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Christa's Tale:

Germany, January 1939

Taking advantage of every shadow to stay hidden, Hans Sommer slipped into the block of flats and waited to make sure he hadn't been followed before he entered his own home.

In the tiny hall, he sighed with relief and leaned against the closed door for a few moments to pull his thoughts together, then moved towards the bedroom.

No time to waste. He woke his wife and daughter, and they all sat on the big bed to talk, as they'd done many times before. He ached at their dismay as he told them what had to be done.

'After the killings and mayhem of *Kristallnacht*, it has become obvious that freedom and justice have been openly set aside in our beloved country. We three are now in danger.'

'But we're not Jewish!' Christa protested.

'No, child, but Communists are also hated by our new leaders and I am well known as one who opposes their regime. This makes it too dangerous for my family to remain here in Berlin, so I've found a way to get you to safety, Christa.'

'Papa, no!'

'Yes, *Liebchen*. First we get you away to Britain, then your mother follows. After all, she is British, even though she came to live here as a child. I will join you later because there are still things I can do to help others. Not all the people managing our country are bloodthirsty in their

solutions, thank goodness. Some of them just want problems like us to go away, as far away as possible.'

His wife nodded acceptance and put an arm round her daughter. 'We have no choice, *Mausi*. Getting you to safety in England will take a huge worry off our minds. Please . . . don't make it harder for us. It is better this way.'

Christa looked from one to the other, tears in her eyes. 'But it's so far away.'

'You will be safe there. I have asked a very big favour of my friend Andreas and he has found a way for you to join the *Kindertransport*. They are giving refuge to Jewish children in Britain and to a few children of dissidents, so you will pretend to be younger than your real age. Since you are small and slender, like your mother, you can become thirteen, not sixteen.'

'How can I feel like a child again here?' She touched her chest near her heart.

'You must find a way to keep up the pretence. Your life depends on it.'

'Thank goodness you can speak some English,' her mother said. 'I wish now that I'd made more effort to teach you. You must practise hard when you get there and learn quickly. They will accept you better if you speak the language properly. It's such a pity I've no close family left there for you to go to.'

Her parents spent the next two days packing and repacking the small suitcase which was all she would be allowed to take, cramming in anything they could. Her mother sewed the family's few pieces of jewellery inside a rag doll, even her wedding ring, brushing aside Christa's protests.

'If I escape, my darling, I shall find this again. If I don't, it is better that you have it. But if you need money, you must sell any or even all of these valuables. Do not hesitate. Life is what matters most, not shiny baubles.'

'I'll write to you, let you know where I am,' Christa said.

Her mother sighed. 'No, *Mausi*. We must go into hiding, so you will not know where to send a letter.'

‘But how will I know you’re even alive?’

‘You won’t. No, shh. Don’t cry. It’s hard, I know, but *we* shall know you’re safe. If we can, we’ll escape later. We’ll know how to find you after the war, because the Refugee Children’s Movement will keep records. I can bear anything if I know you’re safe.’

Such love shone in her parents’ faces, that Christa felt blessed to be their child. She swallowed further protests and did whatever they asked.

But when she was in bed, she wept silently . . . for them, for herself, for a world where families could be torn apart like this.

With everything happening so quickly, and so much to do—and say—the hours flew past. Two nights later her father took her to the rendezvous point under cover of darkness. Before she could say anything, he hugged her close, kissed her forehead and walked away.

By the time it sank in that this might be the last time she saw him, he’d vanished into the darkness. Oh, how she wanted to run after him! She stood straight and tried to be brave, as he would want her to. But she couldn’t stop the tears welling in her eyes.

She was taken to a cellar where she waited for what seemed a long time with a group of children, all strangers. Many of them were taller than her, for all they were younger, so she didn’t seem out of place. Her heart icy with fear, she kept firm hold of her suitcase, which was all she had left of her family now.

Could you fit a whole life into a suitcase?

More children arrived and joined them in the cellar, some weeping quietly, others stony-faced. Most were alone like her, but a few had brothers or sisters. How lucky they were to have each other still!

No one spoke unless they had to. Christa guessed that like her they’d been told to keep quiet and do as they were told.

'Do not draw attention to yourself!' her father had repeated time after time.

When it was nearly morning, a plump lady who spoke mainly English with only a few halting words of German came down the stairs and beckoned to them. She put one finger to her lips to indicate silence, then they picked up their suitcases and filed out.

It seemed to Christa that sadness walked beside them like a ghost in the night as they stumbled along the poorly-lit back streets.

Her father hadn't been quite sure how they'd get away, but she knew enough English if she listened carefully to understand what their rescuers were saying. They were worried that the Nazis might change their minds at the last minute about letting the children go. She'd overheard her parents sharing the same worries.

