AN EXCERPT from SURVIVING HITLER AND STALIN:

A WOMAN'S JOURNEY

By Margot Richens

Chapter 91: *New Work, and New Possibilities*

I was glad when, after a few lonely weeks, a friend offered me an opportunity to accompany him to Hemer, a small town located in the province of Westfalia. It seemed to be the chance I had been waiting for, and I gladly accepted. Fritz was his name, and he was going to visit his parents who lived in Hemer. He was looking for a travel companion and I would have an opportunity to check out the employment market in Hemer and area.

The weather was somewhat inclement the day we began our seven-hour trip, and the heater in his old Volkswagen didn't work, leaving us chilled to the bone. Fritz's parents were kind enough to put me up for a few days, and his relatives showed me around the pretty little town, which had been completely spared from the bombings. I had caught a cold in the drafty vehicle and when I began to feel quite ill, Fritz took me to their family doctor who prescribed a suitable remedy. During the consultation Dr. Schulz and I became engaged in a conversation, in which I explained that I was looking for employment. My lucky star was shining again; he promptly offered me a temporary position as his assistant. He told me that in order to save money, he usually hired low paid apprentices. Dr. Schulz had a girl lined up for the following summer, when she would graduate from high school. As fate would have it, another young woman had just resigned from this job, and it looked as if suddenly everything was falling into place for me. I gladly accepted the position.

Since Dr. Schulz needed me immediately, I decided I would stay in Hemer and

have Erica send me my clothes. I suggested that she come to Hemer to look for employment, but she declined. It seemed she was happy at her new job on the Island.

It turned out that lodging in the town of Hemer was as scarce as everywhere else in Germany. I began to fear that I would have to abandon my plans, and the new job, but then, at the last moment, Fritz managed to get me a room at one of his friend's homes. My new landlady's name was Elli, her husband's name was Karl, and they had two teen-aged children of which the oldest one had to give me her room. The rent I paid was to improve their family's finances. Temporary jobs, temporary lodgings—it was a temporary life without any security. I enjoyed living with Elli, who was a friendly cheerful person, but Karl was a misery gut and difficult to be around. I tried to avoid him as best I could.

Right from the start I found the job with Dr. Schulz to be very challenging, and I quickly developed a keen interest in all things medical. It didn't take long and I was able to do simple blood and urine tests, as well as reception work.

Dr. Schulz was equally liked and feared by his patients, and he could become quite annoyed with them for not following his directions to a tee. Some asked me how I could stand working for such a grouch, but I had soon discovered that he was much kinder than he would want anyone to know. Our office was very busy, and since we were located next to a seniors' home, we treated plenty of elderly citizens. There were open sores on legs to be bandaged, boils to be drained, and minor operations performed right in our surgery. At that time, a general practitioner was just that; he looked after a myriad of diseases and injuries.

In short, I enjoyed working for Dr. Schulz, and he appreciated me. It was not long before I was in a position of trust, being allowed to write some simple repeat prescriptions during his absence, and to give some injections. A few months later, and

to my amazement, I was to discover that this small town practitioner I worked for had much greater aspirations. He confided in me that he would be treating patients with some new, very controversial injections of embryonic animal cells. They were marketed as “fresh cells,” and Dr. Schulz would be the first physician in West Germany to use this method. I was sworn to silence about this unconventional treatment.

We received the cells from Switzerland, where their manufacturer, a well-known scientist by the name of Professor Niehans, had already become rich and notorious. The Professor had opened a spa where he treated the wealthy and famous with desiccated, reconstituted sheep and calf glands. It was believed that these injections would improve their sex drive, increase glandular function, and restore their youthful looks. In our office, Dr. Schulz used these injections to treat problems such as under active thyroid glands, insufficient ovarian function, and impotence. Being very experimental, these injections were not covered by public health care and cost the recipients an exorbitant amount of money.

If at first I had believed that this was simply a “get rich quick” scheme by the doctor, I had to change my mind when he began to treat a member of his own family with one of these substances. At times the injections seemed to be moderately successful, but this was very difficult to ascertain. Was it the placebo effect when the parents of a slightly mentally challenged girl saw an improvement in her? There were other cases that showed a minor change for the better for a brief period of time. When my six months of employment were up and I had to move on, I regretted that I was no longer able to follow these experimental treatments. The hype about these injections continued for a few years, then suddenly ceased. Even today I still believe that the injections had some validity for a few people, if only briefly. Scientists would discover years later that foreign tissues like these would eventually be rejected by the immune

system and rendered useless.

