

# Escape from Königsberg

A novel by  
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For those whose actions in the face of death bear witness to the invincibility of the human spirit.

This novel was inspired by a true story and historical events.

I am grateful for the support of my wife Karen Tosoff, whose editing and belief in my work goes far beyond words. Thank you for being with me on this journey.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

It was by happenstance that I was inspired to write the little known story that tells of the plight faced by the German people in the days after the end of WWII. I met an elderly man of German-Prussian descent who survived the Soviet occupation of East Prussia during one of the most brutal atrocities in the history of warfare. He told me how he, as a young boy of just 14 years of age, along with his two sisters, aged six and ten, made a daring flight to freedom after they were orphaned during an unparalleled reign of terror against the civilian people of the former Baltic city of Königsberg. He also spoke of his father, a highly trained munitions expert in the German Wehrmacht who spent most of the war incarcerated as a POW. Unfortunately, I did not find out his name nor did time allow the elderly man to finish his fascinating tale of courage and heart and I was therefore left with the job of developing the plot for this coming of age historical novel using my writer's imagination. After returning to my writing studio and taking in what he had shared, I decided to write a novel based in part on his *Escape from Königsberg*, hence, the title. Extensive research unveiled the terrible mistreatment and killing of German civilians that continued long after the end of the war in 1945 and gave me insight into a very human story that needed to be told. Many details pertaining to life in Königsberg in late 1944 and early 1945 were difficult to establish with certainty in spite of arduous research, but I have done my best to make this story historically accurate.

## Chapter 1

Königsberg, East Prussia, January 26, 1945

Seventeen-year-old Walter Heinrich pulled back the curtain on his bedroom window and stared out at the barren expanse of white that covered the Prussian winter landscape. Having laid awake for most of the night listening to the sound of artillery fire in the distance, he was coming to terms with the fact that life for him and his family was about to take a turn for the worse. The Red Army was advancing and would soon take control over the 700-year-old Prussian city he and his fellow East Prussians called home. Life felt as though it was crumbling before his eyes. The safety of his family, his education and his future were now in the hands of the communist fate that was about to befall Königsberg.

A lone crow landed on the telephone pole at the edge of the farmhouse property and cawed loudly, perhaps in search of its flock mates or an opportune meal. Walter hated crows. Its black form set against the frozen background of endless white reminded him of how bleak and depressing his life had become.

Walter turned and walked over to his dresser and stared at a picture of his father. In the year following the news that Adolf Heinrich was missing in action, grief gave way to the confusing feelings that can accompany a young boy's entry into adolescence. Walter's body began changing, taking on the attributes of budding manhood. It was a time of physical and emotional upheaval, but he kept his difficult metamorphosis to himself.

Walter's almost overnight onset of heavy beard growth and body hair gave him the appearance of a young man older than his years. He secretly scoured his mother's room to find his father's shaving razor and taught himself how to shave once his facial hair became too obvious to ignore. His square face and determined jaw framed by a shock of sandy blond hair made him unmistakably Germanic in appearance. However, underneath his mature looks was an insecure and emotionally backward young boy who craved for love. Although Lena Heinrich did her best to provide for her family, she had little time for affection. There were times when Walter felt alone and alienated from her.

His extended family had been a comfort to Walter following his father's conscription into the Wehrmacht, but the news of his almost certain demise changed everything. Walter's paternal grandfather took the news hard. The elderly Heinrich spiraled into depression followed by a recurring lung infection that did not respond to treatment. He eventually became deathly ill, passing away from pneumonia the following year. Walter and the elder Heinrich were close and he was devastated by his grandfather's death.

Walter cared deeply for his sisters, 6-year-old Mila and 10-year-old Brigitte. Knowing how they looked up to him and in spite of the fact that he often felt empty in the gloomy days following his father's disappearance, he would set aside his own feelings and always made time for them when they felt frightened or alone.

After several minutes lost in thought, Walter turned and walked out of his bedroom. He made his way down the old wooden staircase where he saw his mother washing the breakfast dishes in the kitchen. Ignoring her, Walter walked out the back door to gather firewood before returning past the doorway to the kitchen, refusing to cast his mother even a cursory glance. Lena Heinrich dropped her head as her son walked by, looking out from the corner of her eye to see if he showed any sign of conciliation. She looked up.