One boy watched her and asked if she understood what the grown-ups were saying. When she nodded, he said, 'Tell us. Please.'

The information was whispered down the straggling line of children, some of whom kept looking uneasily over their shoulders.

They arrived at the station and soldiers watched them pass in the grey, unreal light of pre-dawn. She held her breath as she walked along the platform, but none of the grim-faced men tried to stop them.

Oh, thank goodness! she thought as she climbed on to the train.

They were crammed into it, and some fought for the window seats. Christa preferred to sit out of sight. She found herself comforting two younger girls who said they were eight and ten, each travelling on their own. That took her mind off her own troubles, at least.

At the Dutch border, they had to show their passports. Most of them had a red letter 'J' stamped on the front page. The guard examining Christa's passport asked her why she hadn't had the stamp put on. She struggled to reply politely, saying that she wasn't Jewish.

The guards didn't look as if they believed her, but they didn't stop her. They made jokes to one another openly about getting rid of rubbish, but they let all the children through.

The train stopped just across the border. Some Dutch ladies came on board with fresh orange juice, bread and butter for everyone. The bread was white and soft, the butter lavishly spread. Christa ate hers slowly, savouring every mouthful. It was months since she'd had food as good as this.

Then they were off again, moving slowly. The passengers had nothing to do but stare out at the dark countryside and as it grew lighter, comment on the windmills.

Every now and then the train stopped for no reason that she could work out, but it didn't matter. They were in a free country now.

It was dark once again when the train arrived at the Hook of Holland. At Rotterdam they were led on to a ship. Christa tried to count the children walking up the gangway. About two hundred. So many families torn apart.

They were given more food and then shown to bunks. She put her suitcase under the thin pillow, for safety, then lay down. The bunk was hard, the pillow even harder, but she was so tired she fell asleep.

They docked at a port in the cold light of a misty grey day. It had been a calm passage, but even so, one or two children had been sick.

Christa heard a man tell a lad who asked him in halting English where exactly they were that this was Harwich on the east coast of England. She didn't remember ever noticing the name on a map and the mist prevented her from seeing what the town was like.

Some of the smallest children were still asleep and couldn't be woken. Since there were boys bigger and stronger than her, she wasn't asked to carry any of the little ones, thank goodness. She was finding it hard enough just to put one foot in front of the other.

The children walked slowly down the gangway into England and after their passports had been

checked they were taken to a hall next to a church. Food was provided and Christa ate it, even though she didn't feel hungry. She knew she must keep up her strength, stay alert and be ready to do whatever was necessary.

After they'd eaten, they were sorted into groups, their names called from lists. No one told them why they were going with one group or where they were going. The people organising things spoke pleasantly enough but were in a hurry.

Some children were sent off to the station and told they would be taken to London. She and several others were taken to a lorry at one side and told to wait for help to climb into the back.

Suddenly a man loomed out of the mist and tried to take her suitcase from her. She screamed and struggled, kicking him in that place her father had taught her was very sensitive for a man.

He yelled in pain and raised one fist, but a man wearing an armband was already running towards them and her attacker fled, cursing. She didn't know the actual words, but curses sounded the same in any language, she felt sure.

'Well done, lass,' the second man said. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, sir. Thank you for coming to my help.'

'You speak English?'

'A little. I soon learn more.'

'That's the right attitude. Hey, Mary! This one speaks some English. She'll come in useful. Some sod just tried to steal her suitcase.'

An older woman joined them. 'I hope he rots in hell! To steal is bad enough, but to steal a child refugee's only belongings is a vile crime.'

She turned to Christa. 'What's your name, dear? Yes, you're on my list. Let Herb help you into the lorry. Will you take charge of the food, Christa?'

'Yes, if you wish.'

'Give everyone a sandwich, just one each, I'm afraid.'

As she passed a basket up, she added, 'There's water in that metal urn in the corner. Only half a cup each. You understand?'

'Yes. One sandwich and half a cup water each.'

'Good girl. And there's one blanket for everyone.'

There were ten children in the back of the lorry in the end, sitting on the bare floor. Even with blankets wrapped round them, they were still cold, so they huddled together for warmth as they had on the ship.

Christa made sure they shared the food equally and didn't allow the two bigger boys to take any from the smaller children when they said they weren't hungry.

'You must eat,' she told the little ones.

'They don't want it,' one big boy protested. 'We wouldn't *steal* it from them.'

'No, but I'll tell the lady if you take the food,' she threatened. 'Then you'll start with a bad mark against you.'

To her surprise they stopped protesting and everyone, even the little ones who'd said they weren't hungry, ate the sandwiches, which seemed to have some sort of yellow jam in them. The bread was squashed and stale, but food was food. She made sure the youngest children ate every last crumb.