I enjoyed living in Hemer and soon began to explore the area, often with Dieter, my landlady's 12-year-old son. The province of Westfalia was very attractive, with gentle hills, patches of forest, and a small lake nearby. Not too far away there was a small winter resort. This region seemed to offer a little of all pleasurable activities. The nearest larger City was Iserlohn, an old garrison town. Partially bombed, it still showed evidence of interesting medieval architecture. I would have liked to have a close adult friend to enjoy and explore my new surroundings, but found myself rather lonely instead. Television was not yet available and reading material was scarce. I was happy when my landlady invited me out to meet some of their friends. Elli and her husband had recently made the acquaintance of some Canadians who were stationed close to Hemer as members of the occupation forces.

"Come on Margot," Elli urged, "we are going to the Army Camp for a pre-Christmas Party, you are invited, too. It's time that you get out of the house." We took the streetcar to the camp at the nearby village of Deilinghofen, where a guard directed us to the Sergeant's Mess. Here I met Elli and Karl's new friend, Bob, who then introduced us to other Canadian soldiers and some of their families. Bob's wife and children were in Britain at the time but we would meet them later.

It was humorous to see us try to communicate with the Canadians, but somehow we managed to get the most important facts across, by using gestures along with our few words of English. Those soldiers who were here in Germany without their families were especially happy to make friends with the locals. After this initial visit we were invited to the camp more often, and we usually had a very enjoyable time.

Right after Christmas, which despite Elli's kindness, was plagued by homesickness, we once again attended an afternoon get together at the 2nd RCHA's

Sergeant's Mess. Besides Bob, a few other lonely soldiers who were eager to make friends joined us at our table. One of them named Red Richens was introduced to me, and it would become one of those predestined moments that suddenly and completely alters the course of our lives.

Since Red sat next to me, we attempted a conversation, which wasn't easy, since neither of us spoke the other's language. But we made do, and became friends. Bob spoke a little German and when his wife Adrienne joined him a few weeks later she, too, was able to translate. Adrienne and I became good friends. She was from Belgium and had been one of the unfortunates who were, at the age of fourteen, forced into slave labour in Germany. Here she learned to speak the language. Adrienne had met and married Bob right after the war, and she had already lived in Canada for a few years. The couple had two boys. It wasn't until much later that I discovered that their marriage was not a happy one, mostly because of Bob's drinking and womanizing.

Even though I enjoyed the invitations to the army camp and found it interesting to meet people from overseas, at first I found Red and some of the other Canadians a little crude and rather uninhibited. Soon, however, I would envy them at least some of these characteristics. In comparison, we Germans definitely were too rigid and straight-laced, and it seemed that I had forgotten how to laugh during these last few very trying years of my life. I felt it was time for me to loosen up a little.

Red revelled in playing the clown at all their social gatherings and most of the people liked him for his exuberance. His behaviour, which at first I found objectionable, became amusing to me, as I too began to enjoy his antics. It also appeared that Red liked children, which I thought was a very desirable trait; he gave little visitors horsey rides on his back. Surely he must miss his own two children very

much. He also looked after Joe the Dachshund, who was the mascot of the regiment, which further endeared him to me.

Chapter 92: *There Are None So Blind*

Red increasingly seemed to enjoy my company, and he began to invite me to the camp by myself or visited me at Elli's place. Soon I was beginning to think that it was rather nice to have such a cheerful friend. Only one thing concerned me as time went on: Red seemed to drink quite a lot. But since none in my family had drunk more than the occasional beer or liqueur, I really didn't know how much was too much. Elli and Karl, as well as most of the people at the Sergeant's Mess, drank and became inebriated on almost all of our visits there. After a while it seemed that I was on an entirely different wavelength from the others, and I began to have a few drinks myself in order not to appear conceited and a spoilsport. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" I thought. Alcohol, however, never did agree with me very well, and on most of these occasions I ended up with a splitting headache.

