

Caspar's Sword



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 **Strategic Book Publishing**
New York, New York

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Strategic Book Publishing
An imprint of Writers Literary & Publishing
Services, Inc.
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor – 6016
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.strategicbookpublishing.com>

ISBN: 978-1-60976-433-3

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Judy Maenle

DEDICATION

*Thank you to Tom,
who is my love and anchor,
and thank you to Bethany,
my creative breeze.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

There really was a Caspar. He was my great-grandfather. I don't know much about him, but I admire his courage. He left Germany and the Prussian Army, to start a new life in America. Because of that bold step, all of his descendants have had chances that he never imagined. I don't think that he would have ever imagined a book being written about him either!

CHAPTER ONE



He came running down the stairs, making a whistling noise through the gap where some front teeth were missing. At the bottom of the stairs, he made a loud “Ka-Boom” sound: the sound of a human bomb. Tommy Haus was so excited that he had a whole week off from school for Christmas vacation! He had all the time in the world to play with his new toys, sleep in, and do whatever he wanted to do.

Because he and his family lived in Chicago, Illinois, there was a lot of snow on the ground this time of year. It was great to take the sled out in the snow, build snow forts, play war, and smell the smells of all of the neighbor’s cooking. They were German, Polish, and Austrian. Some even came from the Czech Republic, wherever that was. Tommy’s little sister, Joannie, who was four years old, loved the smell of cabbage, and she could eat it morning, noon, and night! Unfortunately, it gave her really bad breath, so Tommy called her “Stinky.”

Going into the kitchen, he looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was nearly 10:00 a.m. If he were in school, he would be in math class. His teacher, Mr. Mitchell, was a nice guy, but math was starting to get harder.

Maybe this week his brain would get a chance to rest, he thought, *and math would be much easier when he got back to second grade.* Tommy did like school when he and his best friend, Chuck, got to play on the playground.

They always played war, and talked about going into the Army some day. His parents told him that there was much more to life than being a soldier, but Tommy didn't think so. He didn't know why; he just thought the idea of wearing a uniform and shiny boots and carrying a gun around was just the best thing ever!

His parents wanted him to go to college and become a doctor or a lawyer. Tommy told them, "I can do that in the Army! They have doctors and lawyers and military police, and I can still wear the uniform and carry a gun. That's even better!"

Tommy's parents just shook their heads. They felt that he had no idea what it was really like in the military. The sacrifices, the separations, were going to be very hard. *Maybe he will change his mind*, they prayed.

They pray a lot, Tommy thought. He didn't know that they were mostly praying for him.

Sitting at the kitchen table, his mother was having a cup of tea with a lady who lived down the street, Mrs. Kocka. In the winter, she always wore this black wool cape, and it closed at her throat with a big red pin. When you saw her walking down the snowy sidewalk, from the back, she kind of looked like a witch. She had a funny accent that was different than some of the people in the neighborhood. It didn't sound German, more like Russian. Tommy often wondered if she was a spy, but he was too afraid to ask.

She didn't have any kids at home. Sometimes, Tommy thought about loaning his little sister to her, because Joannie was such a pest.

Girls couldn't play Army! Joannie was always trying to play Army nurse and Tommy and Chuck would just shoot her and make her go away, or tell her to go and bandage up the cat. Poor Kitty, she was always the injured soldier.

Mrs. Kocka kept busy, though. She seemed to spend all day at her computer. Tommy would see her at her desk, through the front window of her house, as he walked to and from school. He would wonder what she was doing, but he was too shy to ask.

What Tommy couldn't see from the front window was the small picture in the silver frame that

Ms. Kocka had sitting on her desk. It was a picture of a man and a woman. These were her parents, who had died in Prague when she was a teenager. They had gotten very sick during the winter, and had died of the flu. Anna would never forget how alone she felt.

