, I was in trouble.

When the bright lights of a jeep hit me in the face, I was blinded. I froze in my tracks. I wasn't afraid I would be shot because the Americans didn't do that. I thought they would send me back, though. The jeep stopped at the guard hut and blew its horn. I could hear them talking.

"Hello, here's the mail," an American GI said.

"Okay, thanks."

When the jeep turned around, the lights shone right on me again. I remained standing like a statue. Then the jeep left and the Americans went back into their guardhouse and closed the door. They didn't even seem to notice me.

I ran halfway across to the bridge and put my hands up over my head before I shouted in German, "Help, help." When no one responded, I ran to the end of the bridge where the Russian guardhouse door stood wide open. The checkpoint was deserted. What a relief! Later, I heard that no guards were on duty that night because they were striking for more food.

I made my way to meet the milkman at his home, where they

served me a super-duper lunch of bread and homemade sausage. It had been a long time since I could eat as much food as I wanted. It tasted wonderful! The milkman and his wife gave me a beautiful bed to sleep in. Their kindness brought a lump to my throat. Both the old people at the guesthouse and this couple treated me as loving grandparents would treat their treasured grandchild. They had arranged for the mail carrier to take me to the next train station and even made me a sandwich to take along for a snack. I got my knapsack back, too.

No money changed hands. So many caring, kind German civilians helped others out of the goodness of their hearts. I was fortunate to have encountered a number of them.

When I met the mail carrier the next day, he said, "Come with me."

By the time we left the village, six of us were walking with him to Treffurt, which took about an hour. We went along the Werra River, sometimes walking in the riverbed where we got our shoes a little wet. When we got to the top of the riverbank, there stood Russian guards. They asked for our identification cards, but I didn't have an identification card.

At first, I played dumb.

"What have I done with my ID? I just had it out. Perhaps it is in my change purse? No, it is not there. Is it in my knapsack? No, it is not there either."

When the others showed their ID, I started to panic. Harvey had once given me a little piece of paper with a postage stamp on it. It looked so interesting I had put it in my pocket. Out of desperation, I waved that little piece of paper and the guards waved us through.

I had to wait for the Bad Berka train a little bit before I made it home to my mother's open arms. Although I was weak with exhaustion, we were so happy to see each other.

"What would you like to eat?" Mutti asked.

My favorite meal had always been fresh carrots and peas with butter, salted potatoes and meatballs, so that's what I requested.

"I can fix you the peas, the carrots and the potatoes," she said, "But there's no meat and no butter for the potatoes."

Mutti still hadn't heard from my stepfather. Was he a prisoner of war or had he been killed? She offered me a pair of shoes that belonged to Onkel Hans. They were a little bit too large, but they worked. I could still wear my old high top shoes that I had gotten on my 12th birthday, although they were pretty worn out by the end of 1945.

I needed to register with the police so I could get my ration cards because Mutti didn't have enough extra food. I hesitated because I realized that once I did so the chances of getting out of East Germany again were slim.

I told Mutti what I had been doing. I explained that Frau Benz had taken the children to Stuttgart where her husband had transferred with the American military government. I told her I had sent Wilhelm's silverware and painting with them. These keepsakes were safe with that family.

I had a message from Herr and Frau Benz to deliver to two ladies who worked in a certain store in Weimar. Since the trains were still not running, I rode an old timey bus. I was shocked at the condition of the beautiful old city. Weimar still was in shambles. It was as if the bombing had just occurred.

After delivering the message, one of the women asked, "How did you cross the border?"

I explained. Then she asked, "Are you going back?"

"I want to," I said, "but I don't know how."

"We are going in two weeks and we'll take you with us," she said. "We have enough cigarettes to pay off the Russian guards. Our plan will work. We have done it once already. We will cross at Treffurt."

"I have nothing to pay off the Russian guards," I told them.

"Don't worry," the woman told me again. "We'll take care of it."

Since I had crossed into East Germany at Treffurt, the surroundings were familiar to me. I liked the idea, but decided to go home and talk to Mutti.

"I don't mind if you go back to work for Frau Benz," she said, "but I want you to finish your education. I want you to be a nurse."

I didn't tell my mother that Frau Benz had sent word that she would welcome me in Stuttgart because they gave big parties to entertain American officers. The family occupied a big house with servants and Herr Benz had his own chauffeur.