Because of the language barrier, there would be quite a few misunderstandings between Red and me. For the first few months of our friendship I was under the impression that Red was a widower. It was only with the help of my friend Adrienne that I finally began to understand about his family situation in Canada. It seemed that Red had been married to an English girl whom he had met during the war while stationed in Britain. They had two children together. Ann was the restless type, and she apparently had an affair with another man while Red was in Korea. This liaison resulted in a pregnancy, and one night shortly after Red had returned from his tour of duty, his wife just disappeared without an explanation. It wasn't until the following day that she phoned to say that she had moved in with her boyfriend and would not return, and that she was not prepared to take their two children.

Much later I would find out about the circumstances that led up to all of this, and that Red was not entirely without fault. By now I considered myself in love with

Red, and throwing all caution to the wind, I proceeded to get involved deeper in this relationship. May it also be said that I was a sentimental fool and a bleeding heart, believing that a nice home and a loving companion would turn this unruly man into a good father and husband. When Red asked me to marry him, I accepted. Soon I began to look forward to living with him in Canada, which was a big step for me since earlier I had refused to go to Britain because it was across the channel and too far from home. I also happily agreed to become a stepmother to his two children.

I found myself at a crossroad one more time when Dr. Schulz had a change of heart and offered me a permanent position. “Margot,” he said, “I am willing to give you a substantial raise in salary, if you agree to stay in my employ. I have found that having an older and more experienced person as my assistant would make this well worthwhile. Please stay.” Then he pointed out the dangers of marrying a man not yet well known to me, and moving to a strange country. But I followed my heart instead of my head and could not be swayed. Dr. Schulz, as a going away gift, gave me a train ticket to Magdeburg, which allowed me to see my family before I left for Canada. In the meantime, I accepted a job at the army camp, serving meals at the Sergeant’s Mess, which allowed me to be close to Red, as well as giving me an opportunity to improve my English.

As I worked, I became acquainted with some of the officers and clergy, and they found out that I was engaged to Sergeant Richens. Obviously he was well known to them. I was shocked when the mess manager relayed a message to me from Father McGibbon, the regimental priest, advising me not to marry this man, as he would not make a good husband. Well, the gall of him to make such a statement… I fumed. I am not even a Catholic, so this is none of his business. Looking after hundreds of men, the Padre undoubtedly was a good judge of character and I am sure that he had

meant well. But foolish me, I did not pay heed to his and other similar warnings. By this time the signs of incompatibility should have been clearly visible to me, but I chose to ignore them. For instance, I found myself unsuccessful in trying to persuade Red to go on outings. Here he was, in a historically rich country, with a chance to learn more about its interesting features, and yet he showed no desire to explore any of them with me. I was eager to show him at least the area around Hemer—the ice age rock formations, stone age cairns, monuments, and the museums which were waiting to provide entertainment and education. Red wanted none of it. Unfortunately, I believed him when he assured me that he was interested in all of these venues and that he would be glad to join me at some later date.

"I don't feel comfortable in Germany, not speaking the language," he explained, "but once we are in Canada we will go to the theatre and ballet if you wish and on outings with our children." The pattern of broken promises had begun, which was to continue throughout our married life. "Later dear, later, some other time," became the standard answer to most of my future requests.

Whenever we met for a date we invariably ended up at the Sergeant's Mess. The reason, I later discovered, was that the drinks there cost only a fraction of their normal price, and that the men had credit at the bar. This was unfortunate, because it encouraged many of them to drink excessively. I also noticed that Red always seemed broke, and that he never gave me even the smallest gift. This, he explained, was because of the heavy obligations he had for the maintenance of his children, who were being looked after by his parents. I was never a materialistic person, so I let it go, even though I noticed that there was always money available for alcohol.

I couldn't help being a little hurt when I met some other German girls who were also engaged to Canadian soldiers, and saw how much nicer they were treated by their

prospective husbands. One of them, a friend named Claire, invited us to her wedding. It was a big affair that took place at the army camp. I was impressed to see all the men in their blue dress uniforms lined up in front of the chapel, their raised swords forming an archway for the new couple. My wedding would be nothing even remotely like it.

