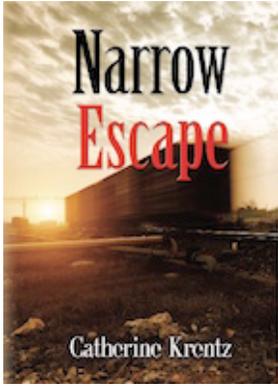


# Narrow Escape

Catherine Krentz



*War changes people and the main character, Johann Theodore Meyer, is no exception. The horrors of war and capture by the enemy are very real. Life "on the run" brings horrors of its own. Theo is forced to change and adapt in order in order to survive the war and its aftermath. Watch this transformation as you read about his experiences in his "Narrow Escape."*

# **Narrow Escape**

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# In Flanders Fields

By John McCrae, May 1915

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw the sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us to die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.



# Chapter 1

The wind blew almost unnaturally through his hair as he jumped from the platform to the open box car. For a second he couldn't see at all. Then the jaw of the open box car beckoned him and he landed on his knees with a light tap and rolled slowly until stopped by the hard wall on the opposite side of the dark car.

He was quite certain that he had not been injured. He quickly smoothed and arranged his hair into the squared off, blunt angled cut favored by the Russians.

He was a German amongst flat, dull-faced Russians and quick-eyed, chunky, little Jews.

He must not attract any attention to himself. For the moment he was safe. But he wasn't entirely sure which direction this train was heading. He hoped it was north or west as the flight from the last train took him out of a south-easterly aim. His heart was still racing and he needed to calm down and think. To get home to Germany he had to go north or west.

Suddenly, a small voice from the corner of the car whispered, "Who are you? Will you kill me?" He replied in his broken Russian, "No! Who are you? Will you kill me?"

All that the voice had to do was shout loudly anytime he heard someone approach or pass close by, "Deutschlander! Deutschlander!"

"I am Johann Theodore Meyer, a prisoner of war and I have been traveling a great distance and a long time trying to get home to a small town in Germany, near the North Sea, Aurich, by name".

The tension of the past month had become a load he wanted to shed. At any minute he could be found out and shot, or worse, on another train to Siberia. German prisoners all knew there were scores of prison camps in Russia that also housed Russian political prisoners. Occasionally, escapees from the camps would meet each other and tell stories that frightened any hearer.

"No! No!" he said to the faraway voice. "I will team up with you and maybe be able to help you or you to help me." Silence, stony paranoid thinking silence, hovered in the air.

He leaned back against the side of the car. He slipped into his usual remembrance which was a comfort to him. He envisioned the recently

germinated seeds in the fields at home in Germany. There was barley, corn, wheat, rye and oats. As always, this vision included the tiny glass buildings also on the property. The wonder was inside of these greenhouses. He always prayed for the tiny beautiful plants, that they would grow and be healthy. They would beautify our world or produce fruits that could feed a starving people. To him, they were tiny babies, reliant on him for all of their needs. How he had missed the fields and the seedlings in the greenhouse! Soon, home soon, to take up where he had left off. The growing of these green things was his purpose given to him by God!

The brakes of the train screeched to a stop. What now? The train belched its pent up steam and some coal dust.

He looked quickly around the car for another exit. There was not one. He shrunk his body up to become as small as he could. He was already emaciated by prison and being on the run. Starvation of prison could help him get pretty small. As quietly as possible he would roll out the box car door, planning to hide under the car and not be discovered. No one was around. He wanted to look at the land on the other side and formulate a destination. Then he would run.

He felt a small hand slip into his. His eyesight had adjusted to the darkness and he could see the ragged and dirty condition of his "companion."

What was he to do with himself with this smelly child in tow? He wondered briefly if smelly could be used to describe him too. His various wounds had healed, but he was still weak. Add the fatigue to the weaknesses and he was inclined to stay put. He breathed a silent prayer that there were no dogs around, who would surely detect them. Fortunately there were many strange people around who would concern dogs.