I didn't tell my mother that I had big misgivings about what would be expected of me if I went there to live. What about all those soldiers who were far from home in an occupied country? How would I be expected to provide amusement for these male guests?

These young American men liked the girls and the girls had no protectors. Their brothers and fathers were either dead or prisoners of war. The Americans were not bad, but they were idle and liked having

a good time. Alcohol flowed freely. If a girl looked at a soldier with a friendly face - a smile - he assumed she was a willing partner.

Once, an American soldier followed me home although I had definitely not given him a friendly face. In fact, I had made a point of ignoring him, but he was so drunk his sour breath reeked of stale beer. He grabbed me when I went to unlock my door. When I could see he wasn't going to let me go, I took my key ring and jabbed him with all strength on the shoulder. He swore and I ran.



When I met the two ladies who had offered to take me back to West Germany, I wore my overcoat. I offered to carry another big coat for one of them over my arm because I had merely a knapsack for luggage. The three of us traveled to Treffurt.

At the train station, one of the ladies left to see the Russian guards at the border. When she came back in a little over an hour, she didn't say much. They put another light coat over my coat, and then a coat with a fur lining over that.

"These coats are so heavy, I don't know if I can walk all the way to the border," I complained.

"You have to," the women told me. "We'll go slowly."

We waited until dark before we started walking across the meadow. It seemed like a long way. I thought we'd never get to the other side. Then we saw three Russian guards. One of the women went ahead and greeted them in Russian, while the other said to me, "You stay right here."

She put a wool scarf around me and loaded me up with so much more clothes, I could hardly move, which was part of their plan. The women told the Russians that grandma (me) was limping. By the time we went across the bridge, I truly did limp. The guards weren't interested. They waved us on.

On the other side, the women took those heavy coats off me. Then we walked what seemed like a long way again before we came to the American guardhouse. We stood right in front of the guardhouse window so they could see us in the light. In English, I called out, "Hello, hello, hello," but they paid no attention to us so we went through.

We had made it back to West Germany safely.

The ladies had the address of a person who could take us on to Eschwege so we knocked on the door of the first house we came to, but

nobody answered. They had no way of knowing who we were or what we wanted. So we kept trying, going door to door until we found the right person. A few more private vehicles were on the roads by that time.

When I got back to Eschwege, Harvey's friend, George Wockenfuss, had two messages for me. George, who was also Marga's boyfriend, had received a letter from Harvey, who was stationed at Fuerstenfeldbruck Air Base near Munich. He and a few other enlisted men and hundreds of prisoners of war were rebuilding the airfield and hangars that had been destroyed in Allied bombing raids.

Harvey told George to encourage me to come to Munich if I should come back. He had found a job there for me in the American post office, as well as a place to stay. Harvey's message didn't excite me.

"I don't know," I told George. "I still have some of my belongings in Stuttgart."

George could read my indecision.

"You know, Harvey is a good guy, an honest guy," he said. "He is not taking advantage of you. I think he is serious about you. He cares about you. He has a job and a place for you to stay. You can't ask for anything more than that."

George also had a message for me from Herr and Frau Benz. They wanted me to come back to Stuttgart.

"I don't know," I told George again. He must have thought how ungrateful I seemed. Without his help, Harvey and I would never have found each other again and I would not have been able to keep in touch with Herr and Frau Benz either.

I couldn't make up my mind right away so I stayed in Eschwege for a couple more days with Herr and Frau Neumann. I went again to check on when I could start work in the pharmacy, but it still was not scheduled to open until January.

What a terrible time this was for all German young people because we could remember better times. I was so discouraged. Some days it seemed like my life was over before it had begun.

"Go to Munich and the home of Frau Schmidt at Maisacherstrasse Number 4," George advised. "Harvey has made arrangements for you to live there."

Still turned upside down and inside out from the war, normal transportation was a long way from being restored to its pre-war efficiency. That's why it took me two days to get to Stuttgart, a trip that would have taken only hours years before.

That meant I had to spend the night in the horribly dirty and dimly lit Frankfurt train station. It was almost bursting with displaced persons and German soldiers. I found it hard to find room to set my knapsack down where I could sit on it. A woman I talked to suggested that I go downstairs and find a bunk to sleep in. She promised to watch my knapsack. The basement was filled with people milling around the huge space broken up by row upon row of bunks. Finally, I found an empty upper bunk and climbed into it. Then I felt an urgent tap on my shoulder.