Since the Army camp and my new place of employment were too far away from my lodgings at Ellis' place, I was happy to find a room within walking distance. Mrs. Pinn, the landlady, was a kind widow who became a dear friend during my short stay. All Red and I could do now was to wait for the military's permission for our marriage. To accomplish this, it became necessary for me to travel to Hanover and the Canadian Army Headquarters for a lengthy interview and a medical examination. Once again, my East German background was under scrutiny, the army fearing the possibility of espionage attempts. However, I assured the investigator that my initials were the only things I had in common with Mata Hari!

It seemed that the fine free meals I received at the Sergeant's Mess were good for me, for the first time in my life I put on weight. While working there, one experience clearly stands out in my mind, too frightening to be forgotten. Every day after we had served dinner, the other staff members and I would take our meals seated at our usual table near the open kitchen door. "Oh, look at these clouds," someone remarked on this day, "I think there is a terrible storm brewing." When I looked up, the sky was almost pitch black, and the loud thunderclaps were rapidly come closer. Feeling safe in this building, we kept on eating and talking until suddenly a hellish inferno broke loose.

A brilliant streak of fire zigzagged through the room, bouncing off the walls and missing us by inches… partially blinding us. It was accompanied by a whoosh of hot

air, the pungent odour of ozone, and an ear-splitting concussion. As one, we all let out a scream and jumped up, shaking with fear and not really grasping what had happened. When we carefully peeked around the corner into the kitchen, in an effort to determine the source of the unbelievable noise, we found the place cluttered with pots, pans, and utensils and the huge industrial size stove was dislodged from its base. There was a gaping hole in the roof where the chimney used to be.

The cooks had been eating with us and, by an incredible stroke of luck, none were in the kitchen when lightning struck the chimney, stove, and nearby appliances. If this had happened fifteen minutes earlier, there would have been casualties. I am glad to say that my Grandma's prediction of "the eater strike dead" had been proven wrong. We all had been in the process of having our dinner but none was hurt.

Shortly after this event, lightning also struck my parents' apartment, damaging all the electrical appliances and causing a small fire. These incidents left me more than a little apprehensive during thunderstorms, and the uneasiness remains with me to this day.

Red's friend's wives had asked repeatedly to see my engagement ring, and I had to tell them that I had not as yet received one. It seemed that expensive diamonds were of great importance to Canadian brides to be. Up until then, this hadn't mattered to me. It was only when these inquiries became a source of embarrassment that I persuaded Red to buy me a twenty dollar wedding band. He promised that he would give me a diamond ring after our return to Canada. It, too, would never materialize. Meanwhile, it was time to go home to Magdeburg to say goodbye to my family. I was ecstatic to see them again, but at the same time, I wished that Red would be able to come along so they could meet him.

Chapter 93: *Hello and Farewell*

Excitement, excitement, I am going home! More than five years had gone by since my hasty departure from East Germany, and during this time, homesickness had been my steady companion. My dear Mother and I had exchanged letters weekly, but since these were censored, we had to be careful not to touch on political matters. A year or two earlier I would not have dared to re-enter the DDR, but recently a brief wave of forgiveness provided visitor permits to some of the politically harmless. I was aware that there was still a certain risk involved, but I simply could not start my new life in Canada without putting my arms once more around those who meant so much to me.

As mentioned before, the DDR, as East Germany was now called, was politically consolidated with the Soviet Union as an authoritarian state under the leadership of the SED party and its leader, Walter Ulbricht. Ulbricht was the puppet, while Stalin pulled the strings. Seventy-five percent of all Industry was now state owned, and most other private enterprises and agricultural holdings had been confiscated and were taken over by the state. Things should have been looking up but, instead, unrealistic demands, high production quotas, and low wages made life very stressful for the East German workers. Worst of all, there was still a shortage of food and consumer goods, all this resulting in the flight of about 37,000 people in any given month. This mass exodus resulted in a great labour shortage, the remaining downtrodden and hungry workers had to pick up the slack. Also, of course, the high rate of arrests of dissidents meant nobody dared to voice their discontent.

