

17. All This Long Time

The war would end. Uncle Henrik had said that, and it was true. The war ended almost two long years later. Annemarie was twelve.

Churchbells rang all over Copenhagen, early that May evening. The Danish flag was raised everywhere. People stood in the streets and wept as they sang the national anthem of Denmark.

Annemarie stood on the balcony of the apartment with her parents and sister, and watched. Up and down the street, and across on the other side, she could see flags and banners in almost every window. She knew that many of those apartments were empty. For nearly two years, now, neighbors had tended the plants and dusted the furniture and polished the candlesticks for the Jews who had fled. Her mother had done so for the Rosens.

"It is what friends do," Mama had said.

Now neighbors had entered each unoccupied, waiting apartment, opened a window, and hung a symbol of freedom there.

This evening, Mrs. Johansen's face was wet with tears. Kirsti, waving a small flag, sang; her blue eyes were bright. Even Kirsti was growing up; no longer was she a lighthearted chatterbox of a child. Now she was taller, more serious, and very thin. She looked like the pictures of Lise at seven, in the old album.

Peter Neilsen was dead. It was a painful fact to recall on this day when there was so much joy in Denmark. But Annemarie forced herself to think of her redheaded almost-brother, and how devastating the day was when they received the news that Peter had been captured and executed by the Germans in the public square at Ryvangen, in Copenhagen.

He had written a letter to them from prison the night before he was shot. It had said simply that he loved them, that he was not afraid, and that he was proud to have done what he could for his country and for the sake of all free people. He had asked, in the letter, to be buried beside Lise.

But even that was not to be for Peter. The Nazis refused to return the bodies of the young men they shot at Ryvangen. They simply buried them there where they were killed, and marked the graves only with numbers.

Later, Annemarie had gone to the place with her parents and they had laid flowers there, on the bleak, numbered ground. That night, Annemarie's parents told her the truth about Lise's death at the beginning of the war.

"She was part of the Resistance, too," Papa had explained. "Part of the group that fought for our country in whatever ways they could."

"We didn't know," Mama added. "She didn't tell us. Peter told us after she died."

"Oh, Papa!" Annemarie cried. "Mama! They didn't shoot Lise, did they? The way they did Peter, in the public square, with people watching?" She wanted to know, wanted to know it all, but wasn't certain that she could bear the knowledge.

But Papa shook his head. "She was with Peter and others in a cellar where they held secret meetings to make plans. Somehow the Nazis found out, and they raided the place that evening. They all ran different ways, trying to escape.

"Some of them *were* shot," Mama told her sadly. "Peter was shot, in the arm. Do you remember that Peter's arm was bandaged, and in a sling, at Lise's funeral? He wore a coat over it so that no one would notice. And a hat, to hide his red hair. The Nazis were looking for him."

Annemarie didn't remember. She hadn't noticed. The whole day had been a blur of grief. "But what about Lise?" she asked. "If she wasn't shot, what happened?"

"From the military ear, they saw her running, and simply ran her down."

"So it was true, what you said, that she was hit by a ear."

"It was true," Papa told her.

"They were all so young," Mama said, shaking her head. She blinked, closed her eyes for a moment, and took a long, deep breath. "So very, very young. With so much hope."

Now, remembering Lise, Annemarie looked from the balcony down into the street. She saw that below, amid the music, singing, and the sound of the churchbells, people were dancing. It brought back another memory, the memory of Lise so long ago, wearing the yellow dress, dancing with Peter on the night that they announced their engagement.

She turned and went to her bedroom, where the blue trunk still stood in the corner, as it had all these years. Opening it, Annemarie saw that the yellow dress had begun to fade; it was discolored at the edges where it had lain so long in folds.

Carefully she spread open the skirt of the dress and found the place where Ellen's necklace lay hidden in the pocket. The little Star of David still gleamed gold.

"Papa?" she said, returning to the balcony, where her father was standing with the others, watching the rejoicing crowd. She opened her hand and showed him the necklace. "Can you fix this? I have kept it all this long time. It was Ellen's."

Her father took it from her and examined the broken clasp. "Yes," he said. "I can fix it. When the Rosens come home, you can

give it back to Ellen."

"Until then," Annemarie told him, "I will wear it myself."

Afterword

How much of Annemarie's story is true? I know I will be asked that. Let me try to tell you, here, where fact ends and fiction begins.

Annemarie Johansen is a child of my imagination, though she grew there from the stories told to me by my friend Annelise Platt, to whom this book is dedicated, who was herself a child in Copenhagen during the long years of the German occupation.

