A THOUSAND SHALL FALL
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THE ELECTRIFYING STORY OF A SOLDIER AND HIS FAMILY WHO DARED TO PRACTICE THEIR FAITH IN HITLER’S GERMANY

Susi Hasel Mundy

with Maylan Schurch

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Gerhard (1935-1994),

who encouraged me to write this book.
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TO THE READER

This is the story of my family during World War II. The account is based on the recollections of the participants. In writing and on tapes my parents recorded the events in meticulous detail. My brothers and sister have told me their memories.

I should mention, however, that I have taken certain liberties in the telling of the story, particularly having to do with the precise sequence of events and who may have said what to whom. Also, I have sometimes combined two or more people into one when I felt it necessary for clarification and simplification. Nevertheless, my intention was always to illuminate more brightly the truth.

It is my hope that this book will be an encouragement to God’s people during the time of the end.
A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

by Martin Luther

_A mighty fortress is our God,_
_A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great;
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

_Did we in our own strength confide,_
_Our striving would be losing,_
_Were not the right man on our side,_
The man of God's own choosing.
_Dost ask who that may be?_  
_Christ Jesus, it is He,_
_Lord Sabaoth His name,_
_From age to age the same,_
_And He must win the battle.

_And though this world, with devils filled,_
_Should threaten to undo us,_
_We will not fear, for God hath willed_  
_His truth to triumph through us._
_The prince of darkness grim,_
_We tremble not for him;_  
_His rage we can endure,_
_For lo! His doom is sure,_
_One little word shall fell him.

_That word above all earthly powers,_
_No thanks to them, abideth;_  
_The Spirit and the gifts are ours_  
_Through Him who with us sideth;_  
_Let goods and kindred go,_
_This mortal life also;_  
_The body they may kill;_  
_God's truth abideth still,_
_His kingdom is forever._

Nobody, _nobody_, can defeat us!”

Chin held high, the teacher gazed into the solemn faces of his third-grade students.

The year was 1939, and most of his fellow Frankfurt citizens shared the teacher’s confidence. After all, hadn’t their Fatherland and their _Führer_ proved this over the past two decades? German hard work, German quality-control, and German stubbornness had lifted them from war-blasted paupers to Europe’s most energetic nation. The future belonged to the Reich.

“We are the strongest people on earth,” he told his class. “And best of all, children, if anyone should dare to invade our airspace, we have the Flak cannons.”

Nine-year-old Kurt Hasel sat straighter. He pressed his lips together and took a breath through his nose.

“Do you believe it?”

“Yes, sir,” Kurt replied.

“Are you ready to help?”

Kurt nodded. “I’ll do my part.”

Mother cupped a hand around each of his shoulders and turned him to face her. “Kurt.”

“What?”

Her voice was serious. “I want you to remember something.”

He tried to wriggle away, but she held him firmly.

“Kurt, if we win the war, it means that we have taken other peoples’ countries away from them.”
“So?”
“Millions of people will lose their homes and their lives.” Her hand loosened from his shoulders, her arms went around him, and her voice spoke from just above his dark head. “Children will be separated from their parents and their brothers and sisters. You might never see Gerd and Lotte again.” She squeezed him and gave him a little shake. “War is wrong, Kurt. Killing is wrong. God wants the Hasels to be peacemakers.”

“Still,” Kurt said stubbornly, his voice muffled against her, “it would be exciting to see airplanes being shot out of the sky.”

By 1939 Franz and Helene Hasel and their neighbors knew that Adolf Hitler was indeed preparing for war. And like everybody else, the little Seventh-day Adventist family had been wondering what the future would hold.

They were soon to find out.

One warm Sabbath after church, they entered the lobby of their suburban apartment building.

Six-year-old Lotte darted over to the Hasel mailbox and looked through the slot. “Mail, Papa,” she said.

Franz unlocked the box and took out a bundle of letters. Flipping through them, he said, “Only business mail. It can wait till after sundown.”

Helene quickly heated up the customary Sabbath meal consisting of dark bread and the lentil soup she had prepared the day before.

“Please, can we go to the Bird Paradise?” Kurt begged. “It’s so nice today.”

Lotte and 4-year-old Gerhard (the family nicknamed him Gerd) chimed in. “Please? Please, Papa?”

Franz gave one longing glance at a stack of books on his desk. He liked to study the Bible and Ellen White’s writings and had been looking forward to a quiet afternoon at home. He sighed and nodded.

