



NINE *lives*


DR. SIEGFRIED KRA

Copyright © 2020 by Siegfried Kra
All Rights Reserved.

ISBN 978-0-912887-65-4
eISBN: 978-1-5457-5332-3
Library of Congress Control Number 2020938372

Edited by Mark Schreiber
Cover and Book Design by Lauren Grosskopf

*Pleasure Boat Studio books are available
through your favorite bookstore and through the following:*

Baker & Taylor, Ingram, Amazon, bn.com & 
PLEASURE BOAT STUDIO: A NONPROFIT LITERARY PRESS
WWW.PLEASUREBOATSTUDIO.COM
Seattle, Washington

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

LIBERTY

A NEAR SHIPWRECK

WAR

SKELETONS AND CADAVERS

SCARLET FEVER

THE SANATORIUM

THE FIRE

BILL

THE BROKEN BOTTLE

ALDO

RITA

THE PLANE CRASH

LINDA'S LUCK

PULMONARY EMBOLISM

EPILOGUE

Liberty

THE HMS *QUEEN MARY* slowed its engines as it sailed past the Statue of Liberty to dock in New York City. The passengers stood silently on the upper deck, some wearing fur collars and fur coats. These were the lucky ones who had escaped from the reign of terror of the Germans, who were on the verge of destroying an entire civilization. My parents and I had escaped from the Gestapo by boat from Danzig to Southampton in November, 1938.

The silence was broken by the jubilant playing of the Star Spangled Banner by the ship's orchestra. Some of the passengers stood wide-eyed, some cried, others applauded. Then, as the sun rose on the horizon, an apparition: suddenly I saw the magic city of tall buildings rising up from the sea like some great silvery monster.

I lifted myself on the railing below the pilot's deck to watch the burly men scurrying about the dock, tugging at the mass of ropes that secured the shifts.

Then came the loudspeaker announcing all refugees and passengers not holding American passports will depart from the AA Deck for customs inspections.

I found my parents in the long line that led to the gangplank.

"We were looking for you, get in line," my father said.

A large custom's inspector met us at the bottom of the stairs. "Welcome to the United States of America. Let's see your passports. Get your luggage please."

He pointed to a huge pile of suitcases on the pier, beside porters in blue uniforms waiting for their tips.

My father said, "No luggage. Only what we wear."

I smiled because I understood something that the porters were yelling. "Okay, okay!" I knew this word from the movies we saw aboard the *Queen Mary*, such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, with Errol Flynn.

I felt my short lederhosen to check if the money sewn in my pants was still there. When the custom's inspector glanced at me, I thought he could see right through my pants. But a minute later we were waved on and my mother pulled my hand as she hurried outside, where our wealthy American cousin waited to greet us.

*

Our rich American cousin checked us in to the Waldorf Hotel, where we stayed for two days before he found us an apartment on 89th Street and West End Avenue. But we barely heard from him after that.

My father looked for work but he spoke no English and America was suffering from a depression. Once a wealthy coal merchant and industrialist, he had no place in New York. He went to Blue Coal and many other companies, but they all refused him. We had no money except the coins sewn into my lederhosen. The Germans had taken everything away from us and we had to escape from the port of Danzig by fishing boat lest we end up in a concentration camp.

It had been impossible for us, or any Jews in German-occupied territory at that time, to get money out of our bank accounts, and we had millions. Fortunately my father had surreptitiously bought four tickets on the *Queen Mary* and arranged for our passports two years earlier. If only we had left then! But like so many others, my parents were convinced the Germans would come to their senses and Hitler would be but a footnote in history.

At the last moment, with the help of a boat captain who was a good friend, we escaped from Gdynia to Southampton, England and caught the *Queen Mary* to New York.

*

At the end of November it was quite cold. I was shivering, still dressed in short pants, as my mother insisted long pants were not for children.

She enrolled me in a public school on West End Avenue. The teacher, Mrs. Snyder, placed me in the first grade, a year behind, in a class for slow learners.

"I like *eis*," I said one day to the black boy who sat next to me in the lunch room.

The black boy pointed his finger at my eye and said, “You’re eating an egg, not an eye.”

I was using the German word for egg, called *ei*. My mother had packed a soft-boiled egg in my brown lunch bag. The egg was now spread over my face like an omelette. From my short pants I removed a small embroidered handkerchief and wiped my face. I left the apple and cookie in the brown bag and tossed it in the garbage pail.

I swiftly left the lunch room, my stomach growling, and mounted the two flights back to the classroom, humiliated, angry and hungry.

“You are back early,” Mrs. Snyder said. “You can still stay in the cafeteria until the bell rings.”

Just a few weeks before in Danzig I had sat in a class like this but facing a picture of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi flag. Now the American flag stood in the corner of the classroom. In Danzig there was no lunch period for me. The Jewish children were not allowed to go to school during the day, only in the afternoon.

*

During Geography class Mrs. Snyder took down a map of Europe. She said, “We have here a boy from Germany, from Danzig. He is a refugee.”

She pointed to the place where I was born on the map, the Free State of Danzig, free no more.

The children all stared at me and laughed.

*

After school a tough-looking black boy came over to me, dropped his books, pushed me down and began to hit me in the face. I had learned to box at the Maccabee Club in Danzig and had no problem defending myself and retaliating with strong punches to the bully’s face, until blood appeared from his nose.

“Hey man,” the bully asked, wiping his bloody nose, “where did you learn to rumble like that? My name is Adolph,” he continued, “Just call me Dolph. I like the way you rumble.”

The bully-turned-friend gestured with his hand for me to follow him home. By now I had learned the way to go home on West End Avenue, a

few blocks past Broadway. The other side of Broadway, the dangerous side, was Columbus Avenue, where Dolph was asking me to follow.