“Walter?” Lena said in an attempt to connect with her son.

Walter snubbed his mother as he walked into the living room with an armful of firewood. Exasperated, Lena stood in the kitchen doorway with her hands on her hips.

“I will not be ignored Walter,” Lena said sternly.

Walter continued to disregard his mother as he stoked the fire in the fireplace. He got up and for a moment they faced each other.

“Then you should have thought about the consequences,” Walter replied angrily before walking past his mother and up the stairs to his room.

Lena turned and looked out at the hazy morning sky that belied the frigid air temperature outside. Although the house was warmed by the fire that Walter kept burning around the clock, Lena always felt cold; no doubt because she, like the rest of her family was suffering from malnutrition.

She walked over and propped herself against the old wooden countertop. Gazing at the world outside, Lena wished that Adolf was there to wrap his arms around her and tell her how much he loved her.

“Omigod, what have I done?” Lena whispered as she struggled with her guilt.

Regaining her composure, Lena knew that her personal feelings had to be put aside given the recent news that the Red Army had infiltrated the eastern sectors of Königsberg. Like most of the citizens who lived in and around the region, Lena feared the worst for herself and her family.

Reflecting on her husband Adolf’s last words before he stepped onto the waiting railcar filled with young patriots who were off to serve the German Fatherland, Lena’s heart filled with a false sense of hope.

“Lena my love, wait for me. I’ll be back,” she recalled Adolf saying pleadingly just before he turned and launched himself onto the wooden deck of the moving railcar.

She braced and shivered, unable to avoid thinking about the recent turn of events that had appeared so unexpectedly. The remorse that had been dogging her for days apprehended her in a torrent of guilt-ridden feelings. Desperately wanting to hang on to her love for her husband, Lena returned to her muse.

She could still see Adolf being pulled through the open doors of the railcar by some of the other patriots who were also leaving their loved ones behind. Lena’s heart swelled while at the same time years of buried grief and loss now pulled at her.

She remembered that a few months after Adolf left, a letter arrived describing his training and saying how proud he was to have been selected for the elite Munitions Division of the SS. He said he was sorry to have been separated from his family when the children were at such a young and formative age, but his patriotic duty to his country had been impossible to ignore. He asked Lena to ensure that no matter what happened, Walter would receive the education they had planned for him. He hardly mentioned Brigitte and Mila except to ask her to pass on his love. Lena was disappointed at how little thought he gave to the fate of his two young daughters.

Although she never heard from him again, she prayed that Adolf would survive the most dangerous operational role in the entire army; the relatively small vanguard munitions unit that was sent in advance of major military operations to take out enemy positions. Although the German Ministry of Propaganda, in conjunction with the War Office were able to publish deceptive reports about the invasion of Norway, Lena's worst fears were realized when the news of the sinking of the Blücher reached her through Adolf's sister Hannah who lived in Berlin. In a letter, she informed Lena that her good friend had inside information through the War Ministry that not only had Blücher been sunk during the first naval offensive of the war, but there had been a failed mission to neutralize the big guns on Fortress Island in Norway's Oslofjord. Hannah was worried that her brother may have been in the frontline munitions group that would have been assigned to blow up the big guns in advance of the naval operation. After months of waiting to hear anything about her husband, Lena finally heard from the War Ministry that her husband was missing in action and presumed dead.

Lena desperately missed her own elderly parents, Hans and Eva Münster who lived in Stuttgart where she was raised. They visited as often as possible during the years that followed the start of the war, but travel restrictions made it difficult for civilian Germans to venture outside their hometown cities and villages.

Lena's engineer father and her mother, who was a teacher, were highly educated and had exposed their daughter to the arts expecting that she would go on to a liberal education at a top university. They never understood what their daughter saw in her rough-hewn husband Adolf, a man who was so unlike the cultured young woman they had raised.

Lena and Adolf met when she travelled to Königsberg in 1926 in the hope that she would be accepted as a student at the university. Her academic plans were forever altered however, when she met Adolf Heinrich during a chance encounter on the street. She was smitten by his understated presence and humble charm as Adolf stood aside and held open the door, gesturing for her to enter a shop she had approached. He bowed his head as she walked through the open door and she in turn smiled and thanked him for his chivalry. A few minutes later, they quite literally bumped into each other as they turned the corner of one of the aisles, causing Lena to drop the articles she was holding in her arms.