“Lady, that’s my bunk. Go somewhere else.”

Discouraged and a little claustrophobic, I went back upstairs to find the woman who had my knapsack. I couldn’t even sit down on it then because the station was even more overcrowded than before. A German soldier returning home from the war occupied the space where I had planted my feet earlier.

He asked where I was from and where I was going. Sensing that I was not too enthusiastic about traveling to Stuttgart, he said, “Come home with me. My family has a big enough house. You will be welcome there.”

I think he meant it in a nice way so I thanked him, telling him I had to go to Stuttgart to pick up my belongings.

The next day, I made it to the Benz home. They were so glad to see me that they greeted me with big hugs. Herr and Frau Benz repeated their offer, “Stay and look after the children and help us with the parties we host for American officers.”

I was still hesitant so I told them, “I don’t know. I have a job promised to me at the American post office in Fuerstenfeldbruck and I have a place to stay. I am supposed to start next week.”

Frau Benz bristled.

“Has this got something to do with that guy, that cheapskate American GI who kept coming to our apartment in Eschwege?”

I didn’t like the sarcasm in her voice, but I didn’t want an altercation so I lied to her. “No, it has nothing to do with him.”

I thought to myself, Harvey had never asked me for anything, which is more than could be said for most of the other GIs I had met.

In the beautiful Stuttgart villa where the Benz family lived, I shared a huge room with three-year-old Thomas. The baby slept next door. Thomas begged me to stay and that made me sad.

“Thomas, maybe I will come back,” I said. That seemed to satisfy the little boy. I asked Herr and Frau Benz if I could leave the satchel with

the silverware and painting for Wilhelm with them. After they agreed, I ironed my few pieces of clothes. Despite the war, we still ironed our clothes! At that point, I had to wash my underwear every day. At the beginning of the war, I had four changes, but they were worn out. When I was a child, my mother told me that my underwear always had to be clean and so I kept it clean.

Then I said goodbye to the Benz family, caught a train to the last station before Munich, and walked to Fuerstenfeldbruck. I reasoned that if things didn't work out, I could always leave and come back to live with Herr and Frau Benz in Stuttgart. When I arrived in Munich, I found the address that George had given me. I knocked on the door of a first floor apartment. When the door opened, I introduced myself.

"Renate, we have been waiting for you," Frau Schmidt said. "Come in, come in!" She had the same surname as Oma, although they were not related.

I had been raised in the central part of Germany and now I was in Bavaria. Frau Schmidt spoke German, but her dialect was so different from mine that I found her difficult to understand. She introduced me to her two boys and told me her husband was still missing in the action like so many others. I was to sleep in the living room-kitchen area. The boys and their mother slept in the bedroom. I was very grateful to have a safe roof over my head, but the apartment was so small, I had no privacy. I took sponge baths at night after the lights were turned out. Nevertheless, how very, very generous Frau Schmidt was to let me live there.

"Harvey comes every day to ask if we have heard from you," Frau Schmidt told me. "He should be here in about an hour. Why don't you hide and surprise him?"

Years before, my Peppi and I would make a loud sound to call each other.

"Ewit, ewit," we would say. Harvey had been amused when I told him the story. That night when Harvey arrived, I hid in the bedroom.

"Have you heard from Renate?" he asked Frau Schmidt.

"No, sorry," she told him.

"Why is she not coming? Maybe she will never come," he said. I could tell he had missed me.

That's when I called out, "Ewit, ewit."

Harvey knew who it was! He was so happy to see me. I was happy to see him, too. Everything was good between us!

I started working at the military post office the next day. Then I

went to the police station to register for my ration cards.

Those of us who were working in the post office were very lucky to be able to eat in the mess hall. By the middle of November 1945, the post office began receiving early Christmas packages for the American soldiers. Some parcels that hadn't been packed well were falling apart when they were delivered. Every day, we had loose chocolate, cookies and other treats spread around the room where we sorted mail. Everything that came in that couldn't be delivered was put in a sack and divided between those of us who worked there.

I had it made! I had a good place to stay and as much as I could eat at work. What an impressive array of food. I had never seen that much meat in my life! However, we weren't allowed to take any food home in a sack so we had to use our ingenuity.