It was on June 17, 1953, that a few brave men would finally rise up to break this pattern of oppression and fear, followed by thousands of angry workers in every major industrial city. The regime was in a state of shock and disbelief, and Ulbricht,

fearing for his job, called on the Russians for help. Because of the Cold War, thousands of Soviet soldiers and weapons were already stationed in the East bloc countries; therefore, it was easy to send Russian troops and tanks to the scene of the as yet peaceful demonstrations. Seeing the tanks arrive, their weapons aimed at them, the demonstrators became terrified, but then their entire long suppressed rage and furore took over. Desperate citizens armed themselves with shovels, axes, and rocks, and tried to block the roads. While chanting slogans with their demands for a better life, their ranks were suddenly sprayed by machine-gun bullets when the Russians opened fire. Within minutes, hundreds were killed or wounded, and the streets echoed with the screams and curses of the scrambling survivors.

This one lone attempt to gain freedom of speech and other democratic rights cost numerous lives in every city and, for the remainder of this regime, there would be no further attempts. It further took the wind out of the rebels' sails when the suspected instigators of this uprising were strung up on street lanterns and left dangling there for days for all to see. The message was unmistakable!

My mother told me later about their feelings of anger and fear on this 17th day of June, when the indomitable spirit of a people, straining under the iron fists of their oppressors, had made them courageously defend their rights, with rocks—against tanks. Mama also mentioned that, after the incident, the population was each given a can of sardines, 50 grams of coffee, and some sweets—bribes to soothe the savage beast. Doesn't this sound familiar?

Fearing a recurrence of these events, the state allowed some family visitors from the West. I was lucky, and became one of them. No hitchhiking this time; instead, I went by train. As expected, the border crossing was an intimidating experience and I almost felt like going back to the West, where I was safe.

The DDR Police searched every nook and cranny of our train, and I was ordered into an office where I had to answer many ticklish questions. After some phone calls to places unknown, and the consultation of a huge ledger, I was allowed to enter the "Workers' Paradise."

Finally I was in my parents' arms and back at our ugly-lovely place on Bismarck Street. In spite of my visa, I kept a low profile and I definitely had to refrain from discussing politics and making comparisons of our two Germanys. Most of all, no one other than my family was allowed to know about my engagement to a member of the Canadian Army. My little sister had grown into a string bean, and in spite of my parcels, she looked very undernourished. But it was just so nice to hold her scrawny little body close to my heart again. I had missed them all so very much.

My little Oma Haacke was also excited to see me again, and a trip to Oschersleben brought all of us much joy. Sadly, Aunt Gertie had passed away and my Grandmother Mia was in the hospital, but the rest of the family was there to welcome me. Everyone was apprehensive about my impending marriage and immigration—my venture into an unknown future. Other than my Opa Haacke during the depression years, I was and always remained the only family member who dared to break away from home and convention.

I set everyone's heart at ease when I told them that Red had promised to let me go home to visit at least once every second year. Meanwhile, I missed Red, and I was sorry not to be able to correspond with him during my stay in Magdeburg. It was very sad that my parents weren't able to be present at my wedding, and that they hadn't even been able to meet my future husband.

In the meantime, like a little girl lost, I wandered around the streets of my hometown trying to find a semblance of the city of my childhood. It was easy to

become disoriented; the orderly grid of streets had been obstructed by tons of rubble. Even a city map would have been of little help since many of the streets were still blocked. In the city centre, a feeble attempt to ready the area for future apartments was in progress. Suddenly, my attention was drawn to a ladder leading underground.

The nearby construction workers explained that they had unearthed a city beneath our present city, with some human dwellings that were perhaps from the days of the Romans. Climbing down the ladder, I must say that I was very intrigued. There were stone living quarters with hearths, as well as stables with iron rings to tie up animals. Some smaller artifacts had already been moved to a local museum. Quite overwhelmed, I sat for a while trying to envision the life and activities of these, our forefathers. After a few minutes, the workers told me of other and much more disturbing findings.

Right after the war, hoping to prevent disease, the whole inner city area north of the market and city hall was bulldozed down. These had been the domiciles of the poor, little century old houses that provided no shelter from the bombs. It was known that the bodies of thousands of Magdeburgers were underneath these masses of rubble. Still, it came as a shock when the construction crews working to clear the area came upon cellar after cellar containing mummified human remains.

