



The Miracle at the Berlin Wall

By Taylor Caldwell

The well-known novelist, Taylor Caldwell, met a radiantly happy couple at an airport in Athens. She wanted very much to get acquainted with them. The young husband responded. "In my travels over the years," she later admitted, "I have heard strange and dreadful stories, and many that cannot be explained. But the story this young man told me is one of the strangest and the most moving."

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LAST JANUARY I visited the Holy Land again for fresh material for a novel, stopping also in Athens, Rome, and Lisbon.

For a full year before, life had become intolerable to me for various reasons, and I had to force myself to make this trip. In Rome I had what is known as a "coronary accident" and was told that I must remain in the hospital for at least a month. I decided, however, that I must continue my journey to the Holy Land no matter the cost and so left the hospital. I do not advise this as an ordinary rule, but I had reached such a state of mind and body that I did not care what happened to me. I was also full of bitterness; nothing was further from my mind than spiritual consolations or reflections, and I was physically pretty low.

THE RADIANTLY HAPPY COUPLE

I had to wait in the airport at Athens for two hours because the plane going to the Holy Land was "delayed." The airport was crowded, and there were many crying children. All I wanted was to sit back, close my eyes, and hope the pain in my heart would stop for a few hours. I was not happy when a young couple with a baby sat down on the bench with me. I gave them a surly look, and the mother, a mere girl, smiled back at me radiantly and prepared to nurse her baby. She was hardly more than 19 and very thin and pale and shabby. Her husband, probably about 21, was in an equally emaciated state. Neither was dressed for cold weather, but fortunately Athens is mild even in January. Their infant, a little boy about a month old, was not fretful in spite of being pale and too thin.

As the mother nursed her child, the young father stood over them protectively. They had their luggage with them, two very small and battered pieces of a foreign make, and old. In spite of my own misery, I was touched by the sight of these young people, so poverty-stricken, so alone. Yet I saw that they radiated joy and contentment.

I began to wonder about them. My command of foreign languages is not very outstanding, and it is not my way to strike up conversations with strangers. But somehow I wanted to know why these young creatures appeared so joyous and so serene; this is certainly no world where even the young should feel peace and happiness! And I had seen few such brilliant faces in many years. I tentatively tried out my French. The young man countered with German; I shook my head. Then he spoke in English, perfect but slow and with extreme politeness.

In my travels over the years I have heard strange and dreadful stories, and many that cannot be explained. But the story this young man told me is one of the strangest and the most moving.

He, Helmar, and his wife Elsa and their little baby were going to the Holy Land under the auspices of a certain Christian sect. They all had been born in what is now known as East Germany, under Communist rule, and both the young man and his wife had been born long after Hitler was dead and had known nothing but communism all their lives. Fortunately, though it was forbidden to teach religion in Communist East Germany, their parents had been devout and reverent people, and in some way Helmar had been secretly ordained as a minister when he was but 20.

BECAUSE THEY REFUSED COMMUNISM...

Because the parents of the young couple had stubbornly refused to embrace communism, they had been denied the merest comforts of living. They were denied ration cards; they were threatened, hounded, harassed, reviled. But they stubbornly, if secretly, taught their children the faith of their fathers, had them baptized, and encouraged them to live as men must truly live if they are not to become beasts.

Helmar's and Elsa's baby was born Christmas morning. Helmar had been trained as a cabinetmaker and carpenter. Elsa had been working, up to the day she gave birth, as a domestic in the house of a "rich" Communist

and his bullying wife. She had been glad of the work, for sometimes she could slip extra food to her parents and her husband.

They lived with Elsa's parents in a two-room "apartment," sharing a bathroom with six other tenants, and they were never warm.

The young couple had decided, before the baby was born, that they must leave East Germany even if they were killed in the effort. They could not endure the thought that the baby would live as they had lived all their young lives, with no future and no hope, only fear and despair. They had relatives in West Germany who had tried the various consuls in West Berlin in an effort to get visas to France, England, or America for Helmar and Elsa. But the consuls were very shy about the whole matter. One must never, it seemed, annoy the Communists anywhere!