Eventually he would see boots, or hear talking or pick up some clue to help decide what to do, or what he must do.

It was time to examine the owner of the voice. He followed the arm attached to his hand to see a skinny boy who looked ready to run or crawl and hide. The whispering he heard next was, "My name is Piotr. Please don't leave me Theo. I'm scared."

We are both scared thought Theo. "Let's just roll out the boxcar door and hide laying on the tracks between the rails." So they did.

Theo judged the woods was about a hundred meters away. But to get there meant running exposed across the meadow which was full of clumps from the last plowing. People would most certainly see someone making a

## *Narrow Escape*

wild dash towards the woods with a boy. After all, there was nothing else to watch. Shootings were common enough as to be boring but were at least something to watch. People had turned cold inside and out. The War, the Bolsheviks, the deteriorating prison camps, and the crushed economy had demoralized people leaving them hungry and afraid. They wasted no pity on others, rather, lavished it all on themselves. The great background of WWI and the Bolshevik revolution played out against such a violent time in world history. Anyone could feel the tension in the air looming just around any cement corner.

Everything in Europe seemed cement; dark, ominous, cold if you touched it. Even though there were shadows against the cement, it looked cold and it was cold if you touched it. It was a metaphor for a world war to come; the cold war.

But Theo couldn't know all of this lying with the boy, under a rail car, on the tracks. The fear of a Bolshevik or Russian soldier finding him consumed him. He had sweated this out many times. If caught they would shoot him or conscript him to fight in their revolution. He had had enough of war.

Theo suddenly couldn't imagine running anywhere. He decided to just lay there and close his eyes. There was no way to know how long the train would be stopped anyway.

## Chapter 2

What seemed a minute later, the train was making startup noises and there were three pair of boots to his right. It was too late to flee anywhere. The train spewed and squealed and slowly started to move forward.

Theo thought he was soon to make a run for the copse of trees. The little voice seemed quite alert and ready to go. "Listen kid," he said, "I am on the run and I will run as fast as I can. Try to keep up." He knew it was a long run and a longer risk. But no choice remained. He had to fight off the slippery fear, think about his seedlings and run like hell.

So they crouched low and ran for the woods. Piotr tried as hard as he could to keep up. Arriving safely, they flopped down and tried to catch their breath. Then Theo noticed boots in front of him and he panicked again. Who were these people? He longed to hear German and hoped they were other German soldiers.

He looked up and saw six men, much like him, also looking scared. He spoke in German and they eagerly answered. They told their names and where they were from, where they had been interred and most of all their strong desire to get home.

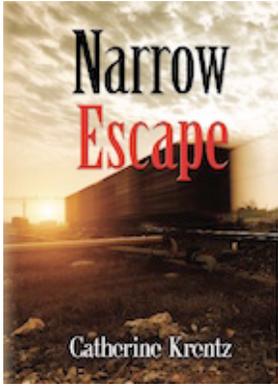
They all sat in a circle and the men asked the kid Piotr his story. He said he had brothers and sisters but he could not remember ever seeing them. "In my dreams we were always crying and cold and hungry." He spoke in Russian and some German. Enough to make them understand. "Well, we all have a story Piotr," said one of the men in the woods.

"Do you have any food?" Theo asked. "We do!" said Kurt. "I snared two rabbits this morning and will cook them now. But the fire has to be discreet. Russians might come investigating. Bolsheviks are the worst. Even though the war is over the Russians have done nothing to get us home to Germany. Top of that, we are forced to work for them or fight in their war." Heinrich said, "We mostly work when we can, get some money and hop a train going west. We ride as far as we can or the money runs out or the Jews threaten to turn us in to the military because we don't have enough to pay their bribe."

The fire was crackling and the rabbit smelled wonderful. It tasted wonderful, too. There was only partially enough to feed all those people, but they were feeling blessed. They had made it through the camps.

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And survived the Bolsheviks so far. They knew that if they were conscripted by the Bolsheviks there would be no escape and war always included fatal battles.



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