Their descriptions were like scenes from a horror movie, and they talked of unintentionally exhuming whole families. It was especially upsetting when they entered such places to find mothers, huddling close to their children, trying to give them comfort in their hour of death, or couples in a last embrace. Since these tombs had been airtight, the bodies were often well preserved and looked almost life-like. It wasn't until air entered the room, or someone tried to move a body, that the whole group collapsed into a heap of dust and bones. It looked as if the legacies of Hitler's

war would be with us forever and ever.

But on a lighter note, my stay with the family was a happy one. However, had I been able to see into the future, I would have changed course right then and there. Oblivious to what was to come, I went full steam ahead, into the unknown territories of marriage and motherhood. Parting was painful for all of us, and only the anticipation of a happy married life and plenty of visits made it bearable for me. It was a blessing to be unaware that, for my beloved mother and me, it would be a last good-bye.

Chapter 94: *The Wedding*

I was happy to see my love again, but disappointed that our marriage permit still hadn't arrived. It was beginning to look as if I may be left behind, not at the altar, but at the dock. But then, about a month before our departure date, the required papers arrived. This meant setting a date at the Hemer City Hall and making arrangements for an interpreter. Just when we believed we had met all the necessary requirements, we came upon another stumbling block. Now it seems that fate was giving me one last opportunity to change my mind, Red was unable to produce the required divorce certificate. We were floored! There was simply not enough time left to have Red's parents find and send these papers. Also, for the first time, Red confided that his parents were not in favour of our marriage and therefore were not expected to expedite the needed document. What now? It was beginning to look as if all of these problems were designed to prevent our impending union.

It was the interpreter who came up with the solution. He suggested that we go to the next town and have Red claim single status on the application, and this is exactly what we did. Other than my landlady, no one knew about our wedding date of November 9, 1955. In retrospect, this wedding was an indication of what our future married life would be like: frugal and unpretentious.

The groom arrived wearing his everyday battle dress, without as much as a single flower for his bride to be. The interpreter looked at us in disbelief when Red refused to hire a taxi and, instead, had us take the streetcar to Iserlohn. Because of the language barrier, the ceremony—having every word repeated by the translator—totally lacked feeling. At the end I was more confused and exhausted than elated. On this supposedly most special day of my life, I didn't feel special at all. Only dear Mrs. Pinn tried to give the day a festive air when she congratulated us at our return home

with a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of champagne. It was good that the next two weeks would keep me occupied with packing and saying my good-byes, which left me little time to reflect on my feelings of disappointment.

Meanwhile, I had been introduced to Waltraud and Mike. Waltraud was a girl from Hemer who had just recently gotten married to Mike, a corporal in Red's regiment. I was pleased to hear that they would be sailing on the same ship, with Winnipeg as their destination.

The time had come! Slowly the train came chugging into the Iserlohn station. After we boarded, Red and I stood by the window to wave good-bye to Elli and Carl, who had come to see us off. I was struggling to keep my composure. When the army band began to play: "Muss I Denn..." (Do I Have to Leave my Little Town?), a favourite German farewell song, the tears began to flow. For a brief moment I panicked, poised to jump from the train, thinking: What am I doing? I caught myself when Red pulled me away from the window to reassure me that this would not be good-bye forever. He already had promised me frequent visits to Germany, and I was assured that the Army would send us back to Germany in two years at the latest. For some reason, I don't remember anything about the train trip to Rotterdam, our point of departure. Perhaps my emotional upheaval impaired my memory.

Chapter 95: *Bon Voyage*

The next thing I knew there she was, the *Empress of Australia*, the ocean liner that would carry us across the Atlantic to Canada. To a landlubber like myself, she seemed huge and impressive—or is it "Empressive"?—and I thought that she looked solid and trustworthy. After all the immigration formalities were taken care of, we were allowed to step aboard her majesty. As always, ranks were of importance in the Armed Forces. The lower ranks and their families had to bunk in the clean but somewhat stuffy inner belly of the *Empress*, where they were subjected to noise and vibrations from the engine rooms.

Since Red was a sergeant, we were housed in the comfortable cabins of the middle deck, each one equipped with a bull's eye porthole for fresh air and an ocean view. The privileged high echelons of officers were assigned staterooms on the upper deck. As soon as we had taken possession of our cabin we went back on deck to watch the seamen prepare for the launch. Crewmembers were hustling and bustling, to and fro, as huge crates were being loaded onto the ship. Soldiers and their families had taken advantage of the favourable monetary exchange rates and had purchased a lot of goods they would have been unable to afford in Canada. Some had even brought along an automobile.

