

CHRISTIAN HEROES: THEN & NOW

CORRIE TEN BOOM

Keeper of the
Angels' Den

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Judenhilfe!

The cold metal of the handcuffs chafed at Corrie's wrists. Her left arm was handcuffed to her older sister Betsie, and her right arm to her father, and each of them was handcuffed to someone else. Together, the chain of handcuffed people stumbled along the alley towards Smedestraat. The morning snow had melted into gray puddles that lay on the cobblestones. With each footstep, icy water splashed onto Corrie's legs. The group's Gestapo escort barked at the prisoners in German, trying to make them move faster, an order impossible to carry out. It was well after curfew, and not a speck of light lit the street. It was all Corrie could do to keep herself and her father from losing their balance and falling. There was no way they could march at the pace their German captors wanted.

Corrie's eighty-four-year-old father simply couldn't go any faster, and neither could Corrie, who was sick with the flu. The soldiers had dragged her out of her bed, and she felt so weak that with every step she took, she had to fight the urge to give up and collapse onto the cold, wet cobblestones.

As they stepped from the alley out onto Smedestraat, Corrie wondered whether she would ever again see the Beje, the house where she had lived nearly all her life. Would she ever again mend watches in its ground floor repair shop? And would her father's cigar smoke and the delicious aroma of Betsie's fresh-baked bread ever fill the house again?

It didn't take long to reach their destination: Haarlem police headquarters. For all of Corrie's life, police headquarters had been a place of safety and protection. It was where you went for help, or to report a stray dog you had found in an alley, or to inquire about your lost purse or wallet. But now it had become a place where people were taken and never heard of again, a place of fear and betrayal where ugly, unspeakable crimes were committed. These days, residents of Haarlem avoided police headquarters at all costs. Fear and dread squeezed Corrie's stomach as the large wooden door to the building swung open and the group was herded inside.

The glare of the lights overhead stung Corrie's swollen, blackened eyes as the line of handcuffed prisoners was led down a corridor into the old gymnasium at the rear of the building. The gym

floor was covered with thin mats, and small clusters of other tired, bloodied, and bruised people sat or lay on the mats. Corrie and her family were obviously not the first prisoners to be rounded up that night. Those already on the mats hardly stirred. Some just looked at the new group of prisoners as they were led into the room. It was better if the Gestapo didn't know who recognized whom.

Finally, the handcuffs were removed, and Corrie ran her hands over her battered and bruised face. The pain was still intense, but it would pass. What was important was that Corrie hadn't given up any of the information the Gestapo officer had tried to beat out of her. The secret of the "Angels' Den" was safe. For that, Corrie was thankful. A few cuts and bruises were a small price to pay for saving the lives of the six people hidden inside the secret room.

By now, Corrie longed to lie down on one of the thin mats on the floor and sleep. The flu made every joint in her body ache, her throat was raspy and sore, and her chest heaved with every breath she took. But instead of letting her collapse onto a mat, the German guards pushed her into a line of people that stretched to a single desk at the far end of the room. As minutes gave way to hours, Corrie steadied herself against the wall and wondered how much longer she could keep standing. Her body shook, both from the effects of the flu and from the shock that had finally settled over her about what was happening. She was scared, more scared than she'd ever been in her life.

Eventually she reached the front of the line. She was asked her name, age, address, names of relatives, activities she was involved in, and her movements during the past month. The questions seemed to go on and on. Even though she felt groggy and weak, Corrie knew the Gestapo interrogator behind the desk was trying to trap her into admitting something or giving up the secret of the hidden room. She prayed silently that God would help her to not say the wrong thing.

Frustrated at not being able to trap her, the interrogator finally waved her on, but Corrie stood nearby as her father was interviewed. Casper ten Boom answered each of the interrogator's questions clearly and proudly. After a few moments, a higher-ranking Gestapo officer walked over and looked at Corrie's father and then at the notes the interrogator had made. Corrie held her breath. Was something wrong?

Finally, in perfect Dutch rather than German, the officer spoke. "What is this old man doing here? The Reich does not want to baby-sit the old or the infirm; let someone else do that. You can go home, old man. Just promise you will not get mixed up in any of this underground nonsense again." There was a hint of kindness in the officer's voice.

Corrie watched as her frail father pulled himself up to his full height. Her father looked squarely into the officer's eyes and replied, "If you let me go, tomorrow morning I will open my doors again to anyone who is in need of my help. And I feel great

pity for you; when you arrest a Jew, you touch the apple of God's eye."

"*Judenhilfe!*" All hint of kindness had vanished from the Gestapo officer's voice. Instead his cheeks were flushed with rage.

Corrie then watched as her father bowed his head slightly to the officer, as though he had been paid a compliment. And Corrie knew in her father's eyes he had. The officer had just accused Casper ten Boom, clockmaker of Barteljorisstraat, Haarlem, of being a Jew helper.

"Sit down with the others, old man," the Gestapo officer snarled.

The bells of St. Bavo Church had already chimed one o'clock in the morning of February 29, 1944, when Corrie finally got to slump down onto the mat on the floor. Corrie was huddled together with her father, her older sisters Betsie and Nollie, her brother Willem, and her nephew Peter. As she lay there, too sick, sore, and exhausted to move, Corrie wondered what would happen next. Would the nightmare that had overtaken Holland ever end? Would things ever be the same again? How she wished Holland could return to the beautiful, calm, peace-loving country it had been before the Germans invaded. Violence, misery, hatred and death had all seemed so far away then. Life did have its hardships, but those hardships seemed so unimportant compared to those they now were forced to bear. And now this final hardship could well cost the ten Boom family their lives.

Yet scared as Corrie was about what lay ahead of her, this wasn't the first time she'd faced the possibility of her death.

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