The walk soon led them away from civilization and into the wide expanse of open fields that stretched behind their large apartment complex. The children delighted in walking on the narrow trails through the ripening fields. Sky-blue cornflowers and scarlet poppies peeped through the still-faintly-green wheat shafts, which stood taller than their heads.

“Let’s pretend we’re the children of Israel,” Kurt said. “We’re walking through the sea. Those flowers are the fish.”

Eventually, the family reached a railway embankment. Carefully crossing the narrow footbridge that spanned it, they listened to the faint humming of the rails far below. On the other side they rested on the warm grass.

“A train!” Lotte called out.

As the passenger cars roared and clicked their way along the tracks below, little Gerd clung to mother’s skirt while Kurt and Lotte waved to the engineer and the smiling passengers. This time the friendly driver even blew the train’s whistle for them. It was a red-letter day—one the children would remember as their last day of untroubled happiness for several years.

As the train disappeared, the family wandered down a sandy path that followed the tracks until they reached the place they called the Bird Paradise. It was like a secret garden surrounded by a thick, high hedge. There was no gate, and no eye could penetrate the green thicket. But the most melodious bird songs floated out of that mysterious place.

Helene and Franz sat down in the shade of the hedge and quietly discussed the threatening political climate. Lotte started picking wild flowers while Kurt and Gerd collected pretty pebbles and snail shells. When a cool evening breeze started blowing, they wended their way home.

After supper and sundown worship Franz got the stack of mail.

“All right, let’s see who’s sending us letters,” he said. He dealt them on the kitchen table into piles.

Suddenly he paused, peering closely at an official-looking envelope.

“Helene. It can’t be. But I think—”

He slit one end of the envelope and drew out a stiff piece of folded paper. Helene looked over his shoulder.

“That’s impossible,” she said. “You’re 40 years old. There’s some mistake.”

Franz’s voice, usually so confident, now sounded dazed and thick. “It is. It’s a letter from the draft board. I am summoned to the army recruitment center in Frankfurt on Monday at 8:00 a.m.”

“This Monday?”

“This Monday. In two days.”

Helene and Franz stared at each other.

“I thought I was too old,” he said. “Instead, it looks like I’m one of the first to be called up.”

He herded the children into the living room and told them to sit down. Then he explained that he had been called to be a soldier.

Lotte started crying. “Soldiers get killed in war,” she sobbed. “Will you die?”

Franz opened his mouth to reply, but before he had a chance to say anything, Kurt said scornfully, “Don’t be silly, Lotte. Germany is the strongest country in the world. The other soldiers will die, not ours.”

“Papa won’t die?” Lotte asked hopefully.

“Of course not,” Kurt replied. “We have powerful weapons that no
one can defeat. And we have the Flak antiaircraft artillery that can shoot airplanes out of the sky if they attack us. We will win the war, and Papa will be a hero, and Germany will rule the whole world.”

Franz’s face turned white. A devout Seventh-day Adventist, he was firmly pacifist. He hadn’t suspected how fully his firstborn son, at age 9, had bought into Hitler’s goal to make Germany the center of an expanding 1,000-year “Third Reich” superpower.

“Kurt. Children. Listen to me.”

Gerd climbed on Papa’s lap and started sucking his thumb. Franz tried to explain why war was wrong and that Hitler was a bad man who did not love God. Kurt listened, but the jut of his small jaw showed that he still thought that being a soldier would be a jolly good adventure.

Monday at the recruitment center Franz passed his physical exam. Then he filled out a lengthy information sheet and handed it to the officer in charge.

“Sir,” he said politely, “I am a Seventh-day Adventist Christian and a conscientious objector. I would like to serve as a medic.”

The officer looked him over. “Seventh-day Adventist,” he repeated. “Never heard of it.” He called across the room to a colleague. “Hey, Hans. Do you know anything about Seventh-day Adventists?”

“They are like the Jews,” Hans yelled back. “They keep Sabbath.”

The officer gave Franz a baleful look. “Well then,” he finally said, “what would you do if you were caring for a wounded soldier and the enemy launched an attack?”

“I would lie on top of the man and shield him with my body, sir.”

“Indeed!” The officer rolled his eyes, then said spitefully, “Well, we have no room for cowards in the German army.” He flipped through some papers, then wrote Franz’s appointment on the intake form. Franz had been assigned to serve as a private in Pioneer Park Company 699.

Franz swallowed. He knew the Pioneers well—at age 18 he had served with them in World War I. The Pioneers were engineering units that prepared the way for the army to follow. He also knew that the prestigious Company 699 was assigned the task of building bridges wherever Hitler planned his next advance.

