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May 2019

# The Strength to Go On

Klaus Stern was a Jew, so of course he was treated differently than the other “pure” kids, but he knew where he stood. He hated the times when he witnessed anti-Semitism, but what could he do? He was just a kid, he thought. Klaus tried not to let his religion be the only factor in his life. Like a jigsaw puzzle, all Klaus had to do was make the mad and happy parts of his life intertwine. The happy pieces of his life included his family, and games. But the brightest piece in his life was his best friend Walter.

In the year 1936, it was a Friday, and Klaus had finished school for the week. All he had to do now was assist at Walter’s parents’ restaurant and then he would be permitted to play with Walter, his best friend. Walter and Klaus were inseparable and had always been. One of the things Klaus admired most about Walter was that he didn’t concern himself with petty topics such as religion. Although, even Walter was changing now, and Klaus certainly didn’t like it. He sensed a storm coming, but couldn’t bear to face or prepare for it.

A few minutes later, Klaus entered “Walter’s” restaurant, with a skip in his step and a smile on his face. The smile slowly disappeared as he opened the doors. Walter’s mother Maria was behind the counter, and a distasteful frown minimized the smile on her face as she saw him enter.

Klaus watched in a resigned way as she turned away, ignoring him. They had gone through these motions many times, yet the sheer barbarism of her actions disgusted him. *How could someone be so cruel, so malicious, because of what I am, not who I am?*

Klaus stood there uncomfortably for a few moments before Maria said, “The tables won’t wash themselves, boy,” the contempt ill hidden in her voice. Klaus sighed, knowing nothing he ever did would stop the discrimination she was displaying. It was in his blood, his heritage, his religion. And there was nothing he could do about it. Klaus pushed down the anger that was welling up inside of him, pushed away the tears in his eyes, and robotically walked to wipe down tables. For the next 15 minutes, he did so in a brooding silence, putting his hate into the task at hand. The air between them was so fragile it would break on touch.

At last, Klaus was done. Maria grunted as he walked out the door, obviously pleased that her diner would be rid of such filth, both from him and the tables. Walter was waiting for him outside, and Klaus lost all thoughts of Maria as he walked up to Walter. That was, at least, until he saw the pained expression on Walter’s face.

“Klaus, we need to talk,” Walter said stonily as Klaus approached.

“Okay, come to my room,” Klaus said cautiously, watching Walter’s facial features as a hawk would, searching for any clue as to what was ailing him.

A few minutes later, when Klaus motioned for him to start talking, Walter said, "Klaus, I joined Hitler youth." He started to choke up. "I can't play with you anymore, in fear of being seen. My parents could lose their business if that occurred."

Time slowed down. *I joined Hitler Youth. I joined Hitler Youth.* The words ran through Klaus' head, moving evasively, as though making sure he couldn't catch them, examine them. Klaus sat on the bed, oblivious to anything but the fact that he couldn't be with Walter anymore. The last thing he remembered was Walter running out of the room, sobbing. Klaus would never see Walter, his best friend, again.

Although he tried to, Klaus never forgot this moment. And although he may have wanted to forget it, this moment probably saved his life many times. Klaus never forgot Walter. He never forgot their friendship, the trust between them. Klaus never forgot his best friend. But when he felt like he couldn't go any farther, Klaus remembered the powerful friendship he had with Walter, and that was enough to keep him going.

At the age of 20, Klaus married his girlfriend Paula. They both could feel the weight of the Nazi's rising power, and understood that war might be on the horizon. Because of this foresight, they agreed to meet in her hometown of Arnstadt, Germany in case they were separated. Eventually, they were. Klaus spent his time in a total of 5 different concentration camps, becoming malnourished, and slowly dying. But one thing kept him alive: Paula. Little did he know that she was working in a munitions factory in Auschwitz, also thinking of him. After 25 months in camps, Klaus was liberated. But he still didn't know where Paula was. Determined to find her, Klaus walked for 3.5 weeks across war-ravaged Europe, even after spending 2 years being malnourished and getting weaker. Eventually, he found her. The couple then emigrated to America and started a new life there with their kids.

Author's Note: Klaus' story inspires me in many ways. I am inspired by the way that Klaus still learned to trust Paula, even after Walter broke his sense of trust with his betrayal. I am inspired by the way Klaus had the determination to walk through war-ravaged Europe for 3.5 weeks, after being malnourished for over two years, even when the hope of finding Paula was desolate. That's what inspires me. His heart had been torn, his sense of trust mangled, and yet he kept going, without stopping. That alone is a show of great faith. He kept his faith in Judaism and G-d, even though so many bad things had happened to him. Klaus stayed strong in the concentration camps not just for his own sake. He stayed strong for Paula and his existing family. He stayed strong for his future family, and lastly, he stayed strong for Walter.

## Bibliography

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