In those days, women's stockings were held up by elastic garter belts. We figured out how to stash some food from the broken packages in the tops of our stockings. Although walking with the extra bulk presented a challenge, I was able to take food home to share with the Schmidt family. They were very grateful because there still wasn't enough rationed food to eat.

At work, we sat down for our meals after the soldiers had gone back to their duties. Every day outside the post office area, old and hungry men who worked at the airfield, lined up. They would stand at the fence holding out empty tin plates, hoping we would share our leftovers. Some American soldiers treated them ugly, but others scraped the food they weren't going to eat on those plates. It was going to be thrown away anyway. I, too, felt sorry for these old men.

I watched and soon picked up on how best to share my leftovers. I filled my plate with more food than I wanted and pushed some of it aside. I didn't even touch it. Then I would go outside and scraped that leftover portion off my plate and onto theirs. The old men were very grateful. So many German civilians still were hungry.

In December, I took Harvey for his first sleigh ride. He got so scared, he dug his heels into the snow and we almost ran into some trees. We laughed and laughed, although there was precious little warmth that holiday season. At the Christmas service, the church was cold and cheerless with no decorations and no music. Only the pastor's sermon spoke of Christmas. How I longed for the warmth and happiness I recalled from the Christmas observances of my childhood.

My gift from Harvey that first Christmas was a pair of boots! They

were my first new boots since I turned 12. My old ones were worn very thin. I had also been wearing Onkel Hans' hand-me-downs, but they were clumsy looking and a little too big. I felt badly that I had no gift for Harvey, but I had no money to buy anything on the black market.

Our dates were very simple. Often, Harvey and I sat on a park bench, snuggled together in the cold with only our love to keep us warm.

In a letter from Mutti, I learned that the Red Cross had notified her that my stepfather was alive and being held as a prisoner of war in Dachau prison, about 50 kilometers from where I lived.

Through the Red Cross, my mother wrote to my stepfather and told him where I was living and that I had an American boyfriend who spoke German. Although it took a long time to be delivered, the mail went through. It seemed strange that she couldn't write to me because I lived in the Western Zone and she lived in the Eastern Zone, but she could write to my stepfather, a prisoner of war in the Western Zone.

Any information contained in mail going to the Western Zone, no matter how innocent, was censored if it did not reflect well on conditions in the Eastern Zone. For example, if I wrote that I had eaten a good breakfast of bacon and eggs, the letter wouldn't go through. If I wrote saying I was able to purchase a pair of new shoes that information was censored, as well. Why the Russians cared, I don't know.

On the morning of the 8th of January 1946, I was describing a beautiful dream I had had the previous night about clear, clear water to Frau Schmidt. It had been very soothing and made me feel so good. I looked out the window and there was Harvey. How nice! He had stopped by with some rolls for our breakfast, but he couldn't stay.

Harvey had to go to work so he went out, jumped in his jeep and made a U-turn, oblivious to the big American army truck stopped in the street across from the Schmidt's house and a man who had gotten out of it.

"Harvey almost ran over that poor guy!" I turned to tell Frau Schmidt.

When I turned back to look out the window, I noticed the man from the truck coming toward our house. He looked a little familiar to me. Then I did a double take.

The man was my stepfather dressed in his German army uniform! What was he doing here? I was thrilled to see him and couldn't wait to hear his explanation.

His account amazed me. It seemed unbelievable. He said since

the Americans always took some prisoners along when they went to get supplies for the camp, he had volunteered to go. He told his captors that his stepdaughter lived in Fuerstenfeldbruck, a city along their route. The GIs dropped him off for a visit with the understanding that they would pick him up on the way back to the camp in a couple of hours.

Onkel Hans was an American prisoner and they took him along on the truck and let him off? Then they would come back for him a couple of hours later? How could this be? This was all new to me.

Onkel Hans had been captured by the Americans in the northern part of Italy. His outfit was supposed to be guarding something, but he didn't know what, in 1944. They remained isolated in the forest so long that they had no idea that the war was over because communication with the outside world was non-existent. When American troops found them, they tried to defend themselves.

A German-speaking American soldier told them, "The war is over, don't fight any more. But we're going to take you prisoner."

Onkel Hans and the other German soldiers were relieved.

"When did the war end?" they asked. They hadn't wanted to fight Hitler's war in the first place.

The prisoners were transported to the closest prison, Dachau, where they could not have been treated better. What a difference a few short months American command had made at that dreadful place. In fact, it is difficult to comprehend.