It was then Helmar heard from some leaders of his particular religious sect, who came to him secretly and suggested that he go to the Holy Land to a small church in need of a minister. For some reason, the thought of going to the Holy Land quickened the hearts of the young husband and wife. Had not their child been born on Christmas Day? Was not Helmar a carpenter, like the adoptive father of Christ? And was he not a minister? Their minds were made up at once.

THE FORMIDABLE BERLIN WALL

Of course, there was the matter of fleeing from East Germany and the Volpos, the German Communist police, who guarded every border, and especially the Berlin Wall. Helmar knew that it almost was impossible to cross over that wall; the land before it was mined. It was patrolled day and night by the Volpos and savage dogs. There were pits and barbed wire and loaded traps, and every day a number of desperately fleeing people, young and old, some only children, were murdered before they could even touch the wall. The police shot to kill; they took few prisoners.

But they could not live any longer in East Germany. They spent days and nights in prayer, growing more and more determined to flee, to save their baby. Whispers went about from their parents, from themselves. They had no money; they had no jewelry; and they had heard that those who assisted refugees did so for a fee, for the attempts were dangerous.

"Then, it was a miracle," said Helmar, looking at me with his large blue eyes full of joy. A man came at dawn to their house and whispered that it was arranged that he and Elsa leave that night for the Berlin Wall and an attempt at flight into West Germany. Their guides would take them to a comparatively vulnerable place in the wall, but once within sight of the wall they would have to take their own chances with the mines, the police, the dogs, and the lighted guard towers.

THE THREAD TO FREEDOM

A collaborator would mark the least dangerous path to the wall with a white thread, and they were, for the sake of the others, to roll up that thread as they proceeded. They were not to deviate one foot from this frail marking, not to show a light, but to stoop and crawl on their hands and knees as much as possible. Their baby's mouth would have to be taped shut so that not a single sound would alert the dogs.

They could hardly bring themselves to describe that fearful flight in the darkness, along dark back streets in East Berlin, filled with police, carrying their child and what little they possessed. It was very cold and snow was falling. The cobbles were slippery with sleet. No one dared to speak, not even in whispers. They darted into alleys and doorways at the sight of the patrolling Volpos. A walk of only four miles took several anguished hours.

There were no Christmas lights nor candles, though this was but five days after Christmas. Elsa was still weak from childbirth, and she had never known good food in all her young life. They shuddered in the cold; the wind tore at their faces and their poor clothing. They protected the infant as much as they could, and Elsa suffered with him, now that his mouth had been sealed. Though the air was bitter cold, Elsa was soon sweating from weakness and terror, and so was Helmar. They never stopped praying.

Then they saw the wall in the distance, fiercely illumined by floodlights. Here their trembling guides must leave them, whispering in their ears where to look for the white thread. And then the guides melted into the darkness, and the young husband and wife were alone, staring at the rude barbaric wall, topped with barbed wire, mined and guarded, which stood between them and freedom. They could hear the distant snarling of

dogs; once or twice there was gunfire. They heard the challenging voices of the Volpos. Then Helmar bent and kissed his wife on her cold and trembling lips, and she kissed him in return, and they went on. By the flare of the distant floodlights they soon found the beginning of the thread between two stones, as they had been told.

There was no cover for them in that wide mined area, constantly struck by glaring searchlights. When the lights swung about, they were to fall on their faces, as flat as possible, and remain constantly still. They soon were covered with mud, their clothing soaked with icy water. As if he knew what was happening, the baby did not stir in their arms.

The white thread led on and on, winding, and the hearts of the young parents throbbed with fright for fear of the mines, and they picked up the thread behind them. Then Elsa stopped. She had to rest a moment. Helmar urged her on with quick touches; he dared not speak. He pointed to three trees in the near distance, where they could stop for a few moments to catch breath, regain courage. It was a poor shelter, but it was shelter. So, they went on, Elsa's knees worn to bloody bruises as she frequently was forced to crawl over wet and stony ground, her hands torn. Helmar more and more had to carry the baby under his arm like a kitten.

They reached the trees and sat huddled together suppressing their gasps. Beyond the wall, they knew, waited friends, but those friends could not help them until they had scaled the wall. They had been told that the friends would cleverly clip the barbed wire a little so that Helmar could part it. The whole hearts and souls of the young parents yearned for the safety beyond the wall, for a little warmth, for shelter, for a short peace, for rest and, above all, for blessed freedom.