Most of them fell asleep after that. She leaned back against her suitcase and though she tried to sleep, she couldn't help worrying that something might go wrong.

The lorry didn't seem able to go very fast. It stopped twice and they were told to get down and relieve themselves by the side of the road, then given more food. Again she helped the little ones.

The next stop was to buy petrol. The grown-ups had cups of tea there, she could smell it. The children were given tin mugs of weak cocoa, but it was warm and sweet at least.

Would this journey never end? she wondered as they set off again. And would they really be safe here in England?

When she woke, it was dark again and cold. Well, it was winter, after all. Not the best time for a journey. The other children were still asleep except for one of the bigger boys.

‘What will it be like here?’ he asked her.

‘I don’t know. I’ve never been to England before. My mother was born here but went to Germany when she was a child. She’s the one who taught me how to speak English a little.’

‘Are you glad to have escaped from Germany?’

She shrugged. ‘Partly glad, partly not.’

‘Me too. Even my father was crying.’

‘Mine also.’

‘Will you teach me a few English words?’

‘Yes.’ She taught him *Please, Thank you, Yes, No, I don’t understand.*

But then the lorry stopped again and the man and woman let down the back, beckoning to the two youngest and helping them off it. The children cried out in terror as they were handed over to strangers and didn’t understand what people were saying to them.

The lorry stopped three more times, leaving children at each place.

Christa was the only one left now. She wouldn’t let herself show fear when they stopped for a final time, but she felt very apprehensive as she got down.

‘Where is this place, please?’ she asked the woman.

‘Lancashire, dear, in the north of England. You’ll be living near a town called Preston. A lady called Mrs Pelling has offered to take an older girl.’ She looked round, frowning. ‘Someone should have been waiting for you.’

Christa stood quietly, her suitcase on the ground between her feet. She wished she had a map, so she could see exactly where she was. She wished she was still with her parents, in spite of the risk.

She wished all sorts of things as the slow minutes ticked past.

At last they heard the sound of a car in the distance. It seemed a long time till it came into sight.

A man was sitting inside it, a dark silhouette against the dull evening sun.

He didn't get out immediately, and seemed to be studying them. When he finally came towards them, Christa saw that he was wearing a military uniform.

'Mr Pelling?' the lady asked and received only a nod in reply. 'Is your wife not with you?'

'I'm not married. It's my mother who wants the child. Last November she heard Viscount Samuel's broadcast on the radio appealing for foster homes and decided that she wanted to help. I'm away serving in the Air Force and she gets lonely.'

'Where is your mother tonight, then?'

'Recovering from a bad cold.' He fumbled in his pocket. 'Here. Mother said to show you this letter.'

The lady checked it in the light of a small torch and nodded. 'It's all in order. This is Christa.'

He studied her, his eyes narrowed. 'She's very small.'

'You were surely expecting a child!'

'Yes. But we asked for an older girl.'

'She's thirteen, old enough to look after herself and give little trouble. We've found her very helpful. And she speaks some English.'

'Ah.' This time he addressed Christa. 'I'm Thomas Pelling. My mother bids you welcome to England.'

'Thank you, Mr Pelling.'

'We have to get back to Harwich now,' the lady said. 'More children will be coming in soon, a private group.'

'Right. I'll put this in the boot.' He picked up Christa's suitcase before she'd realised what he was doing and she tried to snatch it back from him.

He looked at her in shock. 'I'm not stealing it.'

'It's all she has in the world,' the lady explained quietly.

He gazed at the shabby little suitcase and shook his head. 'Poor thing.'

Christa went with him to the car boot, then he opened the door for her on the passenger side, which seemed the wrong side of the car to her. But she got in, calling 'Thank you!' to the lady.

There was no answer. The lady with no name had already gone back to the lorry.

'Half an hour,' Mr Pelling said. 'We'll be there in half an hour. Do you understand me?'

'Half hour,' she repeated. 'I understand.'

He didn't speak again, just drove on and on through the greyness of the cold evening.

So she didn't speak either.

She never saw the other children again and she'd never known their full names. That seemed wrong, somehow.

They could have been taken anywhere. Her father had said that people all over England had volunteered to care for refugee children until their parents could join them, or until they could be sent on to America or Australia.

She hoped she could stay in England till her parents joined her. America was much too far away.

Worried about being alone with a complete stranger, she made sure she was ready to run away. But he didn't look the sort to harm a child. Indeed, he'd hardly looked at her let alone touched her. He seemed tired more than anything.

She was almost a woman, hadn't felt like a child for a year or two because in such difficult times her parents had talked openly to her, treated her as an equal.

Could she do this? Become a child again? She had to. Her father said it was the best way of staying safe.

She wondered what life would be like in England.

She hoped Mrs Pelling would be a kind lady.