

# WITH YOU THERE IS LIGHT

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Jürgen looked at Fritz for a signal that he was ready. They were losing light and the freezing temperatures and vicious winds would soon make it completely impossible to complete the letter.

January 13, 1943

My dear Sophie!

We've had some very bad days behind us. For eight days we've been steadily retreating from Stalingrad. For eight days we lay outside in -30°C, without the possibility of getting warm. My hands are completely frozen. I was on the way to the main field hospital to get treated, but they are only taking the severely wounded.

I don't know how everything is going to work out here. The situation is pretty hopeless. When another fate doesn't befall me, with God's help and a miracle I am spared, then perhaps I will become a prisoner in Russian captivity. But I haven't given up completely. And if we don't hope for this life, what then can be taken from us? I will pray and pray again in the next few days, and you and all your loved ones are included. What can I do for you but ask God for your protection?

From my heart and in closest love, I send you my greetings, my dear, good Sophie. Tell your parents and your brothers and sisters hello, and also my parents and sister, should I be unable to do so.

I remain, your Fritz.

Artillery fire stopped in the darkness. Fritz wavered and passed out, falling into Jürgen, who folded the finished letter and put it in Fritz's chest pocket. It was dark when Fritz came to again. Starvation finally claimed two men's lives. Remaining green and grey colored faces peered out at Fritz. They couldn't expend their last energy on burying their friends. None of the men wanted to live anymore. They were more comfortable dying out in this forgotten frozen landscape, covered with lice, consumed with typhus, and delusional from hunger. Life would never mean the same thing as it did before, now that they knew this.

"Help me to the airstrip, Jürgen. It's near here," Fritz begged.

Fewer and fewer planes flew overhead. He couldn't remember the last time he heard one. Even the artillery fire was getting less. Survival was a thought greater than hunger or freezing to death. At the very least, he had to get the letter to Sophie out of Russia.

For two days they trudged along the freezing steppe towards the sound of approaching gunfire until like a mirage, they saw it. Thousands of soldiers surrounded a field hospital and what was left of the landing strip. They stood still like ghouls. The only sign of life was a thin strip of smoke billowing from the remains of a canvas tent. Fritz managed to get through the silent crowd of enlisted men and peeked into the ravaged tent. He announced himself as Captain Hartnagel. Rank still had meaning in this last place on earth.

"Captain Hess," the tent's only occupant replied. "Come in." Hess had somehow managed to find a cot, stove, and wood. The warmth from the little fire embraced Fritz and made him faint. The captain

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reached out to help him. With a torn grey uniform falling off of a skeletal frame, his face darkened by charcoal and black eyes deeply buried in his face, Fritz could barely tell if he was still human.

“Please. I have a letter in my jacket pocket. Can you take it out and make sure it gets posted?” Fritz collapsed onto the cot and lost consciousness.

When he woke, Hess had cut the boots off his feet and wrapped both his hands in a dirty cloth. His left hand ached like nothing he had known before. A moldy frozen piece of bread lay next to him. Fritz stuffed it into his mouth like a starving animal. The letter was missing from his pocket.

He was still alive.

“A plane finally came in while you were sleeping, Hartnagel. And rumor is that it leaves tonight. Only officers and the severely wounded are allowed on it. I’ll be on it. You can stay here and take your chances.” Captain Hess’ eyes glistened with madness as he toyed with a hand gun. Fritz nodded. Outside they could hear shooting and the distant rumble of tanks. They were coming closer.

At dusk, the zombie-like men began to shuffle towards the white bird that sat perched with its beak pointed into a lifeless pale grey sky. Hundreds of what was left of men slowly pushed toward the plane. Some fell down from the strain. Fritz watched from the tent. The captain was standing inside of the plane’s exit door, pointing the gun at the crowd, protecting his position. Rolling off of the cot, Fritz stumbled toward the plane. No one spoke.

The strongest officers hoisted themselves up into the plane, pushing the weaker and more wounded ones down. In between the chaos, medics hoisted the wounded on stretchers. Others squeezed and pushed their way in. The propellers stalled. Faltered. The pilot attempted to start them again and again. The engine sputtered. The pushing intensified. Some men started shouting. Fritz thought for a moment that he was being trampled. The plane couldn’t get off of the ground. The propellers were frozen.

It couldn’t start with all of the weight. Some men were trying to hold on to it as it attempted to taxi. This was a question of survival. All of a sudden the propellers began to spin. Then with great force and spinning like giant razors, the plane’s propellers pushed away the throngs of clamoring men.