_This means_, Franz thought to himself, _that the soldiers in 699 will always be among the first Germans in enemy territory. No doubt the officer had put him on the front lines because he hated men who were not supportive of Hitler’s war effort._

“Don’t just stand there, private,” the officer snapped. “Move on. We have other people to process.”

Franz went to the clothing barracks, where he was issued the complete gray-green uniform of the German army. He received a pair of trousers and a combat tunic with four patch pockets, gold tresses on the collar, and the emblem of the Nazi eagle clutching the swastika sewn above the right breast pocket. He also received a wide black leather belt, from which he could hang his bread bag with provisions. He was given a pair of shoes, a pair of high boots, a side hat, a steel helmet, and underwear and socks.

He was told to report to duty on Wednesday morning.

Back home, the children explored the uniform. Lotte liked to carry her dolly in the bread bag. The various compartments were just right for a spare bottle and diapers.

Gerd put on the side hat with the colorful red dot in front encircled by a white and black ring.

Kurt cocked his finger and aimed it at Gerd. “Bang! I hit you right in the forehead. You’re dead!” Gerd promptly started to cry.

But Kurt’s favorite was the steel helmet. He liked the smell of the new leather webbing that lined its crown. Padding it with newspaper to keep it from sliding over his eyes, he proudly paraded through the house proclaiming that no one could hurt him.

In the next couple of days Franz had much to do. For years he had been a literature evangelist and publishing secretary in Austria and Germany. So now he contacted the publishing house in Hamburg and the conference president to inform them he’d been drafted. Working methodically, he finished reports and answered letters so that when he left, his work would all be in order.

On Wednesday morning Franz buttoned and buckled his uniform on, then called the family together. Lotte looked at him with awe, and whispered, “Oh, Papa, you are so handsome!”

Kurt studied the belt buckle: the Nazi eagle encircled by the words _Gott Mit Uns_, meaning “God With Us.”

“Papa,” he said thoughtfully, “if Hitler wants God to be with us, he can’t be that bad.”

“Kurt,” Franz said with intensity. “Hitler is an evil man. Never trust what he says. You stay true to God and God only! But come now, let’s have worship before I have to leave.”

Franz read from Psalm 91:5-11 “Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; . . . a thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. . . . For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.”

Then the family sang their favorite hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Afterward they knelt in a circle and held hands while Franz prayed.
A near-carnival atmosphere reigned in Frankfurt’s central train station. Two hundred soldiers in smart new uniforms were being sent to boot camp in Nierstein on the banks of the Rhine River. Clean-shaven, sporting new haircuts, standing proudly in their crisp uniforms, they looked strong and confident.

Wives and sweethearts hugged their men. A few were crying, but most were in a holiday mood, waving blood-red swastikas and scattering confetti. A group in the center of the crowd drank champagne and sang victory songs.

Awkwardly the soldiers held bouquets of flowers and fancily-wrapped boxes of chocolates given them by the women. A young lady Franz had never seen before kissed him on both cheeks and wished him good luck. Finally the train steamed out of the station to the thunderous roar of the German’s battle cry: “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!” One People, One Empire, One Leader! Victory Salvation! Victory Salvation!

A muted shock coursed through Franz. Hitler’s demonic power of suggestion has captured the masses, he thought. They’re convinced that the war will be over by Christmas, and that Germany will soon rule a better world.

As the train pulled away from the station, he started chatting with some of the others. He hit it off especially well with a Karl Hoffman, and the two men initiated a friendship.

Three hours later they arrived in Nierstein, where the new recruits settled into their quarters while the rest of their battalion arrived, 1,200 men in all. The bridge-building Pioneer Park Company 699 was one of Hitler’s elite troops who took orders directly from headquarters in Berlin. Many of the men were skilled craftsmen and mechanics.

On Friday Franz searched out the Hauptmann (captain) of his unit, a man named Brandt. He found him in a room talking with his accountant and a clerk. He had a pleasant expression on his face.

“Our Father,” he said, “I have been drafted to be a soldier. You know that I have no interest in war and in fighting. You know that I found no joy in battle in the Great War, even when I wasn’t a Christian yet. Much less so, now.

“Please be with us, Father, as our paths separate. Help me to be true to my faith even in the army. Help me so that I will not have to kill anyone. Please bring me back safely, and protect my family from all the dangers of war at home. Amen.”

It was getting late. They quickly said their good-byes, and Franz left, feeling in his heart that one day they all would be back together again.