She missed them terribly, and the only thing she had left of them was her dad's black cape, and her mom's red pin. She wore them whenever she could, just to keep her parents close to her. Sometimes, when she put on the cape, she could hear her mother's voice saying to her "Anna, stay warm until we meet again!"

"I will, Mama!" she always answered back.

Mrs. Kocka stood up and started to move toward the front door, her big black cape over her arm. "Well," said Mrs. Kocka, "I see that you have your hands full with this one," as she pointed to Tommy. "So, I'll be on my way."

She wished that she and her husband had had children. Lots of them! She would have been a great mom to someone like Tommy, a rascal but a very nice boy.

Oh well, she thought, no use in wanting something you can never have.

"I have some more people to dig up today!" she said, suddenly a little more cheery.

As she put on her big black cape and left, Tommy wondered what Mrs. Kocka did for a living, but was too shy to ask her. *Such a strange lady*, he thought. *Was she a gravedigger? She said she had people to dig up!*

After she left, Tommy asked his mom what Mrs. Kocka did. “She is a genealogist,” she answered. Tommy had no idea what that was. “She helps people find out who their relatives were. She goes to the library, and looks on the computer and with all the information she has, she helps find out more about their family.”

Tommy wondered why they didn't just ask their family. Maybe they were too shy to ask. He felt that way sometimes. His uncle John was really loud and always pointed his finger at people. That scared Tommy, a lot. It wasn't fun talking to Uncle John.

Aunt Marg always hugged everyone. She was a big lady, and when she hugged you, you felt it for days! Tommy didn't like to talk to her either. She always complained about her feet. Besides, her breath smelled like spearmint gum. He hated spearmint gum.

“All right,” said Tommy's mom, “let's take down all of the Christmas decorations, and put them in these boxes, so your father can put them back up in the attic.”

Tommy thought his mom was like a drill sergeant he had seen in war movies on television. She kind of told everyone in the family what to do, and they did it.

Tommy had never been up in the attic, so he agreed, although it sure sounded like work. They took down all of the ornaments off the tree, and put them in special boxes. Next they took down all of the garland that hung down the staircase, and around the fireplace.

When everything was taken down and packed away, Tommy's dad started taking the boxes up the stairs. Joannie saw them walking past her room with all the ornaments, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"Bye-bye Christmas," she waved to the boxes with one hand, clenching her baby blanket. Tommy pretended that he was in a military parade, and tried to salute his sister, and almost dropped the box.

At the top of the stairs, there was a door in the ceiling, and a chain hung down, with a ring on the end of it. Tommy had never noticed this before. Maybe he hadn't seen it because it was right in front of his sister's room, or maybe because he had just never looked up there before. Tommy's dad set the boxes down and grabbed the ring. He pulled on it, the door opened, and a ladder came down. *What a marvelous thing that is*, Tommy thought. *What a great place to hide things!*

Tommy's dad unfolded the ladder, picked up the boxes, and they both climbed up. "Be very careful where you step," his father said. "Heaven knows what's up here!" The attic was a storage place on top of the house, right under the roof. It smelled dusty and was warmer than the rest of the house.

There were all sorts of boxes, marked 'Baby Clothes' and 'Dishes,' and other things, like his sister's crib and tricycle. There was nothing much of interest to him there. Tommy had hoped to see some big old spiders up there. He would have put them in his pocket and scared Stinky with them. She hated spiders, and would run away screaming. Too bad there wasn't anything else good up in the attic.

Then, in the corner, was a really dusty green box. It was harder than the other boxes, not made of cardboard but wood, and it was nearly as big as him. It also had letters on it that were not in his mom's handwriting, like all the others.

"What is this?" Tommy asked.

His father replied, "It belonged to my grandfather. Your grandmother asked me to keep some of his things up here." Tommy's grandmother had died a few years ago. She always had a cough. *Maybe that's why she died*, he thought, but he was too afraid to ask.