On the 29th of April 1945 when the Allies liberated Dachau, they described it as "a gruesome spectacle of wholesale bestiality and barbarism." It is estimated that over 200,000 prisoners from more than 30 countries were held there under appalling conditions and subjected to hideous, inhumane treatment. About two-thirds of these were political prisoners and nearly one-third was Jews. The world will never know the exact number of people who were interned or lost their lives there.

Now a little more than eight months later, the Americans were bending over backwards to treat their German prisoners well. No doubt, they had seen far too much of the Third Reich's atrocious wickedness. It speaks well of the Allies that they didn't retaliate against poor German soldiers like my stepfather who had been forced to follow Hitler and his Nazis.

How wonderful that my stepfather was alive and well! The two-hour visit went fast. At the appointed time, the American army truck pulled up across the street again, waiting to take Onkel Hans back to Dachau.

When Harvey arrived the next day, I said, “You almost ran over that poor guy getting out of that big army truck yesterday.”

“Yes,” Harvey said, “I didn’t see him. I’m so glad I didn’t hit him.”

“Me too,” I said. “That was my stepfather!”

Harvey could hardly grasp my news. Since the Americans allowed their prisoners of war at Dachau to have visitors, he decided to go and get acquainted with Onkel Hans.

One day, Harvey said to me, “I’d like to take you home to Texas with me.”

I thought I knew what he meant, but I acted clueless.

“How could that be?” I asked, wide-eyed.

“Well,” Harvey said, “we could get married.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I will have to ask my mother.”

“What if I drive up to Dachau and ask Onkel Hans?” Harvey asked.

That sounded fine to me, but Onkel Hans told Harvey that my mother must be consulted. My stepfather wrote to my mother through the Red Cross and told her he liked Harvey and he spoke German.

We started working on a plan to reunite my family. Mutti wanted to join the three of us so much that she arranged to cross from East Germany to West Germany in the south. Coming to West Germany illegally was still very difficult and dangerous in early 1946.

Harvey got word that she would attempt to cross the border near the small village of Kronach, where he should meet her about the 10th or 11th of February. Mutti’s trip went according to plan.

Harvey brought Mutti to Maisacher Strasse where I lived and she stayed with the neighbors because the Schmidt house was so small. Then Harvey went to Dachau and arranged for my stepfather to get passes for three or four consecutive days. Harvey picked him up each morning and took him back to the prison each afternoon.

During that time, Harvey formally asked my mother for permission to marry me.

Mutti said, “Well...”

Even though she liked Harvey, she was hesitant. She talked back and forth with my stepfather, who didn’t have too much to say. He thought Harvey was a good person, which was the most important thing.

“Texas is so far from Germany,” she told Harvey and me.

Then she agreed, adding, “You may never return, Renate. I may never see you again.”

We celebrated my mother’s birthday on the 13th of February, Harvey’s

birthday the 16th of February and our engagement all at the same time. Since food was still rationed, we had no cake or even a comfortable, quiet place to sit and visit. Nevertheless, we were together. It had been a long time since I had been that happy. I was sorry to see her return to Bad Berka.

When other people heard that I was going to marry an American, they said to me, “Why? Aren’t there enough guys here?”

The comments hurt, but I loved Harvey and he was a respectable man.

Harvey expected to be sent home to Texas after he was released from his military service on the 20th of June 1946. After several years in Europe, he was ready to head back to Texas. He had already written and told his parents that he had met a German girl whom he wanted to marry. He said his family was happy for him and looked forward to meeting me.

In February 1946, Harvey and I went to see the Lutheran church pastor to seek permission to get married at Easter weekend, Saturday the 20th of April. I had a seamstress make me a plain blue and white dress. We were so excited.

Then we were told that the wedding was impossible. We would not be permitted to marry because Harvey was an American soldier and I was a German civilian.

“No problem,” Harvey said. “We’ll get married after I am discharged. Should we set a date?”

Sunday the 28th of July sounded fine to me. I hoped my mother and my stepfather could come, but it would be too risky for Mutti to attempt to cross the East German border again so soon. My stepfather didn’t know when he would be released from Dachau so that was that.

Before Harvey got his discharge, he applied for a civilian position with the American military. He was hired by the civil censorship division and from then on, he could eat at the officers’ club on an American base and wear civilian clothes. He often wore his uniform, though, because civilian clothes were hard to come by. ☺