We arrived at a five-story apartment building. We entered a dark hallway that stank of urine and garbage.

He led me into his apartment, where a woman was standing, holding a baby. "This is my kid brother and my mother," Dolph said.

I had never seen a black woman, except in the movies at the art cinema in Danzig, where my Uncle Herman took me on Saturdays.

I tried not to stare at her.

Dolph said, "This is my first German friend. He don't speak English but he understands."

His mother gave me a pleasant smile. I bowed and clicked my heels. The light from the window showed a woman with a pleasant face who looked as though she'd just woken from a deep sleep. She seemed embarrassed to see me and quickly arranged her messy hair.

Dolph took me by the hand from the darkened room into the room adjacent.

"Here is where I sleep with my mother," he said.

There were two twin beds, each with a floral bed cover. The walls were bare with white, peeling paint.

Dolph then led me into another room, where he said his older brother sleeps. Then he took me up to the roof.

"Did you ever see a pussy?" he whispered.

He led me by hand to the edge of the roof and yelled to an open window across the street.

"Hey Shauna, show my new friend!"

A girl appeared in one of the windows below. She pulled down her panties and spread her legs apart.

I let go of Dolph's hand and swiftly ran downstairs and out of the building.

A Near Shipwreck

IN OCTOBER 1953 I received a letter admitting me to the Medical School in Toulouse, France.

Three days later, on a dreary morning, my parents drove me to the Brooklyn Naval Yard, where I boarded a tug boat to the *Mankato Victory* cargo ship, bound for Bremerhaven, Germany.

The tug boat swayed to and fro like the toy ships I had played with as a child in my bathtub in Danzig. The ocean was cold and the wind strong as the tug boat crawled to the ugly gray cargo ship.

A line was thrown by one of the tug boat crew and caught by one of the sailors on the cargo ship. A long ladder was then suspended from the top deck to the tug and I watched the crew hoist his trunk.

“You’re next,” the sailor called, as if I were just another piece of luggage.

I climbed in terror, hanging at times like a trapeze artist, as gusts of wind threatened to blow me into the sea. Once on top, two of the sailors were able to help me over.

“Pretty good, kid,” one of them said.

The deck was crowded with military vehicles, jeeps and tanks. I was escorted through one of the steel entrances on the third deck to my cabin, located adjacent to the pilot room. My luggage was already in the room.

*

At 5:00 p.m. one of the sailors said dinner was being served in the galley. We were at sea already and it was dark and even windier than it had been in port. After several wrong tries, I finally found the galley, walking blindly up and down stairs.

Seated in the small area on wooden benches around a wooden table was the captain, the red-headed radio operator, the first mate, and the chief engineer.

A sumptuous meal of steaks and potatoes and ice cream was my first meal on the *Mankato Victory*. The captain had little to say. They ate quickly and returned to their duties. I went up to the deck and walked on the windy side and watched the rough sea and the bright stars. I missed my parents already, but felt like an adventurer on the high seas. Like Joseph Conrad.

*

Later I walked down to the deck where the crew hung out and found myself in a large narrow room where there was a strained table covered in cards and poker chips. The room was airless and filled with smoke, which seemed to bother only the medical student. They paid little heed to me, who thought it like a scene from *Heart of Darkness*, these rough able seamen arguing, shouting and laughing as if it were their last night on Earth.

I wandered back on deck as the Atlantic Ocean got rougher and the waves hit the *Mankato Victory* hard, making the ship roll side to side and the bow rise up, slamming down with a fierce force that made a loud booming sound.

I was allowed in the pilot's room and watched the angle of inclination showing deeper and deeper variations, as the first mate steered the ship. On deck were army vehicles bound for Iceland, our first destination. The weather got rougher, with water splashed over the deck. I slept fitfully that night, but was glad not to get seasick.

*

Two days later there was an even fiercer storm. I was in the radio room, talking with Sparkie, the Irish redhead, when he received an SOS that a cargo ship was in distress one hundred miles away, apparently split in half by the storm. But the *Mankato Victory* was itself struggling to stay above water. As the ship rolled violently the crew worked to secure ropes to aid in walking about the deck. The captain ordered me to return to my cabin.

But later I snuck up on the slippery deck, past the pilot's room where the captain and first mate were busy trying to keep the ship from breaking

in two. The bow lurched up at a 45 degree angle. As I clutched onto the ropes, I watched in amazement as a tank broke loose and crashed into the truculent sea.

I saw the sailors rushing to secure the jeeps and offered to assist, but the captain screamed at me to get the hell off the deck.

*

Two nights later we arrived in Reykjavik, Iceland, lighter by the weight of a tank, but grateful to be alive, the ship seemingly no worse for wear.

I watched the jeeps being offloaded and then walked off the gangplank, past a statue of Leif Erickson, and into the nearest bar.

*

Four days later the *Mankato Victory* made port in Bremenhaven. I was awakened by a loud knock on my door. It was still dark and I thought this was a dream, or nightmare. Three tall men wearing black rubber raincoats with guns in holsters stood by the door speaking German.

“Border Police,” one finally said in English.

I did not tell them that German was my native language. I had seen these faces before, in Danzig, except those men wore uniforms emblazoned with swastikas.

“I am an American,” I declared, my voice weak and scared.

“Passport please.”

I searched frantically through my suitcase, remembering my family’s escape from Danzig Harbor, a lifetime before. I saw my childhood in flames, my uncles, aunts, cousins, friends marched into the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

“You were born in Danzig?” the officer asked, scrutinizing the passport.

“I am an American. A citizen of the United States,” I said proudly, and fearfully.

The officer handed me back my passport. “Welcome to Germany.”

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>