

Max Krakauer
Lights in Darkness

– Lichter im Dunkel –

English translation by
Hans Martin Wuerth

Calwer Verlag Stuttgart

In memory of my in-laws, the Righteous Gentiles
Otto and Gertrud Mörke.

Publication by Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart/Germany

Title in the original German version:

Lichter im Dunkel – Flucht und Rettung eines jüdischen Ehepaares im Dritten Reich

1947 by Behrendt-Verlag, Stuttgart/Germany

Copyright: 2007 by Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart/Germany

First English version:

Lights in Darkness (English translation by Hans Martin Wuerth)

Copyright: 2012 by Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart/Germany

Maps: diGraph, Atelier für didaktische Grafik GmbH, Lahr/Germany

eBook (epub): ISBN 978-3-7668-4232-9

eBook (pdf): ISBN 978-3-7668-4241-1

Print edition in German: ISBN 978-3-7668-4001-1

www.calwer.com

Table of contents

Preface	5
Dark skies overhead	9
The gutter overflows	11
Forced labour	15
Asylum overnight	19
Pomeranian journey	28
Panic	39
Salto mortale	45
Arrest	49
Brethren's council	57
Christmas and winter	67
On swabian roads	74
The race against time	83
They are coming	90
Conclusion	95
Epilogue	96
Brief biography	103

Preface

Since the end of World War II, Holocaust-related books and articles, in the form of fiction and non-fiction, have appeared in large numbers. The authors, among them Holocaust survivors, told and retold the anti-Jewish racist policies of the National Socialist regime, which resulted in the identification, discrimination, persecution, deportation, and extermination of European Jews. Among the many autobiographical narratives, is the memoir of Max Krakauer who, soon after the war had ended in 1945, wrote the story about his and his wife's years of living in hiding. This small book, with the symbolic German title, *Lichter im Dunkel*, was published in 1947 and was one of the first autobiographical accounts by a German Jew who, with his wife Karoline (Ines), had managed to escape detection and capture inside Nazi Germany between January 29, 1943 and their liberation 27 months later, on April 23, 1945. Despite the abundance of other autobiographical works, Max Krakauer's book, now available in translation, may be of interest to many English readers.

Lights in Darkness describes an extraordinary, perhaps even unique survival story. Immediately after they had been warned by a neighbor of their imminent arrest, this Jewish couple was constantly on the run for more than two years, without once enjoying a lengthier stay of a month or longer at the home of a rescuer. It is truly astonishing that, as they fled from one shelter to another, covering many hundreds of miles, they were temporarily sheltered in 66 homes in northern and southern Germany. Moreover, yet another surprising aspect was that the majority of their rescuers were Protestant pastors, their wives and other family members.

How, where, and with what difficulties and hardships was this possible? Krakauer provides detailed and objective answers to these and other questions. But above all, his memoir is a very personal and intuitive recollection of how, where, and why he and his wife were able to endure the trauma of being pursued relentlessly by Nazi government officials, and to stay alive in a climate of anti-Semitism, segregation, hatred, persecution, war, and genocide.

How many Jews lived in Germany between 1933 and 1945? Exact numbers are hard to obtain, but there seems to be agreement on the following estimates. When the National Socialists gained power in January of 1933, the Jewish population numbered approximately 500,000, less than 1% of Germany's population of 75 million. 160,564 of them resided in Berlin. Once Germany's vitriolic and diabolical policy of anti-Semitism had restricted, then removed the freedom and equal rights of its Jewish citizens, emigration became the only option. German Jews left their previously beloved homeland in large numbers, and some 275,000 did so between 1933 and October 1941. In early 1943, only 20,000 Jews still lived in Germany under harsh and unforgiving conditions. Of those

in hiding, approximately 3,000 to 5,000 survived. The Krakauers' survival was due to their perseverance, the remarkable assistance by their Christian helpers, and, as Krakauer never failed to add, God's protection.

Lights in Darkness describes Max Krakauer's futile attempts to emigrate from Nazi Germany following the confiscation of his lucrative business, a film rental agency in Leipzig. In January, 1939 the Krakauers daughter, Inge, left Germany for safety in England, and he and his wife, soon after they arrived in Berlin, were subjected to hard and dehumanizing forced labor ("Zwangsarbeit"). This continued until both went underground in January, 1943, having taken this drastic, life-saving measure at the last possible moment, literally only a few steps ahead of the Gestapo. At this exact point in time began their perilous and prolonged odyssey. Illegally travelling on foot and relying on public transportation that was regularly controlled by police, and carrying falsified identify papers (they had assumed the name of "Hans and Grete Ackermann" until their liberation), they had only little money and limited food rations, and initially stayed at seven places in Berlin. Subsequently, they were advised by members of the Confessing Church to take a precarious but necessary train ride to Pomerania, east of the Oder River.