Fritz heard shots. The officers positioned in the doorway of the plane began firing into the desperate crowd. Fritz got close enough to see that the shooter was Captain Hess. He shouted his name. Recognizing Fritz, he hoisted him up and into the plane. For the second time in two days, this madman had saved his life.

The last plane to airlift survivors out of Stalingrad began to taxi down what was left of the airstrip. It would still have to escape the baptism of fire from Russian anti-aircraft fire.

Munich, January 7, 1942

The fifth leaflet began in clear, political language. Hans deleted intellectual phrases in favor of persuasive statements. Hans, Alex, Sophie, Willi, and Gisela sat around the architect’s drawing table. Willi began to read aloud from it in perfect German characteristic of Northerners.

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Are we to be forever the nation which is hated and rejected by all mankind? No. Dissociate yourselves from National Socialist gangsterism. Prove by your actions that you think otherwise. A new war of liberation is about to begin. The better part of the nation will fight on our side. Make the decision before it is too late! A criminal regime cannot achieve a German victory.

Sophie brought in some more wine on a wooden tray.

“Who is going to read all of this, anyway?” Gisela finally interjected, her bow-and-arrow lips stained red. Sophie had liked her at the women’s camp in Sigmaringen when they had been forced to ingest Nazi propaganda all day long. Together the two women had silently rejected it and made fun of the others who gullibly drank it all in. Sophie had been grateful to Gisela for that. Now she was no longer sure who she was.

Alex flung a rubber band at her. Willi got up, looked around blankly as though he had forgotten his wallet, and excused himself. Women shouldn’t be allowed in on their conversations. Gisela had just proven his point.

Hans hadn’t even heard her.

“Let’s get started then. Let’s see if we can make 6,000 copies of the German Resistance’s fifth leaflet for every major German southern city. Falk will get it to Berlin too.”

“And Austria,” Alex chimed in. “Linz. Vienna. Graz. Salzburg.” He got up and closed the curtains.

Averse to rolling up her sleeves, Gisela said something about having to study for a literature test and left abruptly. Since Gisela’s presence, Traute attended fewer and fewer meetings. They all missed her.

By the time Sophie ran out of paper, Alex had fallen asleep on the table. Hans was still addressing envelopes on the typewriter. Tat-a-tat-tat, all throughout the night. The “t” key had broken and cracked every time Hans pressed it. Willi was still turning the handle on the ancient machine, oiling it gently as Sophie slowly fed it pieces of paper, sheet by sheet. Its handle fell off every few turns. Willi stopped and patiently screwed it back on, picking splinters out of his hand.

By the time they were done, they had two piles: 4,000 for mailings, 2,000 for distribution by hand. The hands on the clock had spun around and the moon was replaced by another grey morning winter sky.

Augsburg, January 22, 1943

On most days she was absolutely certain that all this work was going to make the difference. The student body at the university would revolt. They were going to be the ones to show Germany. To show the world. Today was different. On the way to the train station she slipped on a sheet of black ice, dropping the heavy knapsack filled with 200 hand addressed leaflets in envelopes. Fear bored into her from all sides.

Would this be worth it? If she got caught, surely they would kill her. As she picked herself up she remembered asking: for this she wouldn’t be able to have children? Or paint? Never see her mother or

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Fritz again? Or run in the fields? Listen to Bach? At this point Sophie turned her thoughts to God, remembering what Professor Muth had taught her.

Every thought was a conversation with God. Then, like the professor had instructed her, she stopped walking, closed her eyes for a moment and listened. What was it that specifically brought her mind to the hereafter? She knew for sure. There, she wouldn't have to worry about these kinds of things. She remembered when she and Fritz went skiing together before her graduation from school and how the mountain air felt like something she could imagine of heaven. They were so happy and free even when her binding came loose and she fell laughing. This memory propelled her forward to Munich's main train station to do what had been asked of her to do. For certain it was a Higher Power giving her the strength to do this work.

Sophie passed the first-class compartment, nodded her head to the well-dressed passengers until she found one empty. Entering it, she hoisted the green canvas knapsack—the kind the soldiers used—above onto the luggage rack. She noted the cabin number, 0175. Catching her breath and reminding herself to be calm, she walked to her reserved seat in second class. Her pulse thundered. She repeated to herself over and over until her pulse returned to normal: Thy will be done. Thy will be done.

Sophie's heart sank. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts. Travelers took up every seat in her assigned compartment. A young soldier in uniform. An elderly couple. A mother and a sleeping child.

"Excuse me," Sophie said, pushing by them, wondering if they thought it unusual that she didn't have any luggage. Probably not. Augsburg was only an hour south with the fast train. Hans assigned her to this city because she visited Fritz once before the war and together they snuck into his barracks.