"So sorry fraulein, I am such a clumsy oaf," Lena recalled Adolf saying as he apologized and leaned down to pick up her things from the floor.

It seemed like just yesterday as Lena saw his striking face in her mind and his powerfully built neck showing blotches of red that told of his embarrassment. He asked where she was from and they conversed briefly before going their separate ways. They encountered each other again at the cashier's table and laughed. When Lena said that their meeting seemed to be serendipity, Adolf looked perplexed and she would never forget his response.

"Yah, so lucky to be in the same place at the same time," he said with a big smile.

She in turn smiled at his simplicity and innocence.

They left the store together and talked as Adolf walked her to the hostel she was staying at.

“If you would be so kind, I would be honored to see you again,” Adolf said in a tentative tone of voice that confirmed his lack of confidence.

“Yes, come knock on my door at the hostel tomorrow. Door number 14,” Lena replied with a soft smile that lightened up her normally serious demeanor.

She recalled how Adolf nearly jumped for joy, his face lighting up at her favorable response. They said goodbye and she watched as the heavily built Prussian sauntered off down the street.

They were never apart from that day forward, soon becoming engaged. Lena never returned home to Stuttgart, much to the disapproval of her parents who did not want their bright 18-year-old daughter to become involved with the Prussian farmer she had described in a letter to them several weeks after meeting Adolf.

Lena’s mother and father were her only comfort after she received the news that Adolf was missing in action and she felt like the burden and loneliness of being a war widow was lifted off her shoulders whenever they would come to visit. After not hearing from her parents for many months following their last visit to Königsberg, Lena found out that both of them died in the November 1942 Allied bombing raid on Stuttgart. She was crushed with grief as now she had no one except her mother-in-law who she detested.

Lena’s strong dislike for Adolf’s mother resulted in a falling out when the matriarch of the Heinrich family tried aggressively to instruct Lena on how to raise the children. Helga Heinrich took a switch to Walter one day in an effort to discipline the 13-year-old boy who she said was missing the influence of a father. Lena was furious and a loud argument ensued in front of the children. After a terrible insult suggesting that Lena was not a fit mother and no longer deserving of the Heinrich name, Lena forbade her to set foot in her house again.

Lena’s thoughts were interrupted when Mila, her youngest daughter ran into the kitchen.

“Mother, Walter is in his room and he sounds very angry. He is banging his fists on his bed. Is there something wrong?” Mila asked.

“No darling. He will be fine. Just leave him alone,” Lena replied and she shoed her daughter back up the stairs.

Lena was too preoccupied to pay much attention to either her daughter’s concerns or Walter’s apparent tirade. She looked at the clock realizing she had been daydreaming for almost a half hour and the water she had boiled on the stove top for the dishes was now lukewarm. After placing a couple of oak logs into the old woodstove and stoking the embers, Lena placed another kettle of water on the stove top.

As she returned to her housework, Lena reflected on the long years of struggle caring for her three children since her husband had been gone. Up until recently, she had eked out a living working as a seamstress in a garment factory making uniforms for the fighting men of the German army. Without the sewing skills she learned from Adolf’s mother, who was a master seamstress, she would never have been able to provide for her young family. As much as she detested her mother-in-law, she was grateful for the skills she had learned from her.

After her exhausting workdays, she would return to her home in the outskirts of Königsberg to cook and take care of Walter and his two sisters. Although Eastern Prussia had not been significantly affected by the first four years of the European conflict, the Soviet invasion was now underway and Prussian Germans were making preparations to leave their homeland for fear of being overrun by the approaching Soviets. Enemy lines were pressing forward and there were reports of terrible atrocities circulating around Königsberg. Lena had heard that thousands of Prussian women were being raped and murdered by the advancing Soviet troops.