There they found shelter in fifteen different homes, but were almost identified as Jews. Five months later, when no additional rescuers in Pomerania were prepared or willing to accept them, they made their second daunting train ride by returning to Berlin. In Berlin, due to the absence of more places to hide (they had located only two), they were persuaded to take their longest train yet, this one to the southern State of Württemberg and its capital, Stuttgart. From August of that year to their liberation 20 months later, they crisscrossed Württemberg, often on foot and regardless of weather conditions. However, their decision to relocate in the south proved to be a lifesaver. The Krakauers who had lived in Leipzig and Berlin before, gradually had become familiar with their southern environment, and once their liberation had become a reality, they remained in this State to the end of their lives. (The enclosed maps and dates of the Northern and Southern Escape Routes are most helpful in retracing their prolonged journey.)

Of course, the overriding concerns throughout their escape were the following. First and foremost, would they not be confronted and seized by German officials, whose sudden appearance could happen anywhere and at any time? "Each train stop became a test of nerves, and each male passenger who got on plunged us into fear and terror because each passenger could have been a Gestapo agent." Secondly, were there enough trustworthy and compassionate persons or families who would take them in, provide them with food and shelter, and for how long? Finally, would they have the strength, will, and resilience to go on? Indeed, on several ominous occasions they saw no sense in pressing on and favoured

turning themselves in. “We were overcome by an anxiety that began to incapacitate us. Again we faced the question: Did our action make any sense whatsoever? Was it worthwhile taking on more hardships and facing new calamities?”

As we can read in this dramatic memoir, the Krakauers struggled against anguish and fear and faced recurrent obstacles, setbacks, and near arrests. But somehow they always overcame their moments of disillusionment and regained renewed hope in staying alive and in being reunited with their daughter Inge as soon as the war was over. The frequent and heavy bombing raids, insufficient food supplies, lack of housing, gradual breakdowns of the transportation system, lack of coal and wood for heating homes etc. signalled the impending defeat and surrender of Hitler’s regime. They felt that their liberation would only be a matter of time. But until this happened, their survival depended mostly on the protection, guidance, support, and encouragement of more than one hundred different rescuers, the “lights in the darkness.”

We know that the Third Reich’s racist, vituperative, and discriminatory policies towards Jews were facilitated by the active and silent support of millions of German citizens. But we must also recognize the relatively few Germans who were not perpetrators, collaborators, or bystanders. Among various resistance groups were the unselfish and bold helpers whose number throughout Germany is estimated to have reached some 30,000. Among these, as stated previously, were Protestant pastors, their wives, family members, and friends. They always had to make absolutely certain that only dependable contacts could be made with persons who were willing to welcome the Krakauers and perhaps, to provide them with the names and addresses of their next hosts. Most of these contact persons were affiliated with or inspired by the Confessing Church and the Brethren’s Council. There also existed one smaller and less known protestant group that closely cooperated with the Confessing Church, the Religious-Theological Society (“Sozietät”). Although some members of these groups were closely shadowed by the Gestapo, their voices and actions opposed the Churches’ conspicuous and deadly silence over the injustices and violence against Jews and their deportation to concentration camps.

In many studies published in recent years, the general consensus was reached that the crucial role rescuers had played during the Holocaust to save Jews, the bold actions they had undertaken, and the personal and professional dangers they and their families had faced and accepted, were ample justification for calling them heroes. On the other hand, we know that the majority of the rescuers themselves – there were many brave women among them! – did not regard themselves as heroes. Many of them stated that they simply had come to the aid of human beings who were without safety, shelter, and food, who, without the assistance of others,

would have perished. Indeed, they sought few or no awards. Nonetheless, Israel's Yad Vashem honoured thousands of them, naming them Righteous Gentiles. Similarly, the United States Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and other Holocaust places of remembrance recognized and honoured rescuers from several nations.

The rescuers named in *Lights in Darkness* were, in the words of Max Krakauer, "the real reason for writing [his] book." In closing it is fitting to quote the following passage. "These rescuers risked their own lives as well as the existence of their families, often regardless of personal privation and hardships... Never will we, or anyone else who witnessed the deep convictions of our rescuers, be able to thank them fully for having saved us from the fangs of Hitler's henchmen. I know they wanted no gratitude and did not desire earthly rewards; but rather, they were motivated by human love and Christian compassion. They wished to do something before God for reasons of conscience, hoping that this would diminish or make up for the bitter injustices committed against human beings whose only fault it was to be of Jewish descent. They risked their freedom and their lives. They were the good Samaritans of the Third Reich."

