

Lights in darkness - Susanne Fetzner

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It was Germany's darkest hour, not because there was no electricity, but because Germany was governed by lawlessness, injustice, persecution and murder. It was also the Jews' darkest hour; 5.7–6.3 million were murdered during the Third Reich's Holocaust.

Yet there were a few lights of human kindness in the midst of darkness. A few Germans, especially Christians, were prepared to risk their lives hiding Jews. Several thousand Jews were able to survive even inside Nazi Germany.

For over two years, from January 1943 until April 1945, Jewish couple Max and Karoline Krakauer lived in hiding. They were given shelter in 66 different homes in various parts of Germany. Many of their rescuers were Protestant pastors and their families. The courageous actions of these pastors were key factors in the Krakauers' survival.



In 1947 Max Krakauer published his moving story. More editions followed and recently his memoir has been published as an eBook, entitled *Lights in darkness*.

New reality

When Hitler assumed power, on 30 January 1933, 44-year-old Max Krakauer and his 38-year-old wife, Karoline, resided in Leipzig. They had one daughter, Inge. Max managed a film rental agency.

From the beginning of Hitler's rule, Max clearly understood the new political reality facing the Jews. He wrote: '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 was a torch parade, endless cheers from the people, and one speech after another. "We are done for", I said. "I'll come home early tomorrow"'.
'

Soon Max's darkest fears were confirmed. In the following weeks and months, because of his Jewishness he lost his job and most of his possessions. Efforts to emigrate to Palestine, the United States, Australia and Trinidad, all ended in failure. Only their daughter, Inge, managed to escape to England in January 1939.

Max barely avoided being arrested in one of the early major round-ups of Jews. This was around the time of *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night), on 9/10 November 1938. Soon after that the couple moved to Berlin.



Fugitives

When World War Two began, the Krakauers, like all other Jews, were subjected to forced labour. Often they performed gruelling work under miserable conditions. The fear of being arrested never left them.

Then, on 29 January 1943, it happened. Karoline returned home from work feeling cold and dejected to be stopped by someone in the street and given a warning: the Gestapo were waiting at her home.

At that same time Max was at a doctor's office. They both managed to evade arrest and deportation to a concentration camp, but now they couldn't return to their home. Their life underground had begun.

They found temporary shelter in the homes of friends, and then Max was told that the Confessing Church, an opposition group of Protestant Christians, was helping persecuted Jews. In desperation, the couple called at an address given to them.

To their relief, a pastor was ready to come to their immediate aid for a short period. But, despite intensive enquiries, no offers for accommodation in Berlin over a longer time could be found. Then, they heard of people in Pomerania, an agricultural region of north-east Germany, who were prepared to welcome them.

Buoyed up by the promise of those in the Confessing Church not to abandon them, Max and Karoline begin their dangerous train ride to Pomerania. 'Each train stop became a test of nerves, and each male passenger who got on plunged us into fear and terror, because any passenger could have been a Gestapo agent'.

From early March 1943, they found various places to stay in Pomerania, mostly in the homes of pastors. But after a while no more lodgings could be found and the Krakauers had to return to Berlin. Max believed that this return would prove their death sentence.

Fear

In Germany's capital, the search for new accommodation presented fresh problems. During August 1943 ever more air raids were launched against Berlin and the mass evacuation of civilians had begun.



Meanwhile Max and Karoline had receive an offer, through the Confessing Church, of accommodation in Stuttgart, a city in south-west Germany some 400 miles from Berlin, if they were willing to risk the difficult and dangerous journey there.

Against all the odds, they made it safely to their initial contact, a pastor who gave them the address of a parsonage in a small village called Koengen. They travelled there by tram and on foot to receive a warm welcome from the pastor's family.

No one took much notice of them, because there was normally so much coming and going of visitors to the parsonage, including weekend retreats. The Krakauers stayed three weeks, with Max helping in the garden and Karoline in the kitchen.

But then they had to move on. Frequent changes of address were essential to avoid suspicion. Various pastors were searching for somewhere the Krakauers could stay next.

The constant fear of being detected was hard on Max's nerves. There were moments when he seemed to lose all courage. He and Karoline were particularly burdened with the knowledge that they were endangering the people helping them.

Especially nerve-racking for them and their protectors were the final months before the war's end. Max wrote in his memoir: 'The prospects of our rescue and the danger of our capture increased proportionately'.

Liberation

In April 1945 the Krakauers moved to another village parsonage. Pastor Spieth was involved in the war, but the Krakauers were to be looked after by his 24-year-old wife, Hildegard, who also cared for the Spieths' small child and some lodgers.

The arrival of American troops would only be a matter of time, so the Krakauers stayed first for one week, then for two.

If retreating German soldiers took over the parsonage, the Krakauers might be discovered and it would be a death sentence for everyone in the house. The other guests asked Hildegard to send Max and Karoline away, but she refused to do so.

Finally the big moment arrived, on 21 April 1945. 'It was four in the afternoon. We were having coffee, when we heard someone shout in the street outside, "American tanks!"

'I rushed outside while the women and some neighbours rushed into the basement. Slowly, three American soldiers advanced up the street, looking alertly in all directions. They were followed by a jeep with five soldiers. Then, a few armoured cars pulled round the corner and took up position by the church.

"They are here", I yelled to my wife, barely able to keep my emotions under control. She came closer and was followed by those who had rushed into the basement ... I held on to my wife's arm and my fingers firmly seized the fabric of her coat...

'My wife looked at me, I looked at her, and both of us couldn't speak a word. But the expression on our faces spoke louder than words: we would see our child again'. For Max and Karoline the day of liberation had come.

New York

After the war the Krakauers lived in the Stuttgart region and Max worked once more as a film distributor. They kept in touch with their rescuers. Max passed away in 1965, aged 76, and Karoline died seven years later, aged 77.

They saw their daughter, Inge, soon after the war's end. She lived in England until 1948. There she married and had a son, later immigrating to the United States and living in New York. Max and Karoline's only grandson, Werner, died of cancer at the young age of 28. Inge lived in Long Island, New York, where she passed away in 2001.

The 'string of parsonages', described in this story, later became well known, as it also hid another 15 Jews.

Lights in darkness

by Max Krakauer, is translated and introduced by Professor Hans Martin Wuerth, with added maps, chronology and epilogue;

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