She wondered about the fate of her mother-in-law who had moved into her ailing sister's home just east of Königsberg in the fall of 1944. Lena had a strange feeling that she was no longer alive and that the only surviving member of the original Heinrich family was Adolf's sister, Hannah Heinrich. Hannah was a spinster who had left Königsberg when she turned 17. She and her mother did not see eye-to-eye and rather than endure her mother's oppressive personality, Hannah snuck away one evening and boarded the train to Berlin. She worked her way through secretarial school and got a position with the German government as a clerical worker. She never returned to Königsberg, not even for her brother Adolf's wedding. Although she and Lena wrote to each other often after Adolf's death, Hannah had never met any of Adolf's children. With no other connection to the outside world, Lena made a point of staying in contact with Hannah.

Without the meager income that Adolf had earned from the farm, it had been difficult for Lena to find money for Walter's education. The highly intelligent young man was able to speak fluent Russian, Polish, French and English as well as his native German. He was a brilliant student who the year before had entered the University of Königsberg, known in academic circles as the Albertina, the same university that Lena had planned to attend before meeting Walter's father in 1926. At age sixteen Walter had been recognized as a gifted student and fortunately for Lena Heinrich, most of his education to study languages was to be paid for by a scholarship funded by the university. Lena knew how much it would have meant to his late father to have Walter graduate from the esteemed campus that had made Immanuel Kant so famous and she was delighted that he took to his studies in earnest. However, the imminent end of the war in Europe had found Königsberg at the center of a political and strategic tug of war as to who would be awarded control of the year round ice-free seaport. The advancing Russian troops and bombing raids by the Allies made certain the end of the scholarly dreams that she and Adolf had for their brilliant son.

As the kettle began to boil, Lena picked it up and poured the hot water into the sink so she could finish up with the dishes that had been sitting in the lukewarm water. As she finished the dishes she stared out the window and tried to make out the steeple of the Steindamm Church where she and Adolf were married on May 28, 1927. There was heavy smoke rising from what Lena could only imagine were shattered ruins and rubble under which were buried hundreds if not thousands of the citizens of Königsberg.

Adolf had proposed to her just one month after they met and Lena, in love for the first time in her life, gladly accepted. Immediately after the ceremony the two newlyweds walked back down the aisle, meeting the eyes of friends and relatives who had attended their wedding. Twenty-year-old Adolf looked so handsome in the suit his mother had sown for him and she felt beautiful in the white gown her mother had passed down from her own wedding 25 years earlier. Lena was happy to have been accepted into the Heinrich family and she had tried hard to please Adolf's mother, whose imposing personality made her hard to like.

The wedding plans had almost been derailed when Lena's parents strongly objected to the marriage. However, after realizing that their headstrong daughter's mind could not be changed, the Münsters were gracious and accepted the fate their daughter had chosen. They even convinced Adolf to accept the diamond wedding ring that had been passed on by Lena's paternal grandmother when she died several years earlier. Lena was thrilled when Adolf had slipped on the ring she recognized as belonging to her beloved grandmother. Looking down at her left hand, Lena twirled the stunning diamond ring she had never taken off her finger since waving goodbye to Adolf years earlier. As Adolf's wife and the mother of his children the ring was a symbol of her marriage and was all that was left of the man she had loved so well.

"Oh, Adolf, my love, I am so sorry," Lena lamented as her head dropped to her chest.

Her mood shifted as she remembered the day she and Adolf married. People milled around and confetti was being thrown from every direction as she and her new husband walked out of the entrance to the oldest church in Königsberg. Adolf helped her up onto the open carriage that had been hooked up to a single white horse arranged for by her father. Lena would never forget what time it was when Adolf kissed her on the lips to a resounding chorus of cheers as they sat in the back of the departing carriage. The old clock in the steeple read ten minutes after one as she glanced up after opening her eyes from his kiss. She had never imagined such happiness as she felt on her wedding day.

The Reform Parish church became the spiritual foundation of the young couple's life. They were both devout worshippers who never missed a Sunday service and prayed each day in thanksgiving for the blessings that flowed into their lives. Having been given a tract of land by his father as a wedding gift, Adolf worked hard to provide what little he could in the early days of their marriage. Neither of them ever complained, even when the harvest on the farm suffered blight in the fall of their first year together. They accepted it as God's way of teaching them greater patience and gratitude for what they did have.

She recalled how Adolf was convinced that Walter had been conceived on the night that they consummated their union. He was a clumsy lover, but Lena was so enamored with the big boned Prussian that she overlooked his lack of finesse in the marriage bed. Contentment and joy filled Lena's heart in the months and days before Walter's birth.

