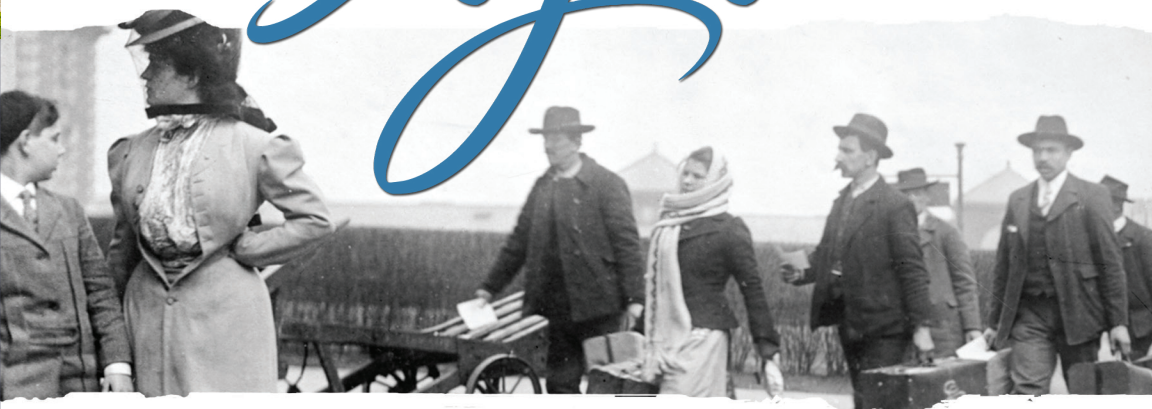


JOHANN & LILY - PREQUEL 1



MERCIES IN  
*Disguise*



MICHELE POLLOCK DALTON



*In loving memory of all those who have gone before me.*

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# Out of Africa



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## PROLOGUE

The Beginning  
(August 1898)

*Lubin, East Prussia, Germany, August 1898*

Shape-shifting fluffy white clouds moved leisurely across the brilliant deep blue sky as the evening sun cast a rosy hue over the bucolic landscape. The nodding heads of golden rye danced lazily in the breeze; and, six-year-old Lily Schwenderlauf was mesmerized by the cadence of the rustling stalks. Not to be swayed from her errand, the child held tightly to the basket her mother, Grete, had entrusted to her care. “Papa,” Lily gaily called as she approached the burly farmer and her three older brothers. “Mama has sent kartoffelknödeln<sup>1</sup> for your dinner.”

Waldemar, the oldest of the brothers, reached out for the woven basket. “Mama’s potato dumplings are just what I needed for this empty stomach of mine!” he declared. At fourteen, Waldemar was hard pressed to find enough food to keep his growing frame happy, especially during the summer months when every waking hour was spent toiling under the hot sun.

“Hurry home, Mäuschen.<sup>2</sup> Your mama will need you to tend the geese while she labors,” Papa commanded.

Lily twitched her nose disagreeably, a nuance that had earned her the

nickname “little mouse” many years ago. She would much rather stay in the field with her father and brothers. “Alwine is with mama until the baby comes. Should I refill the water bucket before I go, Papa?” she asked hopefully.

“No, you hurry back,” Werner admonished his youngest daughter. “Mama needs you.”

Dispirited, Lily turned and trudged back toward the single-story wooden dwelling with its thatched roof. Smoke rose from the chimney and was gently pushed towards the sunset by the evening breeze. A low barn leaned against the north side of the simple home. Even from a distance, Lily could hear the squawking of the gaggle of geese. Oh, how she hated those pesky creatures – they were always chasing her and taunting her with their fearsome beaks and long necks!

“Come quickly, Lily!” eight-year-old Alwine called from the door of their home. “It is time! And, you must watch Helmut and Hinrich!”

Scampering quickly into the poorly lit house, Lily hurriedly herded her little brothers outside. The deep groans coming from behind the partition wall peppered the evening air and struck fear in the little girl’s heart. She did not remember the night Hinrich had been born nearly two years ago. One night she had gone to sleep; and, the next morning the infant was in the cradle next to the fireplace. Mama had winked at Lily and told her Der Kindlbringer had brought the baby boy in his pack. Now that squirmy bundle of mischief was trying to make off with her scarf! “Hinrich, you bring that back!”

Four-year-old Helmut grabbed the graying kerchief and dashed away, straight into the flock of geese milling about waiting for their evening meal. “Are you afraid, little mouse?” the sturdy boy jeered, waving the pilfered linen over his head.

Snatching the straw broom from beside the door, Lily brandished the cleaning implement above her head and would have boxed her brother’s ears had a steady hand not stayed her arm.

“Now then, kleine sonnenblume,<sup>3</sup> what are you about?” the husky lad questioned, tweaking the burnished blonde braid that hung down

the little girls back.

“Johann, Helmut has taken my kerchief and given it to those wicked geese,” she cried, certain the loss of her headgear would merit a sound smack to her bottom.

“Well then, I am certain Helmut must be willing to give something equally as valuable in return. Perhaps the wooden soldier I carved for his birthday?” the young man suggested.

“No!” Helmut screeched, wading back through the clamoring animals to return the stolen item.