The young soldier wanted to talk. He couldn't have been more than eighteen. His grey uniform and the heaviness of it hung on him as if he were just a boy playing a game of war. But his face revealed something different. His eyes possessed the knowledge that he was being sent to a battle that had no right to be fought and had no chance of being won. He looked again anxiously over at Sophie, wishing for her to start a conversation.

The soldier cleared his voice. Perhaps it would be his last chance ever to speak to a pretty, young girl. Rumors were spreading all over Munich about the fate of Paulus' Sixth Army. Sophie hadn't heard from Fritz in over three weeks. Although for a long time now she knew the war couldn't be won, shouldn't be won, she couldn't bring herself to believe that Fritz wouldn't be all right. He would find a way out.

"Have you been to Augsburg before?" he began.

"Yes, once," she answered. She didn't add that she'd been to the Prince Heinz barracks. She smiled to herself remembering how mad Fritz was when she and her friend Lisa got stuck in his room and he had to sneak them back out without the guard noticing. "And you?"

His grandparents lived outside of the Bavarian city and he wanted to see them again. He could have said "one more time" but he didn't. They continued on instead with an easy conversation, avoiding talking about the war, the subject that was deciding their lives.

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When they ran out of things to say, the soldier closed his eyes, and Sophie stared outside at the frozen landscape. She tried to imagine the trees in spring. She began to pray. She was going to act like an undercover spy whose cause was freedom.

Sophie went over the entire campaign in her mind, visualizing every step and each of the necessary most dangerous actions: collecting the knapsack in first class, buying stamps, posting the letters in various mailboxes, and finally boarding the 8:15 p.m. train with an empty knapsack. She was going to be very careful, and when she was finished with informing Augsburg's citizens about resistance, she would go on to Stuttgart. Suze Hirzel, her friend from the seminary, was at the university there and she wanted to recruit her. The German Resistance needed a few more women. They needed Stuttgart too.

Two days later, Sophie boarded the 4:30 p.m. train from Munich with a second knapsack full of leaflets. She proved Hans right. There was less of a chance that the police would search a young woman's bag than a man's. All men were supposed to be fighting on the Eastern Front now.

When the train arrived, Sophie looked up warily into the black, starless sky. Stuttgart, city of steel factories, received its share of Allied bombings. Because of the blackout measures, she couldn't make out the damage, and for a second it occurred to her that she hadn't contemplated the possibility of an attack. She thought of what she would do. She would throw the knapsack away and find a bomb shelter. Just like everyone else. As a way of dispelling her fear, she recited some of the leaflet's passages to herself as she walked through the station, filled with commuters and passengers coming and going, arrivals and departures.

"Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the protection of individual citizens from the arbitrary will of criminal regimes of violence—these will be the bases of the New Europe," she repeated the line that she and Alex had written.

Almost effortlessly, she tossed batches of letters into different mailboxes, walking city streets confidently and assured. The devastated city was like a ghost town. Only shells of municipal buildings remained. Most shops were closed and boarded up. A gaunt man with a yellow star on his torn lapel passed her. They didn't dare look at one another. No one in the streets of this city took the chance of looking someone directly in the eyes.

"Young lady. Stop." A voice called out from the darkness. Sophie froze and clenched the knapsack.

A black-uniformed man approached her in a side street near the train station.

She had just finished emptying the knapsack's contents into the last mailbox and was headed to Suze's apartment near the university. Had he seen her put the batch of letters into the mailbox? He would ask her why she was sending so many letters. And to whom. She had already prepared her answer: her grandmother just died and she was posting the announcements. Then why was she in Stuttgart if her identification papers said she was from Ulm. She hadn't prepared an answer for that question. Fear ran through her and with terrified eyes she looked at her accuser.

"Identification papers." The policeman looked her up and down.

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“What was in that knapsack?” he pointed to the empty canvas bag.

Sophie hadn't prepared for this particular question. Then, a lie came out, fluidly, unexpectedly, and perfectly. “I'm getting clothes from a friend who lives in Stuttgart. I'm on the way there now. She grew out of her wardrobe and is giving them to me.” It could have easily been the truth. She thrust out her papers.

The man scanned her identification documents. She wasn't much interest to him. He knew by their cover that she was Aryan. This girl seemed a bit frightened and his intuition told him to pry further but his mission tonight involved looking for Jews. His orders were to make sure that they were no longer walking the streets of his city.

“Do you know the way to Lindenstrasse?” Sophie inquired in the tone she used when she wanted something. She wanted desperately for him to start thinking about something else. It worked. He gave her directions and told her to get off the streets as soon as possible. It was no longer safe from bombings, even at night.

