

SUNSETS IN THE PUDDLES

The pouring rain beat heavily against the church office window as I tried to finish up the last of my sermon for the coming Sunday. I took a paper towel and wiped clear the foggy window to see what the overall sky looked like. The horizontal rain and bent over small trees told me I should find additional inside work to do. And so, I did. About an hour later, the storm subsided, and I closed the office to head home. Walking outside, I saw that the dark, menacing clouds now appeared to be to the east, maybe even over Profitville/Jack Valley. I wondered if Pastor Fred might now be trying to find additional work to do inside his office. In Cedar Crossing, though, the western sky brought a bright orange setting sun.

Stepping around the many puddles on the way to my car, I suddenly stopped. In my hurry to leave, I realized what a moment I was missing. People have paid good money to go to art museums to absorb the beauty of the painted canvas, sometimes of glorious sunsets, and here I stepped around a dozen such canvases at my feet. Large and small

puddles hosted beautiful reflections of the fiery sun from many different angles. I leaned against the car, even though my pants got wet from the beads of water on the finish, and just absorbed the pictures being painted for me. When the artist finished for the day, I got in the car and headed home.

Later that night, as I sat in the big easy chair in the living room, I began thinking about the scene in the church parking lot. It got me to thinking of a story I had read somewhere. I don't even remember where I had read it, but I do remember that it was titled "Sunsets in the Puddles". The beauty that the title evokes had its roots in the horror of a Nazi death camp. Taken from the memoirs of an Auschwitz survivor, the vignette described how one prisoner standing outside a building became moved by the reflection of a brilliant sunset in the puddles of a recent rain on the camp's compound. He went back into the building housing so many who had lost hope, and he urged those inside to come outside. He wanted others to see the beauty of the sunset in the puddles, hoping it would strengthen their will to survive. While the account showed that it gave a brief uplift to the people, it also noted that the Nazis eliminated most of those inside less than

a week later to make room for a new group of prisoners.

I have often wondered what the large population of German immigrants in the Cedar Crossing area must have been thinking about the land they left during those horrific years. Although my ancestors arrived in America in the mid-1800s, they still had plenty of relatives in Germany. I don't remember any conversations about the subject as I was growing up. I need to go talk to those in the area with any recollections of that time before they are gone—there aren't many left.

The next week I called on Elsie Gutenmeier out at the Randolph farm in Bast Township, just west of Cedar Crossing. Elsie is a member of St. John, but since moving out to her granddaughter's place, she doesn't get into Cedar Crossing much anymore. She's now at age 87, which would have made her a teenager during those years. Elsie welcomed me inside the house and her granddaughter offered me some tea, which I gladly accepted. Though the years had severely limited her mobility, it didn't stop her from talking—her words, not mine—made even more amusing by the fact she was always so quiet.

“What can you tell me about life in your family’s household during those years, Elsie?” I asked.

“I remember my mother and father spoke a lot of Low German at home, so I picked up bits and pieces here and there,” said Elsie. “But they were very cautious about speaking it in public during the war years, forcing themselves to master the English language.”

“Did you fear for your safety here in America?”

“No, not really,” answered Elsie. “If there was any intimidation, I didn’t see it. We spent so much time out here in the country working the farm we had little exposure to anything outside this community, which was largely German immigrants. I had some cousins in the city that spoke of a few incidents.”

“What about relatives still living in Germany?” I asked. “Did you hear anything from them about life there?”

“I was young and didn’t have that direct connection to anyone over there, but I would hear my mother and father talking sometimes. I know I had an aunt and uncle active in hiding Jews from the

Nazis until they got caught and were executed as traitors. The strongest thing that I gathered from their conversations was the absolute hopelessness that many Germans felt. So many of their fellow countrymen had ‘totally lost their moral convictions’ and the decent people felt the nation was so out of control that they felt powerless to change anything. That neighbor you had known and trusted for so many years; that neighbor who helped you rebuild your barn when it burned down; that other neighbor that tended to you when you were sick; now, you had to watch what you said because you didn’t know who would turn against you next.”

“Things we have no concept of now,” I said.

“There were many people that secretly hoped Germany would lose the war, but they also feared what would happen to their nation afterwards,” said Elsie. “The Nazi propaganda machine was so strong.”

Elsie asked me to go over to her bookshelf and find a book titled Two Women and a War. The well-worn binding made it a little difficult to find, but I eventually located it, and I took it to her.

“This book is a two-section volume, one called Diary by Grete Paquin and the other called Pillar of Fire by Renate Hagen,” said Elsie. “It is a very good account of the lives of two women as they try to cope with life amid the Nazi war machine. Their faith in God kept them alive.”

Elsie opened the book to a place where she had a greeting card serving as a bookmark. “I read and reread this book many times when I was a young woman,” said Elsie. “I’d like to read you a diary entry for June 20, 1942. Frau Paquin wrote:

I learned a prayer taught in Nazi kindergarten: *Let’s say our prayers now and think of Adolf Hitler, who gives us our daily bread and leads us out of every trouble.*

And Gustav told me from Bremen, “A young teacher ordered an outing for his boys (ten to twelve years old). They were to bring no sandwiches. They walked and then had a rest. He told them about the five thousand who Jesus fed and said, ‘Well, I think if we pray, Jesus might feed us well today,’ and clapped his hands and called, ‘Jesus, Jesus, here are hungry children!’ But nothing happened and they went on. At the second rest he

did the same, and the children began laughing, but then grew tired and later sullen and bad tempered. When they had come into a village, he said, ‘Now let’s see if our Leader has got a heart for his youth. Adolph Hitler! Here are hungry German children! Have you got anything to feed them?’ They threw the door of the inn open, and young girls of the Hitler youth came out; they had dinner laid inside with lovely food and plenty for all.”

Elsie and I just sat in silence for a minute or two. Finally, Elsie said, “That one entry kind of sums up what the decent people of Germany faced in their homeland.”

“Yes, it does, Elsie. Yes, it does.”

We talked for at least another hour, when Elsie abruptly told me it was time for her nap. I laughed, thanked her for sharing that part of her life with me, and wished her a pleasant nap.

When I got home that night, I turned on the television and clicked on a news station. I watched for about five minutes when they showed a montage of a politician making speeches. At the first speech he told the audience something; at the

second speech he told the other audience the exact opposite; at a third speech he said something totally different from the first two speeches—and they were all on the same subject. I switched to a different news channel and found them lauding and magnifying the politician for his third speech, citing it as a blueprint for changing the world. The second channel's news anchor never mentioned the first two speeches. I went back to the first news channel and saw a story that 'highlighted' new curriculum mandates from the federal government for kindergarteners. As I listened to the highlights, I thought what a strange word 'highlights'—for me they would have been more appropriately termed 'low-lights'. I thought of something that Abraham Lincoln once said, "The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next." All the scarier, but slightly more understandable, was the thought that the area where the Reformation was born was also the area that produced Hitler and the Nazis. The deception of propaganda relies heavily on the repetition of the lie until it sounds like the truth. I don't mind telling you, there is a part of me that worries about my children's future. Maybe that sounds like a crack in

the armor of faith, but sometimes I feel the weight of the daily barrage.

The following afternoon we had another storm rumble through our area. When the skies finally cleared, the day ended with another glorious red sunset. As I once again stepped around several puddles, I stopped. For there in front of me again was God's canvas, and I remembered the prisoner of the death camp who tried to strengthen those who had lost hope by seeing the beauty of the "Sunset in the Puddles".

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

Muhlenberg Press published Two Women and a War: Diary by Grete Paquin and Pillar of Fire by Renate Hagen in Philadelphia in 1953.