DISCOVERY, AND A PRAYER FOR QUICK DEATH

Then, to their terror, they heard a near voice shout, "Halt!" Searchlights swung about, probing. They heard the furious snarling of a pack of dogs. Now they could see three Volpos running in their direction, accompanied by their dogs, their guns held ready in their hands. In some way they had betrayed their presence, though they did not know how. It was enough for them that they had reached the end, and they held each other tightly and prayed for a quick death.

Helmar looked at me gravely in that crowded and noisy airport in Athens. "You will not believe," he said, "for there is no explanation. But it is true. We saw it ourselves."

For, as the young couple's despairing eyes watched the approach of their murderers and the leaping dogs, a young woman suddenly stood before them. They had not heard her coming. She had appeared out of the very dark and bitter air. The floodlights illuminated her. She was tall and slender and clad in an ancient fashion, her head covered by a deep blue veil. Her face and hands were as white as milk, and shining like the moon. When the searchlights touched her, she glowed and sparks of light fell from her garments. Her face was beautiful beyond dreaming. "More beautiful than an angel's", said Elsa, and her voice broke as she told me. "And in her arms she carried a baby, not older than mine."

She smiled down at the huddled young people below her. Her eyes touched the infant in Helmar's arms, and her lips trembled a little. Then she turned and faced the running Volpos and their dogs, and she lifted the left side of her garment and spread it between Helmar and Elsa and the Volpos, and now they could see nothing but light and the form of the young woman in that light, as if she herself were made of light.

NOTHING BUT THE WIND

The shouts of the Volpos and the dogs stopped abruptly, and there was nothing but the wind. A moment later there was a confused muttering and calling: "Where are they?"

The dogs came sniffing, then suddenly they howled and turned and fled, though the guards shouted after them, cursed, and fired their guns. "We were mistaken. It was only shadows," said a Volpo. But another swore that he and two others had seen a man and woman distinctly, in the edge of a searchlight. They began to stamp around the trees, cursing again, and as they turned so did the mysterious Lady turn, holding her child in her right arm, her left hand spreading out her garment to hide Helmar and Elsa. The boots of the Volpos pounded and splashed in a circle. They carried flashlights, and they turned them everywhere, even onto the Lady. They turned them on Helmar and Elsa, but they saw nothing at all but darkness.

Still muttering and swearing but laughing, too, they left and returned to their guard towers. Then the Lady

turned and smiled at the staring and shaking husband and wife, and she beckoned to them gently. They stood up and followed her. But Helmar remembered to pick up the thread behind him, and the Lady waited patiently while he did so, nodding in approval.

“Where she walked before us,” said Elsa, “it was like the full sun, and we could avoid all the traps, and we were not afraid any longer. Because we knew who she was and the name of the Baby she carried.”

They reached the wall. Here it was not so tall, and the stones were rough. Helmar looked at the Lady, and she pointed to the wall. He obeyed and climbed it, found the cut barbed wire and parted it. Elsa lifted the baby to her husband. He looked at the other side and saw the silent figures of his friends, and he dropped the baby down to them. Then he helped Elsa climb the wall, and he lifted her in his arms, and dropped her on the other side.

“And then”, he said, “I turned to thank the Lady, but she was moving away. And I said in my heart to her — and I knew she heard me. — “A very Blessed Christmas to you, for you have made our first Christmas a blessing”. And then the Lady was gone, and Helmar dropped down to his wife and child — and freedom.

“Her memory is in our hearts like the sun,” said Helmar. “We will never be afraid again.”


I had forgotten where I was and was greatly startled to hear my flight called. I stood up, and Helmar courteously put my bag into my hand. I did not know what to say. Then I said, “You truly saw her?”

“Truly,” said Elsa. “She remembered her own flight into Egypt.”

I looked back when I neared the gates. The young parents were sitting side by side, their arms about each other, and the baby laughed on Elsa’s knees, as if he knew, too. And so do I. My sadness and pain and despair left me. I had hope again.

The Immaculata excites in our hearts a love toward Herself even to an entire dedication of ourselves to Her cause, a cause to win all the more souls for Her love – indeed, to help all souls to know and love Her, and through Her to draw near to the Divine Heart of Jesus, Whose love for us extended even to the Cross and the Tabernacle. — St. Maximilian Kolbe.

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