

Hello Zaher,

I am 78 years old and live in the United States. Seventy years ago, when I was 8 years old like you, I was also a refugee. I'm writing to share my story with you to let you know that, no matter how bad things may seem, there are good people in this world who can make everything better.

From 1939 until January 1945 I had lived a rather comfortable life with my mother, my little brother, and my German Shepherd dog, Senta, on my grandfather's farm in Langendorf in East Prussia, the most eastern province of Germany. Although World War II was raging in Europe, we had plenty of bread, potatoes, milk, eggs and meat. In the autumn of 1944, I had just started the second grade at school.

All of this came to an abrupt end when the Russian army swept into East Prussia forcing us to try to escape to the West in a horse-drawn wagon with only a few possessions. When my mother told me that we had to leave Senta behind, I sobbed for hours. The Russians caught us on April 15, 1945, trapping us for the next 3-1/2 years in Russian-controlled territory.

During that time everyone twelve years old and older, including my mother, had to work twelve-hour days on a "Kolkhoz" (a Russian state-run farm). The daily wage was 300 grams of bread. For the German children, like me, there was no school. Instead, I spent all my time with my 9-year-old cousin searching for firewood, which we sawed and chopped up for heat and cooking. We also collected nettle leaves (which my grandmother cooked like spinach) and went into the forest to gather acorns, berries, and mushrooms. In the fall we found potatoes left on harvested potato fields. When I dared, I also sneaked onto the fields to steal potatoes.

The winters, when nothing grew and everything was covered with snow and ice, were the worst time for all of us. Not a single day went by when I wasn't hungry. To help my family I went begging for bread at Russian-occupied houses. During that terrible time, many German refugees died of starvation.

Finally, in September 1948, my family, together with 900 other Germans, was brought by freight train to East Berlin. The trip, which normally took ten hours, lasted two weeks. After ten weeks in Communist East Germany my mother, my brother and I crossed the border illegally to West Germany where we spent almost two years in a crowded refugee camp, a former ammunition dump. There were only a few fathers in the camp. Most of the fathers had either died in the war or were still missing.

Our room in the refugee camp was 20-square meters and we shared toilets down the hallway with nineteen other refugee families. I returned to school, where my shabby clothes and my limited education embarrassed me. My mother got a job working on a nearby farm so we were no longer starving. We had enough bread, potatoes, margarine and vegetables. But we still could not afford to buy meat and decent clothing. They were just too expensive.

Then, one day, out of the blue, we received a huge CARE parcel from America with an incredible collection of packages and cans: rice, raisins, dried plums, fruit salad, coffee, coco powder, corned beef and spam. The CARE parcel had been sent by a Mennonite Christian farm family from Pennsylvania in the United States. One of the cans was filled with fruit salad. As I savored my first spoonful, I was sure that fruit salad was the kind of food the angels ate in heaven. The letter from the farmer's wife was written in an old-fashioned German mixed with a number of English words. My mother was so touched that she cried. During the next two years we received more than a dozen CARE parcels from that family and my mother and the farmer's wife exchanged many letters.

Fourteen years later I immigrated to America and, in 1976, my American wife and I visited the Mennonite farm couple and met their large family. It turned out that they had sent CARE parcels to many families in Germany and that this was the first time that one of the receivers had come in person to thank them for all their good deeds. In the meantime the couple has died but their seven children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in various states of the United States have been our best friends for decades.

I trust with all my heart that your school situation is better than mine was and I hope that your life will also change for the better soon. No matter where you are, always try to learn as much as possible by reading books. The day will come when it all will pay off. Enclosed are a photograph which shows me and our dog Senta on my grandfather's farm in East Prussia and a photo of me now as a seventy-eight year old man. My wife and I have been married for forty years and our sons are 31 and 33 years old. They are both five centimeters taller than I am!

Best regards to you and your family,

Gunter Nitsch