I had always been fascinated and moved by Annelise's descriptions not only of the personal deprivation that her family and their neighbors suffered during those years, and the sacrifices they made, but even more by the greater picture she drew for me of the courage and integrity of the Danish people under the leadership of the king they loved so much, Christian X.

So I created little Annemarie and her family, set them down in a Copenhagen apartment on a street where I have walked myself, and imagined their life there against the real events of 1943.

Denmark surrendered to Germany in 1940, it is true; and it was true for the reasons that Papa explained to Annemarie: the country was small and undefended, with no army of any size. The people would have been destroyed had they tried to defend themselves against the huge German forces. So—surely with great sorrow—King Christian surrendered, and overnight the soldiers moved in.

From then on, for five years, they occupied the country. Visible on almost every street corner, always armed and spit-shined, they controlled the newspapers, the rail system, the government, schools, and hospitals, and the day-to-day existence of the Danish people.

But they never controlled King Christian. It is true that he rode alone on his horse from the palace every morning, unguarded, and greeted his people; and though it seems so charming as to be a flight of author's fancy, the story that Papa told Annemarie, of the soldier who asked the Danish teenager, "Who is that man?"—that story is recorded in one of the documents that still remain from that time.

It is true, too, that in August 1943 the Danes sank their own entire navy in Copenhagen harbor as the Germans approached to take over the ships for their own use. My friend Annelise remembers it, and many who were children at the time would have been awakened, as little Kirsti was, by the explosions and the fiercely lighted sky as the ships burned.

On the New Year of the Jewish High Holidays in 1943, those who gathered to worship at the synagogue in Copenhagen, as the fictional Rosens did, were warned by the rabbi that they were to be taken and "relocated" by the Germans.

The rabbi knew because a high German official told the Danish government, which passed the information along to the leaders of the Jewish community. The name of that German was G. F. Duckwitz, and I hope that even today, so many years later, there

are flowers on his grave, because he was a man of compassion and courage.

And so the Jews, all but a few who didn't believe the warning, fled the first raids. They fled into the arms of the Danes, who took them in, fed them, clothed them, hid them, and helped them along to safety in Sweden.

In the weeks following the Jewish New Year, almost the entire Jewish population of Denmark—nearly seven thousand people—was smuggled across the sea to Sweden.

The little hand-hemmed linen handkerchief that Annemarie carried to her uncle? Surely something made up by an author who wanted to create a heroine out of a fictional little girl?

No. The handkerchief as well is part of history. After the Nazis began to use police dogs to sniff out hidden passengers on the fishing boats, Swedish scientists worked swiftly to prevent such detection. They created a powerful powder composed of dried rabbit's blood and cocaine; the blood attracted the dogs, and when they sniffed at it, the cocaine numbed their noses and destroyed, temporarily, their sense of smell. Almost every boat captain used such a permeated handkerchief, and many lives were saved by the device.

The secret operations that saved the Jews were orchestrated by the Danish Resistance, which, like all Resistance movements, was

composed mainly of the very young and very brave. Peter Neilsen, though he is fictional, represents those courageous and idealistic young people, so many of whom died at the hands of the enemy.

In reading of the Resistance leaders in Denmark, I came across an account of a young man named Kim Malthe-Bruun, who was eventually captured and executed by the Nazis when he was only twenty-one years old. I read his story as I had read many others, turning the pages, skimming here and there: this sabotage, that tactic, this capture, that escape. After a while even courage becomes routine to the reader.

Then, quite unprepared, I turned the page and faced a photograph of Kim Malthe-Bruun. He wore a turtleneck sweater, and his thick, light hair was windblown. His eyes looked out at me, unwavering on the page.

Seeing him there, so terribly young, broke my heart. But seeing the quiet determination in his boyish eyes made me determined, too, to tell his story, and that of all the Danish people who shared his dreams.

So I would like to end this with a paragraph written by that young man, in a letter to his mother, the night before he was put to death.

...and I want you all to remember—that you must not dream yourselves back to the times before the

war, but the dream for you all, young and old, must be to create an ideal of human decency, and not a narrow-minded and prejudiced one. That is the great gift our country hungers for, something every little peasant boy can look forward to, and with pleasure feel he is a part of—something he can work and fight for.

Surely that gift—the gift of a world of human decency—is the one that all countries hunger for still. I hope that this story of Denmark, and its people, will remind us all that such a world is possible.