The day she told Adolf that she was pregnant he fell to his knees and kissed her belly before standing up and taking her head into his huge hands. He looked at her as if he had been taken by a state of rapture, staring into her eyes as a single tear trickled down his face. Adolf was not an emotional man, at least not when it came to being tender, so Lena did not know how to respond. He told her that it was a sign from above that a baby was conceived on the night of their marriage and that it would be a boy who would make the Heinrich family very proud. Lena was pleased that her new husband looked forward to being a father, but it was almost as if he was obsessed with what he hoped would be the coming of his first born son.

It was the afternoon of February 29, 1928 when Lena went into labor. Although she was in the throes of childbirth, she was aware that Adolf was beside himself as he waited for the midwife to arrive at their farmhouse. The matronly old woman had been held up by the heavy snowfall that had come the day before and Adolf had been worried that he would have to help his wife in the delivery. He paced back and forth in the kitchen as Lena, in spite of a lengthy labor, almost effortlessly birthed the child. When the midwife walked out of the bedroom and told Adolf it was a boy, he nearly crushed the poor woman with his powerful arms as he embraced her in a show of gratitude.

When Adolf entered the bedroom and laid his eyes on the baby, Lena's heart filled with joy. She could see that her husband couldn't wait to hold his newborn son in his arms so she offered him up to Adolf. As he held the infant, Adolf smiled, first at the baby and then at his exhausted wife, before looking to the heavens.

"Walter," he uttered.

Lena recalled smiling at the hulking man she had married as he held the tiny seven pound, three ounce baby in his arms.

"We will name him Walter," Adolf said, looking directly into her eyes.

The fact that Walter Heinrich was born on a leap year further entrenched Adolf in his belief about his son's extraordinary place in the eyes of God. He was convinced that his son would someday be famous and elevate the Heinrich family from their humble status as farmers.

The first year of Walter's life was spent basking in the attention that a newborn baby brings. Walter was Lena's sole focus and she would spend hours holding and talking to him. Adolf was enamored with his infant son and would stand in the doorway of little Walter's room listening to his wife Lena sing Brahms Lullaby as she held him to her breast before putting him down for the night.

Things began to change however, in the months following Walter's first year. After working in the fields during what had been an unusually hot and grueling summer, Adolf would come home and find that dinner was often late, much to his annoyance. At first he was patient but one day he had finally had enough.

"Lena, the baby is not the only one who needs attention," Lena remembered Adolf saying sternly.

She responded immediately and realized that she had been ignoring her husband ever since the baby was born. From that day onward, wanting to be a good wife for the man she loved, she made a point of ensuring that Adolf's supper was on the table when he walked through the door at the end of each workday.

As the years unfolded, Lena would spend her days with little Walter, walking through the woods near the farmhouse that Adolf and his father had built just before their wedding. Holding hands, mother and son would watch the colorful red and black Peacock butterflies land and rest on the violet Knapweed flowers in the meadow that was enclosed by tall fragrant Austrian Pines.

Lena returned from her reverie for a moment and glanced out the window towards the stand of trees that surrounded the magical place where once she could escape from the drudgery of her day to day life. The meadow hidden in the midst of the tall pines was a haven of peace that now, in the throes of the growing military conflict, seemed like a distant dream. She thought about how much her relationship with Walter had changed from those days of wonder and innocence in the sanctuary of their secret meadow. There was now a growing divide between her and her son. Tears welled up in her eyes as feelings of terrible regret consumed her. Her eyes were drawn up the staircase to the open door that led into Walter's room.

Upstairs in his room, Walter ended his angry outburst as he threw a pillow down on the bed with a sigh of exasperation. He walked over to the window and saw smoke rising from several locations on the horizon. His simmering anger soon turned into fear as the sobering scene just a few miles away brought him back to the cold reality that he and the rest of his family were facing a deadly threat from a ruthless enemy. The Soviets were now pushing back the weak German forces just east of the city. A second line of troops and armored artillery were desperately defending the Königsberg Hauptbahnhof railway station, without which all travel out of Eastern Prussia would come to a halt.

