

A Hanukkah Gift, Part I

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Published on Stories Space on 14 Dec 2011

A wounded German soldier and a Jewish girl hiding from the Gestapo save each others' lives.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/romance-/a-hanukkah-gift-part-i.aspx>

Patches of snow flecked the dirt road in rural France as a squad of German soldiers rode by on motorcycles. A land mine exploded, destroying the first motorcycle, and killing the rider. The other motorcycles crashed. Their riders tried to shoot at unseen enemies. French resistance fighters quickly mowed them down with submachine gun fire. The resistance fighters fled to avoid the approach of more Germans. All was silent. Each of the German soldiers had been killed but Private Hans Rickmers, seventeen years old, slender and slight, 5'7". He had been wounded in the leg. When he was sure the resistance fighters had left he began calling out to his older brother, "Karl! Karl!" When he discovered the body of his brother, Hans began to cry bitterly. After he composed himself, he applied a first aid bandage to the wound over his trousers to slow the bleeding. Using a rifle in addition to his own, as a makeshift crutch, he began to hobble painfully down the road to find a farm house. When he found one, he walked to the front door and knocked, knowing that a French man on the other side might kill him. A girl opened the door. She was perhaps a year younger than Hans, and several inches shorter. She had a slender, shapely body, a pretty face, and the dark eyes and straight black hair of people who live in countries bordering the Mediterranean. In his best school boy French, Hans said simply, "I have been shot. My brother is dead. May I come in?" "Of course," the girl said. "Come in and close the door. I will do what I can for your wound." Hans walked in, and sat in a chair. The girl found a bowl to wash Hans' wound, some bandages, some rubbing alcohol, and a pair of shorts. "Here are some shorts you can wear, but you will need to remove your trousers." The girl went into another room while Hans changed. When the time came to apply the alcohol, she said, "This will hurt." Hans winced, but made no sound as the girl applied the rubbing alcohol. Then she wrapped a bandage around the wound. "I do not know what the couple that owns this house will think of you," she said. "Their son was in the French Army. He was killed when the Germans invaded. You are wearing his shorts. I will show you his room. Stay there until I talk to his parents." While Hans and the girl waited for the return of the French farm couple, there was a knock at the door. The girl opened it to greet a young French man. "Hello, Louis," she said. "Ruth," the man began, "we ambushed a squad of Germans. We thought we killed all of them. When we went back to collect their rifles and ammunition we found that one had left. He left a trail of blood leading this way. You must be careful." "Thank you, Louis. I will be." Several hours later Ruth went into the room where Hans was waiting.

“The French couple said you can stay until you can walk better. Then you must leave. The man will drive you near to where a train depot is. Remember that if the neighboring farmers learn about this they will kill the couple that is hiding you. They will probably kill me too.” “My company commander will think I have deserted.” Hans had been struggling with French, so Ruth said to him in German, “Write a letter. Tell him you have been taken in by a family of German sympathizers, who do not want them to come to pick you up, because they will be killed. Do not write a return address on the letter. I will mail it.” “Your German is flawless,” Hans said. “Why is a German girl here?” “I am Jewish.” “Why didn’t you kill me?” “You have a gun. Why don’t you kill me?” “I do not hate Jews,” Hans replied adamantly. “I love Germany.” “My father did too,” the girl said. “He fought in the German Army on the Western Front in the last war. He was wounded. He and my mother were killed at Dachau .” “My parents died in a bombing raid.” “Well then,” the girl said, “I guess we are both orphans. My name is Ruth.” “I am Hans. Why are you doing this for me?” “Everywhere in the world millions of people are being killed, Hans. If I can save one life I think it’s a good thing.” By now Hans had unpacked the contents of his knapsack. Ruth picked up a book with a black leather binding. She read the title. “Serviceman’s New Testament . Are you devout?” she asked. As she leafed through the pages, she said, “Yes. You’ve been reading it. It even has the Psalms.” “Read me your favorite one.” Ruth turned the pages and said, “This is the beginning of Psalm 137, ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Zion. As for our harps, we hanged them up upon the trees that are therein. For they that led us away captive, required of us then a song, and melody in our heaviness: Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; yea, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy’.” When it was time for Hans to leave the farm house he told Ruth, “I know a minister in Germany who can make counterfeit passports. You could easily pass for a French girl. If you go to Spain you will be safe.” “Come with me,” Ruth said, “Leave that army.” “I cannot betray my comrades.” “Get me a passport, and I will leave. I will write letters to you.” “Think of it as a Hanukkah gift.” Several weeks later, when Hans was back in Germany on leave he entered a large wooden church that had been built during the Middle Ages. The minister was at the organ playing “Oh Come Oh Come Emanuel.” The music filled the church. When the minister was finished Hans walked down the aisle of the church, and said, “Hello Pastor.” “Well, hello Hans,” the minister said. “You look quite handsome in your uniform. Do you have a photograph of Ruth?” “Yes, Pastor. Here it is.” The minister looked at the photograph. “Ruth is quite beautiful,” he said. “Are you sure you want her to go all the way to Spain?” “Yes Pastor.” “Very well. I will have the passport ready tomorrow.” As Hans left the church he passed the minister’s wife. After he left she walked down the church aisle. “Yes wife,” the minister said in a subdued tone of voice. “Another one?” she asked. “Yes.” The woman said, “Someday the Gestapo will come for you. What will I do then?” “The same thing I am doing.” When Hans and Ruth went to the train depot everyone thought she was just another pretty French girl. When it was time for her to get onto the train Hans wanted to kiss her, but did not try to. She wanted to kiss him, but did not take the initiative. “Please live,” she told him. “Please love me forever.” Hans gently squeezed her hand.

She got into the train, and waved to him from a window as the train left. Several weeks later the other soldiers in Hans' company were ordered to depart for fortifications on the French coast in preparation for the Allied invasion. Hans was ordered to remain alone in the barracks. Two days later he was ordered to speak to the regimental commander in private. Hans walked to the colonel's office and knocked on the door. "Come in," the colonel commanded. Hans entered, and stood at attention before the colonel's desk. "Close and lock the door," the colonel said. Hans did. The colonel was tall, lean, and broad shouldered. His craggy good looks were marred slightly by a dueling scar. He looked every bit the ideal Prussian aristocrat. With his Iron Cross, his blond hair, and his blue eyes he could have been a model for a Nazi propaganda poster. The colonel sat back in his chair, touched the tips of his fingers together, and said, "Private Rickmers, I have some good news for you and some bad news. The good news is that your Jewish girl friend made it safely to Spain. She thanks you for saving her life." To be continued...