

PREFACE

In May 1968 I spent several days at a retreat center in Darmstadt, Germany. At a time when most Germans preferred not to think about the Holocaust—or even denied outright that it had happened—a group of Lutheran women calling themselves the Sisters of Mary took on themselves the task of repentance for their nation. They assisted Jewish survivors, listened to their stories, and publicized the truth about the Nazi past.

While at the center, I attended an evening service featuring two speakers. The first was a man who had been a prisoner in a concentration camp. He had been brutalized and starved; his father and a brother had died in the camp. The man's face and body told the story more eloquently than his words: pain-haunted eyes, shaking hands that could not forget.

He was followed at the lectern by a white-haired woman, broad of frame and sensible of shoe, with a face that radiated love, peace, and joy. But the story that these two people related was the same! She, too, had been in a concentration camp, experienced the same savagery, suffered identical losses. The man's response was easy to understand. But hers?

At the close of the service, I stayed behind to talk with her. Cornelia ten Boom, it was apparent, had found in a concentration camp, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, a "hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest . . . the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32:2).

With my husband, John, I returned to Europe to get to know this amazing woman. Together we visited the crooked little Dutch house, one room wide, where until her fifties she lived the uneventful life of a spinster watchmaker—little dreaming as she cared for her older sister and their elderly father that a world of high adventure and deadly danger lay just around the corner. We went to the garden in southern Holland where young Corrie gave her heart away forever. To the big brick house in Haarlem where Pickwick served real coffee in the middle of the war.

And all the while we had the extraordinary feeling that we were looking not into the past but into the future. As though these people and places were speaking to us not about things that had already happened but about the experiences that lay ahead of us. Already we found ourselves putting into practice what we learned from her about the following:

- handling separation
- getting along with less
- security in the midst of insecurity
- forgiveness
- how God can use weakness
- dealing with difficult people
- facing death
- loving your enemies
- what to do when evil wins

We commented to Corrie about the practicalness of the things she recalled, how her memories seemed to throw a spotlight on problems and decisions we faced here and now. “But,” she said, “this is what the past is for! Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the perfect preparation for a future that only He can see.”

Every experience, every person. . . . Father, who did the finest watch repairs in Holland and then forgot to send the bill. Mama, whose body became a prison but whose spirit soared free. Betsie, who could make a party out of three potatoes and some twice-used tea leaves. As we looked into the twinkling blue eyes of this undefeatable woman, we wished that these people had been part of our own lives.

And then, of course, we realized that they could be. . . .

Elizabeth Sherrill
Chappaqua, New York