After several hours of observing these interesting activities and getting acquainted with some of the neatly uniformed and well-mannered personnel, the orders to sail were given. For some time already, the ship had been shuddering and throbbing as the engines were started. Now the shrill sound of bells was assaulting our ears, occasionally accompanied by foghorns that let out their hollow forlorn wail. This time it was a Dutch band that bid us farewell, while Waltraud and I stood at the railing, weeping. It would, however, take some time for us to fully realize that, for the

sake of love, we had left behind forever a wealth of culture, tradition, and family ties.

"Anchors aweigh!" Slowly, and to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" and shouts of "Bon voyage," the *Empress of Australia* left the harbour. The waving figures on the pier became smaller and smaller, and were eventually swallowed up by the fog.

Where oh where is the "ocean blue" we had heard so much about? As far as the eye could see, grey skies and leaden waters surrounded us. It was hard to distinguish the horizon. Worse, less than an hour into our voyage, we had already needed to try out our sea legs. The English Channel was living up to its bad reputation. Choppy seas caused many of our fellow passengers to succumb to seasickness right then and there, and many of these unfortunates never recovered until we reached Canada and solid ground again. Having heard plenty about this scourge of mariners, I had purchased some newly discovered and much hailed anti-nausea pills. Fortified with these I remained unaffected. Also I was advised that keeping one's stomach full would prevent seasickness.

While many weakened and green-faced passengers were leaning over the railings and feeding the fishes, I enjoyed myself, indulging in the wonderful cuisine so generously provided. Four times a day the melodic sound of a gong would call us to the elegant wood panelled dining room. Here, scrumptious delicacies were awaiting those of us who were still able to enjoy them. Stewards in immaculate starched white jackets were at our every beck and call and, after just recently escaping the post-war German bluntness, I felt like royalty. Red was doing very well, too, and it seemed that for him, alcoholic beverages served as a cure for motion sickness. My method, however, caused me to gain almost ten pounds on this trip.

During the summer months, such a voyage would have been lovely, sunbathing on deck, swimming in the pool, and playing shuffleboard. But in November the

everlasting dark clouds and the stormy weather did little to encourage any fresh air activities. After a few days of boredom, having a cocktail before dinner and a few more to aid the digestion helped to break the monotony. Everyone was pleased when at night we were shown some movies. Of course, the screening had to be celebrated with plenty of alcoholic beverages and I doubt that my husband remembered much of the movies or the trip. Being with him for the first time around the clock made me realize just how much he drank. But again, he had excuses, such as boredom, and I was only too willing to accept them. I also noticed that Mike drank very little in comparison.

More than halfway into our voyage we were to be treated to one of Mother Nature's spectacular shows. Suddenly one evening, there was a big commotion, with everyone dashing to the ship's starboard side. We weren't able to determine what was going on, until a hush fell over the crowd and our vessel silently passed a large dark mass, gliding through the dense fog in the not too far distance. An iceberg, people whispered, an iceberg. Aaah! Most of us felt deeply humbled by this experience, as we were once again reminded of our insignificance.

During our last days on board ship, and after days of fairly smooth sailing, we encountered our first nasty storm. It became quite frightening; twenty-foot high waves pounded our vessel relentlessly, tossing our boat about like a nutshell. This time even good sailors like me came pretty close to losing their supper. The good old *Empress* was heaving up and down and making terrible creaking sounds as if ready to snap into pieces. While my husband, anaesthetised by alcohol, snored away, I spent a sleepless night listening to these ominous noises, clutching a life jacket to my chest and feeling lonely.

After this latest experience, we were all only too happy to hear the cry "Land ahoy!" from the bridge. It wasn't long and we entered the St. Lawrence Seaway, on our

way to Quebec City, where we were provided with landing papers. We were also informed that ours would be the last ship to come this far this winter, and it was easy to see why; we observed the huge icebreaker ahead, working hard to push massive ice floes out of our way. Meanwhile, wrapped in our winter coats and scarves, Waltraud and I watched excitedly for signs of civilized life along the shores of the St. Lawrence River. To our amazement, all we saw was snow, snow, and more snow. I was getting alarmed. “Where are the houses, the villages and the people,” I asked my husband.