As Walter stared out the window he thought about how simple life was before the August Allied bombing raids that devastated the city several miles to the south leaving it in ruins. Life was in the balance; each moment charged with the fear of death at the hands of the cruel Red Army said to be on the verge of taking control over what was once one of the most vibrant cities on the European sub-continent. Gunshots could be heard in close proximity to the farmhouse. Walter's heart sunk in his chest at the prospect of such a dim future, as the end of Königsberg drew near.

A picture of his Sunday school class caught Walter's eye as he lay on his bed with his hands behind his head. It hung beside the picture of Jesus that Priest Knoefler had given him when he left the parish for Berlin.

It reminded Walter that until the war broke out, the entire family would gather every Sunday at the church in Königsberg to take in the sermon for the week. Priest Helmut Knoefler was a spellbinding orator and could evoke a moving response in his parishioners during his often intense discourses. He was a kind and generous man who took a shine to Walter, often taking him aside and talking to him about his role in God's plan for salvation.

Walter felt comforted by the impressive and caring man who he saw as just one step away from God himself. It saddened Walter when Knoefler was asked by the church to move to Berlin and was replaced by a new priest. The new minister was a more serious and severe man that Walter did not like very much and avoided whenever possible.

Sunday evenings would be spent at his grandparents' home, down the road a mile or so from his parents' farmhouse. The lesson from the Sunday sermon would be discussed over dinner, sometimes becoming heated when his intellectually endowed mother would argue certain deeper philosophical points that were at odds with the literal interpretation of the bible. Walter often heard his mother refer to his grandparents as simple minded and over time her attitude towards the elder Heinrichs became a source of contention between Lena and Adolf. One particular argument was indelibly etched into young Walter's mind. It was after they had returned home from Sunday dinner at his grandparents when Walter overheard a heated quarrel.

"You shall not refer to my mother and father in such a disrespectful way," Walter remembered his father saying as he listened at the top of the stairs.

"Adolf, you do nothing to defend me when that nasty tongue of hers lashes out at me," his mother shot back.

"I won't become involved in your conflict with her, she is my mother," Adolf retorted.

"And I am your wife!" Lena said indignantly.

“You lord over them with your high and mighty talk,” Adolf stated angrily.

“They are naive peasants who take everything said in the bible literally. They should get a dictionary and look up the meaning of allegory and metaphor,” Lena replied sarcastically.

“You’re a bitch, you know that?” Adolf spat back.

Walter heard a slap and glanced around the stair rail to see his father gripping both of his mother’s hands. His teeth were bared and Walter’s heart was beating madly in his chest. Both of his parents turned and looked up at Walter. His father let go of his mother’s arms before coming to the bottom of the stairs.

“To bed with you boy before I take a strap to you,” his father said loudly with a wave of his hand.

“Leave him alone you brute,” Walter heard his mother say as he stood up and gripped the railing.

Knowing better than to disobey his father Walter turned and ran into his room shutting the door behind him.

Indoctrinated by the Heinrich family’s fervent adherence to the teachings of Reformed Lutheran Christianity, Walter never questioned the bible like his mother did. During an overnight stay with his grandparents he was shown a picture of a fearsome red devil with an arrowhead tail and a pitchfork in his right hand. Helga Heinrich told him that if he was bad, the devil would come and punish him. Walter had nightmares for months afterwards and often got up in the night to crawl into bed with his parents.

As Walter grew older, he was chosen as one of the youngsters who would take around the collection plate at the Sunday service. As an eight-year-old boy he had no idea about tithing or how the money he collected was distributed. He assumed that the money was kept somewhere in the church and that God would tell the priest how it was to be used. He was surprised to learn in later years that the priest that replaced Helmut Knoefler lived in an opulent house in Königsberg and drove an expensive Mercedes Benz automobile. However he never doubted that the priest was God’s agent on earth and that he had powers that went beyond ordinary men like his father.

As he mused on his religious upbringing, Walter was suddenly snapped back to reality by a loud blast followed by machine gun fire. Alarmed, he jumped to his feet and ran over to the bedroom window. A German tank, in the distance, was traveling at high speed across a snow covered field.

The first close exchange of gunfire brought the reality of war to the doorstep of the Heinrich household. Walter looked out the open door to his bedroom and heard the sound of his mother putting away dishes in the kitchen cupboards. A moment of regret filled Walter’s chest and he thought about forgiving his mother for what she had done.