I wish to thank the Calwer Verlag in Stuttgart, Germany for encouraging me to translate Max Krakauer's memoir. For those able to read German, I recommend the original text of *Lichter im Dunkel*. Its new edition is attractive, smartly edited, has useful maps, and includes many valuable, never before published photographs. Finally, I wish to thank Susanne Fetzer, the committed and able associate of the Calwer Verlag. She provided valuable advice and information that made this English version possible.

Dr. Hans M. Wuerth
Professor Emeritus, Moravian College
Bethlehem, PA USA

Dark skies overhead

The past day had been exhausting and difficult. I called my wife in Leipzig in the evening, as I always did when I was away on business. This time I called from a hotel in Magdeburg. In a halting and trembling voice she told me that she was sitting by the radio at that very moment, listening to a broadcast from the seat of government in Berlin where people were celebrating. Adolf Hitler had been appointed as the new Chancellor of the Reich. There were a torch parade, the endless cheers of the people, and one speech after another. „We are done for,“ I said, „I’ll come home early tomorrow.“

When I hung up, a crackling noise in the telephone sounded gloomy and malicious. For a moment I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I noticed the calendar on the wall in front of me. An ad for Hapag was on it, with letters forming a square, and above it, a colourful ship sailing away. Beneath it was the date, January 30, 1933.

I knew the meaning of my wife’s report as I had also heard it on the loudspeakers in the afternoon. Already I have had some bad experiences at a time, when only a handful of some 500,000-600,000 Jews living in Germany understood how much of a common threat were the names of the NSDAP and Adolf Hitler. Most of Germany’s Jews tended to view the Nazis as a rather harmless group of ludicrous fanatics.

Since my return from World War I in 1918, I had served as the manager of a film rental agency in Leipzig. I worked tirelessly to help the business grow from its modest beginning to a well-known company. Early in 1932 we purchased the Charlie Chaplin movie „City Lights“ for the extraordinary sum of 250,000 dollars. It was a top-notch work that we and the entire German film industry thought would become a success. And it met all of our expectations – until the bad times began.

One day the Nazis, far from seizing power at that time, made what they thought was an astonishing discovery, namely that Chaplin was a Jew. They assumed that this discovery would appeal to a receptive segment of the population predisposed to anti-Semitic ideas. In their „campaign of enlightenment,“ some groups with decisively nationalist leanings claimed that Chaplin was a communist. They also shouted that Chaplin was a multi-millionaire. They tried to demonstrate that their striking method of deception was blossoming. It allowed them to come up with the most contradictory charges and to publicize them. However, no matter how hard their party media tried and their speakers ranted, the Nazis failed time and again to discredit the “Jewish millionaire-communist” and his film.

Then, for the first time, the Nazis resorted to a tactic that would lead to a far greater triumph one year later. SA troopers appeared in front of all movie theaters that showed the Chaplin film. They wanted to „enlighten“

the audience, i.e. they were determined to harass the viewers and to prevent them from entering the movie theater. When this failed, the Nazis quickly made use of „intellectual weapons“ that delivered a special punch: they used smoke bombs and firecrackers. When they introduced similar impressive weapons, the ensuing panic was even greater, and soon their goal was within reach. Owners of movie theaters who refused to lease Chaplin's film were frightened by such terror and personal threats. To avoid further complications, they gave in to the pressure of this manipulated „public opinion.“

The financial loss suffered by my company was substantial. It went bankrupt, in part due to the movie studio „Ufa“ that was infested with Nazis as early as 1932. Thanks to the Nazi movement my personal loss was considerable. I could not file any claims against a company that was going bankrupt. All of this was only the prelude of worse things to come. Although I was employed by the newly founded company, the political sky remained dreary. Soon darker clouds would appear overhead. Berlin was on the march, at least those Berliners who were convinced that the salvation of Germany would come once Hitler assumed power. They were cheering now, especially the young people, but also many women.

It is not my task to investigate how the German people, having been so trusting and politically so non-judgmental, had fallen prey to the world's most satanic pied piper. Perhaps everybody had been deceived, and not only those who cheered. Others had no real idea of the magnitude of the impending disaster. There were a few who believed that Hitler and his movement would last far longer than a few months. One was comforted by the thought that people who pretended to know everything and who promised the world to everybody, would be ruined economically in only a short time; and people cited other reasons in the hope of making everyone relax. Doesn't it seem today as if all foreign countries became victims of the same delusion?

But it is not my intent to „investigate“ this and to deal with theories and hypotheses. Instead, I hope to report objectively on my fate, and that of my wife, and to focus on members of society during the Third Reich who had not often been in the world's spotlight.