“Just wait,” he replied, “Montreal is a big, busy city and we’ll soon be there.” In astonishment, we continued to watch the deserted shoreline and were delighted when we finally spotted a church steeple, and later, a few farmhouses, their lights shining like welcoming beacons into the winter’s night.

Chapter 96: *Arrival to a New Home*

Before disembarking we bid farewell to the friendly staff of the *Empress*, whose service had been exemplary. I was shocked to hear that this had been our vessel's last trans-Atlantic trip. She was old, they said, and no longer considered seaworthy. She had been sold to Italy, to serve as a pleasure ship along the Adriatic coastline. It seemed the old English gal would be enjoying a well-deserved retirement, but I was kind of glad that I had not known of this any earlier, or I undoubtedly would have spent those last stormy nights at sea in a lifeboat, ready to abandon ship.

Yes, Montreal had people, a lot of them, milling around the busy railway station where we had to spend several hours awaiting the train to Winnipeg. There was shouting and chatting all around us as busy travellers loaded the Black porters down with piles of luggage. Waltraud and I had barely mustered a few words of English, when suddenly we were surrounded by yet another foreign language. We had forgotten that this was French Canada. I was happy when I found out that Waltraud and Mike were able to share our coach. Most members of the 2nd RCHA, my husband's regiment, were going to be stationed in Winnipeg, and travelled on this train. For me it was another first: to sleep in a railway car and in a berth.

It was interesting to watch the courteous porter push a button here and move a lever there, and turn our seats into two comfortable beds. But by the time I finally got used to the click, click, click, of the wheels and the whistles, bells, and vibrations, we were just about in Winnipeg. My husband, however, slept very well, having imbibed heartily from the constant supply of drinks, offered to us at a reduced price. "Dinner in the diner; nothing could be finer," were lyrics from the song "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and came immediately to mind while we enjoyed delicious meals in the dining car.

For three long days, all through Ontario and parts of Manitoba, signs of civilization rarely interrupted the vast white landscape. It was truly fascinating, but also a little frightening to Waltraud and me, who had never travelled such distances before, or encountered so much emptiness. By now, our eyes were hurting from looking at this blanket of white, which seemed to enshroud this whole country of Canada. “In two hours we’ll arrive in Winnipeg,” the porter announced, “so please collect all your belongings.”

Now that we finally neared our destination, I became a little nervous about meeting Red’s family and most of all his children. What if they didn’t like me? Waltraud had no such concerns, as Mike had no relatives in Winnipeg. From the Atlantic coast and all the way to Winnipeg we had not seen one patch of brown earth or even a little speck of grass. Even more snow, and a temperature of 30 degrees Celsius below, would now receive us. I was only wearing little leather pumps and a light wool coat when I stepped out of the warm train onto the unprotected platform.

Whoosh, an icy wind instantly numbed my face when we rushed down the steps to the street, looking for a taxi. Suddenly we found ourselves surrounded by a group of excited people, Red’s family. His parents, his children, and two of his sisters made up the receiving line, and they certainly seemed very happy to see him. When it was my turn, I wished that I could have mustered more than a timid “Hello, how do you do?” Red’s two children, David and Jose, stood shyly aside during the welcoming ceremony. They had hardly seen their father over the last few years and they were naturally apprehensive of me, their new stepmother. It was twelve o’clock at night when the taxi drove us through the snowy abandoned streets of Winnipeg, to the army’s Personnel Married Quarters (PMQs), and my future home on Ubique Crescent.

After several nights of restless sleep on the train, Red and I were ready to fall

into bed. “Where are the feather duvets,” I inquired? “We don’t need them here,” Red replied and pointed to the thermostat on the wall. Like magic, with just the flick of a finger one could turn the dial and pronto: heat would come streaming out of the registers on the floor. I was assured that our house would always be nice and cosy, no matter what the temperature outside.

Still, for some time, I would miss the mountain of feathers that had covered me all of my life. It had provided not only warmth, but also an added feeling of security and insulation from the world, which the flimsy wool blanket simply couldn’t supply. But then, I now had a loving husband who would provide the physical and emotional sustenance I had hungered for, for so long. Contentedly, I closed my eyes.