When Suze Hirzel opened the door to her apartment, Sophie immediately noticed that her friend had changed. There was little that remained of the fresh-faced girl from the seminary. Suze looked tired and frustrated. The two hugged, and Suze rushed her through the door. The girls talked until late into the night. Suze brought Sophie some fresh clothes and rubbed her feet until they were warm. The war had forced them to be mistrustful of others. But this friendship brought back the selves that they had been before the war took over. Suze played some Mozart on her flute.

When it was time for Sophie to go, she told Suze about what they were doing in Munich.

“I'm no longer guilty, Suze. I will not be guilty. We have stood up for what we always believed in. For our natural rights. For the things that were taken from us.”

“And if you are caught, Sophie? What then? What about Fritz? What does he have to live for, if you die?” Her friend pleaded.

“I won't get caught, Suze,” Sophie answered.

“Then why haven't others tried? They are watching us, Sophie. They're watching us very closely. And with your father's arrest, they'll be watching your family most of all. Please don't do this, Sophie. I have a bad feeling.” Suze got on her knees and begged.

“I'm absolutely convinced of what I'm doing. Even if I get caught, the war will be over soon. ‘Enemies of the State’ get ninety-nine days before an execution. The Americans have joined the war. They'll free us. The war will be over soon.” Sophie glowed and continued.

“Either we'll bring an end to this madness, or the Allied powers will. Soon. Don't worry, Suze. Please. Then we will be free again. I don't even remember what that feels like.”

“Sophie, leaflets will do nothing to change anything. And you're risking your life because of it.” Suze was pleading with her friend to come to her senses.

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Sophie's tied up the laces of her worn leather boots.

"I have to go, Suze." Sophie couldn't hide her disappointment. She put on her coat. "I can't rationally explain what I've chosen to do. Perhaps I don't even fully understand its consequences. I don't even think about it much anymore. Or I try not to. I think about those who are suffering—those who are powerless to do anything."

Suze started to cry.

"I think about Fritz, Otl, and Werner fighting in Russia under impossible conditions for impossible reasons. And then there is so much I don't know. Do those camps really exist? What do we really know for sure? But I will not be guilty. Everything else—and I'm sorry, Suze—is cowardice."

"Sophie..." Suze trailed off. "I don't possess the faith you have. I'm not as strong as you are."

Sophie smiled and hugged her friend. She couldn't judge a friend who was always more fragile than she was. She kissed her, shutting the door behind her. A razor-blade wind cut into her, causing her to buckle. She cursed the cold. The 11:25 p.m. train would take her back to Munich. She didn't worry about arriving at three in the morning. Sophie slept on the train and woke up as it pulled into Munich in the dead of night. She imagined her life at the end of the war. She thought about graduating from the university. The first woman in her family. Would she be a botanist? A horticulturist? Would she help to rebuild the woods, fields, forests, and gardens? She thought about marrying Fritz. He wanted to be a farmer. She wasn't sure she wanted to be a farmer's wife. But what she knew for sure is, like her mother, she wanted many children. Six. Or seven.

She walked through the silent and deserted city towards Schwabing. As Alex said, he was ready to carpet bomb the city with truth. That's how she saw it. The Germans wouldn't be able to deny what they had written. She prayed for Alex's and Hans' safety. She worried about them. Would they be as careful and meticulous and slow as she'd been? Or would they be impulsive and reckless? Sometimes she wondered if her brother calculated the dangers as closely as he should.

Hans and Alex distributed leaflets all over Munich until four in the morning. When they completed their mission, they had left 2,000 leaflets. Hans walked the north of the city in the night's freezing cold, and Alex covered the south. They were getting to be experts at working underground.

Walking her favorite city in those desolate hours, she admired the Neoclassical and Baroque columns and detailed façades. King Ludwig once hoped that Munich would be the next Greece or Rome. She chuckled. For them, it was. The German Resistance was carrying on the democratic traditions of Plato and Aristotle. Tomorrow the city would celebrate the ten-year anniversary of Nazism. Red, white, and black banners draped over the city's fine architecture, contaminating them.

Sophie thought again about freedom and God. She thought about all of their late-night discussions and debates, all the books she read to find the answers. The fifth leaflet summed it up best: Where there is no individual responsibility, there is no freedom. Freedom only exists when one can articulate and express it. The State can guarantee freedom, but freedom is always a question of the individual citizen. These leaflets were a culmination of everything she had learned. And now, everything that she was

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actually doing. The recipients of the leaflets would know what to do. They would break out of their denial. They would help return Germany to the Germans.