A wry smile stretched Johann’s handsome face; and, a glimmer of mischief twinkled in the deep brown eyes. “That settles it nicely then,” Johann decreed, before helping the girl tuck in her braids and retie the linen scarf. “On to the purpose of my visit,” he explained. “I have come in search of cousin Wilhelm. We are meant to journey together tomorrow; have you seen him?”

Happy with the outcome of the scuffle, Lily snagged the calloused hand that patted her head and said, “Oh, thank you, Johann. Mama would have scolded me soundly if I had lost my kerchief! But, I have not seen cousin Wilhelm since Sunday past. He and his brothers must be in the fields with Uncle Otto.”

Johann looked out over the waving fields of grain. The rye harvest had only begun; but, the call of the unknown and duty to the Fatherland was paramount in his mind. Dropping his gaze from the fields, he found a set of cerulean blue eyes pinned on him in adoration. That look reminded him of the wooden medallion shoved deep into his pocket. Fishing the carefully carved sunflower from its hiding spot, Johann held it out to the sweet child who had dogged his every step since she had learned to walk. “To remember me by, kleine sonnenblume.”<sup>3</sup>

Lily tipped her head back and scrutinized the grown boy. His sable colored hair was thick and wavy, with curls teasing the collar of his homespun shirt. His warm brown eyes held a teasing twinkle; and, Lily scrunched her nose as she considered his closed hand. Would she find a snail or some other horrible creature inside? Tentatively she tapped his

knuckles. "Let me see," she finally demanded, hoping that there wasn't a tree frog just waiting to jump out at her.

Opening his palm, Johann lifted the twine he had found to hold the pendant. "There you are, little one, a pleasant surprise."

\* \* \* \* \*

Raised voices broke the stillness of the morning. But, Lily had no desire to leave the warmth of the trundle she shared with Alwine. The shrill wail of her newborn sister, Friederike, added to the cacophony and Lily finally poked her nose out from under the lightweight quilt.

"You will not go!" Werner shouted at his oldest son. "You are too young!"

"I will not stay!" Waldemar contested. "You have Klaus and Christian to help with the rye. I want to travel with Johann and Wilhelm. Then perhaps we will be assigned to the same regiment."

"The Kaiser and *Deutsches Heer*<sup>4</sup> do not need more cannon fodder!" Grete wept, turning away to gather the squalling infant into her arms.

Johann and Wilhelm hung their heads and shuffled their feet. The conversation was reminiscent of those carried out in their own homes, the only difference in the argument being their ages. At seventeen and eighteen it was more difficult for their parents to object based on age; but, the timing of the trio's departure was a bone of contention that could not be circumvented. Harvest time was busy, back-breaking, and often a rush against inclement weather.

"Perhaps we should wait one more week. The rye harvest will be nearly complete by then; and, our families will be better able to manage in our absence," Johann offered.

Scowling, Wilhelm faced his cousin. "Time is of the essence! How many more ministers must die at the hands of those pagans?"

"I know your families would be relieved to have the harvest complete before you hurry away in service to the Fatherland; but, Waldemar will not be going until he is at least sixteen. Anything else is unreasonable;

and, I will hear no more about it!" Werner commented, shooting a stern glance at his eldest son.

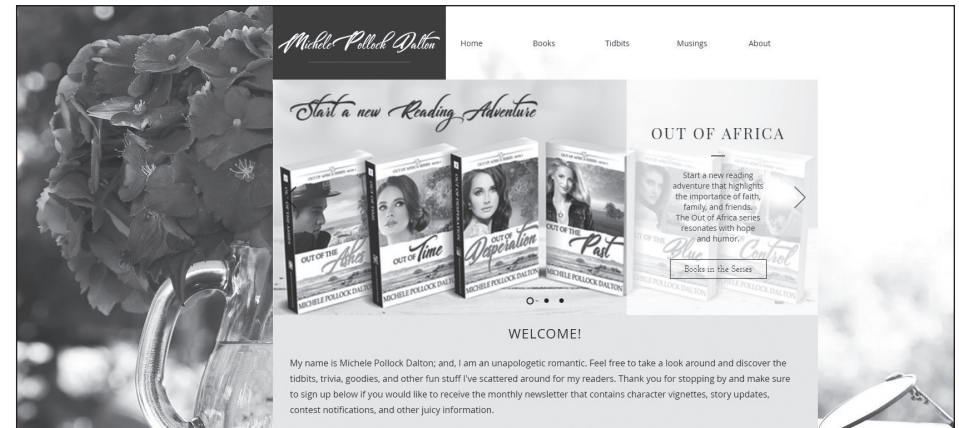
"Do what you will Johann; but, I will not be deterred. The train leaves in three hours; and, I will be on it. Are you with me?" Wilhelm arrogantly questioned. "My father has enough strong backs to bring in the harvest. Those Chinese devils will pay for the Juye incident!"

"Enough of this talk!" Werner commanded. "Daylight will break soon; and, there is much to be done."

Furious, Waldemar grabbed several warm buns and some leberwurst<sup>5</sup> before slamming out of the house. Wilhelm followed, determination in every step. Johann started when a small hand slipped into his.

"Must you go, Johann? The Dozynki Pod Debami<sup>6</sup> is coming soon; and, I will wear the wreath," Lily said, afraid for the young men.

"One more week, little sunflower, and then I must go. Wicked men must be stopped before more men of God are killed. It is my duty to the Fatherland and the church."



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