

My Lucky Escape

A true story

In 1936 at the age of thirteen, I had no knowledge of the political implications, which affected so many people at that time, but I realised that great changes had taken place with the new Regime in Germany.

With the improvement of the economical situation had also come a new phenomena - Anti Religion -. According to the new dogma, the Bible and its teaching was dismissed as not suitable to be taught in schools. It was not prohibited to go to church but it was discouraged.

A new culture was introduced, the very old Pagan culture of Sun-Worship. Christmas was now called Yule-Tide. This brought new activities throughout the year. At Easter and in September huge fires were lit on hills and burning wheels were cascaded down. Here is where my story begins.

We lived in the middle of a pine forest just outside the village called Dueneberg about 30 km from Hamburg, as the crow flies.

After breakfast at 7.30, I set off to go to school. After a twenty minute walk, I met my friends to walk together for the rest of the way. We discussed the fire, which was going to be lit on a nearby hill. Everyone seemed excited and looked forward to it.

As our lessons began at eight am, it was still dark in the winter months and often bitterly cold, often 15 degrees below zero. In the summer months we were glad to start off early. School finished at 1pm, and after finishing our homework we had at least 3 hours to play before supper time.

With my best friend, Leni, we agreed to meet by the fire. It would be fun, seeing the boys jumping over the last few flames before the fire died down. We were always joking that one day they might singe their pants.

When I arrived, I could not see any of my class mates, and Leni did not turn up either.

After about an hour, the fire was burning so fiercely that I had to step back and fell down an embankment, giving me a shock. The embankment was quite steep, but luckily I was not hurt only shaken.

After scrambling up, I fetched my bike to ride home. When cycling through the adjacent town Geesthacht, a drunk appeared from a pub and staggered crossing the road. I waited until he had gone. Now I could cycle again. The street led down hill. In the older part of Geesthacht the streets had cobble stones. The bike and I were bobbing along until I came to a cross road.

There I had a choice whether to follow the road to Leni's home, to ask why she did not turn up as promised, or take the road home to the left, leading to the path in the wood.

I decided to see Leni first. Her home was on the far end of the main road. I had to pass several side streets right and left before arriving at her home.

I was about half way there, when I saw in the last side street on the left, a man sitting on his bike, as if waiting for someone. As soon as he saw me, he overtook me, racing along with his jacket flapping on his sides.

In the dim light I noticed that he had a handlebar moustache. Immediately I felt danger, felt very frightened and stopped. I turned my bike around and cycled into the next side street, now on the left. Following this road, turning to the left again, would have brought me back to the main road.

The sinister man must have surely lost track of me now, but before I went much further, he raced past me again, while I was still in the side street. It was very dark, as there were no street lamps, and it was very quiet. Not a soul was to be seen. Now I felt really scared.

I stopped and turned my bike again to follow the road, which passed by my school. This road went in a curve, meeting up with the crossroad I had left earlier on. I definitely had given up seeing Leni that night. The man was not to be seen, and I was sure that I had lost him.

Just before coming to the path leading through the woods stood an advertising pylon. Silhouetted from the street lamp, the same man, his handlebar moustache clearly visible, was again waiting, sitting on his bike. He was leaning against the pylon. Somehow he knew that I was coming home this way. The pylon stood on an open triangle. On either side of the path was a road. On the right the road went past a moor, and on the left a road led to the factory gate and a guard house. Father was employed in this factory. At once I got off my bike and waited to see what the man would do next, being too frightened to continue.

Only a few seconds later he raced past me again into the woods, giving a shrill whistle through his fingers. Standing like a statue, I was suddenly surrounded by five burly men, including the one who had followed me.

All five had bikes and formed a circle around me. I just stood there, not saying anything, thinking hard of a way to escape. As sudden, as they had surrounded me, four of them disappeared back into the wood. One of the men stayed with me. He had placed his back wheel, against my front wheel. It was a relief after the four had left. Now I seemed to have a better chance to escape.

If I timed it right and pushed his wheel away and then run to the factory gate, I might get away.

"Would you come into the wood, we want to show you something," said the man.

As he spoke, I recognised him. He was one of the older pupils from our school. He had left school a few years ago. In his last year at our school, the Rector, who was his class teacher, tried to take the cane to him at one time, but Arthur Klein, that was his name, hit the teacher with the cane instead.

After Klein had invited me to the wood, I gave his bike a sudden push and run like I had never run before. My heart was beating so fast, that I felt the pulse in my throat, thinking, he would follow and grab me. But I had taken him by surprise. He did not follow.

At the gate of the factory, I told the guard what had happened. To my great disappointment he would not believe me, but he let me come into the guard room. "Please could you call Herr Zabel, our Policeman, he is my friend Leni's father." "I can't do this, there is nobody out there. You must have been dreaming."

The guard must have thought that I was a vagrant, looking awful, black from the fire, the fall and tear stained. We argued for a while and in the end I had to find the telephone number myself. It was difficult. I was still crying.

There was no answer. It made the guard even angrier when I demanded to call the now new appointed police man. I didn't even know his name yet, but found his telephone number somehow. The police man's wife answered the phone and told me that her husband had been called out. Feeling fed-up with the guards moaning I said, "I shall have somebody to take me home. I'm not going through that wood by myself."

"There is nobody here who could take you."

"There must be, there must be other guards on the premises. If you don't make an effort to help me, I will tell my father and he will have a word with Herr Meyer. He is a friend of our family."

Herr Meyer was the Director of the factory. That brought the guard out of his apathy and he made a phone call. To my great relief, within five minutes another guard came to take me home. He had brought his bicycle.

Of course the five men had now disappeared or kept well out of sight. On our way to my home, this new guard would not believe me either and kept repeating "you see, there is nobody here, nobody at all."

Well, there wouldn't be. I tried to explain, but it fell on deaf ears. It was now already 11 pm. Home at last. The guard waited until father and mother opened the door. They had been very worried, because I had never come home this late before. The guard tried again to make me look a fool, telling my parents that I made it all up.

It was good to be home and to be believed and comforted. Father said, "I'm very proud of you, you did the right thing."

From then on I never went out again alone in the evenings. Leni told me later that she could not come, as her father had a free weekend and had taken his family on a short holiday.

I often wonder what would have happened had I not taken the road to Leni's home first. I would not have known those five men were waiting for me until it would have been too late.

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