Tommy's dad was not very interested in it, as he was trying to find a place for the Christmas boxes

they had brought up. He wanted to get this job done, so he could go watch the football game on television. As they both scrambled down the ladder, Tommy decided that he needed to come back up some other time, and see what was in that box.

Maybe he could sneak back up there, when no one was looking. *No, that wouldn't work, he thought, since the cord that pulls down the ladder is so high. He would have to stack things on top of a chair just to reach it. He better just ask his mom. After all, he didn't want to get grounded during Christmas vacation. That would be horrible!*

While the football game was on, Tommy went into the kitchen to talk with his mom. She didn't work in an office; she worked at home, sewing dresses and things for other people. Tommy was happy about that. She was at home when he went to school, and she was home when he came back. Most of Tommy's friends had moms who worked, and were gone all day, and he was happy that she didn't. Chuck's mom worked in an office, so his Aunt Gina stayed with him until she came home. His mother always seemed tired and crabby. Aunt Gina would fall asleep on the sofa, and Chuck would watch war movies on television while she was sleeping. Sometimes Tommy would come over, and Aunt Gina would lay there as if she were dead! One time, the boys wrapped her up in bandages and splints.

They were pretending that they were World War II medics and they were trying to save this big soldier's life. Aunt Gina woke up and was furious when she found her leg bound up with a broomstick.

At Thanksgiving, Tommy's mom would say that she was thankful that dad made enough that she didn't have to work away from home. Then her parents would smile at each other. Tommy's dad worked selling cars, and was a good talker. He could sell you anything, at least that's what his mom said.

He had started selling cars in high school, to make money. His mom, Grandma Minnie, had been sick since she quit work, and his dad had died, so Tommy's dad had to work as much as possible, for both of them. He stayed at the car dealership and moved up from selling cars to being the manager, but he still loved selling. He loved talking to people, and he got along well with everyone. But when he got home, he was tired of talking, and just wanted to sit down and watch television.

Tommy's dad's mom had to work in a factory, and Tommy's dad was always alone at home. Maybe that's why he liked to talk to people so much, because he was alone a lot as a kid. It was really important that his wife was home for Tommy and Joannie.

Tommy sat down at the kitchen table, and started fidgeting with the plastic tablecloth. He wasn't sure

how to talk to his mom about this. Maybe, he thought, it was none of his business. But then, that's why he had to ask.

“Dad and I were up in the attic just now, and there is a big green box up there. What's in it?”

Tommy's mom stopped chopping vegetables for the soup and looked like she was thinking very hard. “I think that it belonged to Captain Haus. He was your father's grandfather. He was in the Army in Germany.”

“What?” Tommy was stunned by this news. “I have a relative who was in the Army?” Boy, would Tommy's friends at school be jealous of this! “Do you have pictures of him? Are there medals and a uniform and all that up there?”

Tommy's mom took a deep breath, and now looked a little sad. “We don't know that much about him. He lived a long time ago, and all of the people who knew him have since died. We can go up and look in the trunk some time, but not today. I have too much to do.”

Tommy didn't sleep at all that night. He could not stop thinking about how he had a family member who had been in the Army in Germany. How cool! What was in that trunk—uniforms, guns, bullets, medals? Of course he would have medals. If he was in the Army, he must have been in a war, and he must have been a hero, and he must have earned

medals. That's how it always was in the war movies on television.

What was war like? Did he have to fight off other soldiers with his rifle and dodge bullets and get shot and hear bombs dropping? Did he see all kinds of blood and dead bodies? That must have been awesome, he thought. Scary and awesome.

All night long, he imagined himself fighting a war. He rode on a great black horse, no, a tank! And he imagined himself getting shot at and receiving medals for bravery, and girls kissing him and calling him a hero. No, scratch the girls kissing him part. Yuk!

Marching around with a gun and looking so important. That's the life for me. Killing the enemy and dropping bombs on them. That's what I really want to do, he thought, as he drifted off to sleep.



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