

Prisoners of War – Luise & Sofie Laderer and Pauline Schnitzer

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Western Europe – Germany

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Account of Luise and Sofie Laderer's Prison experiences in WWII

A Little of my Experiences at Stuttgart by Pauline Schnitzer

Account of Luise and Sofie Laderer's Prison experiences in WWII

Since we were asked to give a report of our experiences in 1944, we will try to give an outline of some of the many things we went through at that time. First of all, the reason of our imprisonment. One of our German workers, **Fritz Schuille**, **refused to take up arms, therefore was put into prison for about 1 year, where he had to suffer much.** He was condemned to death, but then was given the choice to be a stretcher-bearer and so was sent to the Russian front lines.* Various reports were then circulated about him and from that time we were sharply watched.

All our brethren throughout the whole land and our connections with other lands were all well known to the "Secret Service". One night a policeman came and told us he had been sent to arrest us. We told him we had done nothing and refused to go with him. After 2 weeks he came again and promised us it would only be for 2 or 3 days for questioning, so we went with him and were kept a day and a night in the Urach prison. Luise went to the same cell where Frieda Schuille (Fritz's sister) was already imprisoned with those who had to do the hardest work from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.. Sofie was kept in a small room with many other prisoners, most doubtful creatures. We were continually observed by SS officials, through a small hole in the door for that purpose. Only one small window high up in the wall made it possible to look out or see anything. Very little food was served and very bad at that. There was a continual coming and going, as new people were brought in and others taken away. So we waited from day to day, to be called to a trial or at least learn the reason of our imprisonment, but nothing happened.

Finally, on the 10th day, an Official of the Secret Service told us to go with him called us. The first question put to us was, "Do you know **Fritz Schuille**?" "Where did you get acquainted with him, at a public feast or at some other pleasure occasion?" Telling him, "He is our Preacher, etc." that fellow began to abuse our faith and fellowship in a way that made our flesh creep. He then tried to force **Sofie** to speak falsehoods and she refused, he took us down to a small dark cellar and locked **Sofie** in, saying, "I give you time to consider." **Luise** was then cross questioned for over an hour and in turn put in a cellar, while **Sofie** was brought up for questioning and he said to her, "I grant you 5 minutes to say 'Yes' to what I say". As **Sofie** refused, he became furious and cried, "You'll go to the Concentration Camp for 10 years; you will never see the green woods of your homeland again." But **Sofie** thought to herself, "There is still a mightier One over the mighty" So they both were brought back to the prison in a prison car.

Nearly every night we had air raids alarms and severe air attacks. The prisoners were taken to a large cellar and often had to stand there 6 hours in silence without moving at all. We were not allowed to even look at each other. **Luise** was put behind a big barrel and **Sofie** at the other end of the cellar. There, **Luise** lived to see the greatest and most dreadful raid over Stuttgart. While in the cellar that night one direct hit after another destroyed that big 7-story building to the ground, so that **Luise** thought the end had come. First all lights went out and people began to scream with fear; about 250 were crowded together. Most of the officials and guards had fled, leaving the prisoners to their fate. Most of the exits were closed and towards morning the prisoners were ordered to leave by only one open passage; and near the top they had to run through fire and flames on every side. While crawling over the stones and rubble, **Luise** lost one shoe and then had to jump down the prison wall. Surely the protecting hand of God had saved **Luise and Frieda's** lives that night. On every hand buildings were on fire and the huge city was like a sea of flames. The prisoners were like lost sheep with only a few guards to bring them through the burning streets.

One was tempted to think of their own safety and liberty, but the thought of our aged Mother and home helped us to bear all things. We were taken to an open Square in the city and a rope put around the whole group so that none could escape. After standing nearly all day in the smoke and sparks from the burning buildings, we were taken in prison vans to a camp some miles outside of the city, where **Sofie** had already spent about 4 weeks. She only had about 3 weeks in Stuttgart, when she was taken to a house of correction with hard labor and very little to eat and worms crawling in the food. In spite of being sick, she had to go down with the prisoners every morning to a big courtyard, where all, one after the other, had to walk around the square about 40 to 50 times, without speaking

a single word. With the high walls and Iron Gate, we could see only the blue sky and some birds flying about, enjoying their liberty. No one knew what pain and how many tears were shed within those walls.

Sofie was in that house of correction for 2 weeks. Then she was taken to that camp mentioned already. **Frieda** characterized this camp, in whispering to **Sofie**, only a few hours after arriving, “Am I in a mad-house?” We were given men’s clothing, many sizes too big for us. Hard work began at 4 a.m. Every little mistake was severely punished by giving less food, (very little food was served without that), or beatings or being shut into a small room without window. Each convict had a number and was called by this, not even worthy a name. It is impossible to describe the conditions in such a camp; also, concerning hygiene, inhabitants in clothing and upon the head were the order of the day. Those women who guarded the prisoners were more like hyenas, going about with a whip and shouting all the time and barking at everyone. Speaking to each other, or anyone, was prohibited and many girls were beaten for this, day after day. Most of the girls were Russian and French, and all had to work hard and got very little to eat. The many questions in the hearts and on the lips of each every morning was, “When will it come to an end?” At last on 20th November the glad message came of **Luise and Sofie’s discharge**. **Sofie** was sick at home for a long time afterwards.

Luise and Frieda were in this camp for one week, and then they were moved to another prison, which was very fortunate for **Luise**. One of the prison officials was a righteous man. He said to **Luise**, “I know you have done nothing wrong and are innocent”, and daily he tried to intercede with the high officials for her sake; and so after 9 weeks **Luise** was told to go home. While being there, it was in the home of that official that **Luise, Frieda and another girl** had to cook with his wife for 150 people, look after their dwelling, care for their clothes, etc. Many traps were set and they often tried to get us to speak words of discontent, whereby they could have occasion against us, but we were able to keep clear of all accusations.

During our 19 weeks of imprisonment, **Frieda** was always with **Luise** and always took the heavy end of the hard work as she was much stronger and this was a wonderful help to **Luise**. When **Luise** had to carry heavy bags of potatoes, **Frieda** was there always to carry the biggest one. **Poor Frieda always had the feeling she would not come home and 10 days after our release, she was taken to “Dachau” and had to give her life.** Only 7 weeks after we came home, our old Mother passed on to her reward, after living for God for 23 years. **Otto Kimmich**, (a brother worker who was born in our town) was to be with us and stand at Mother’s grave, utter a short prayer and a few words of comfort to us. This was prohibited and even endangered **Otto’s** life at that time. We have often been reminded of the words of David in Psalm 68:6, “*He bringeth out those which are bound at the right time*”, (as we say in German), and we learned the true meaning of the Hymn, “*We thank thee Lord for weary days, dark nights, in desert experiences, in deepest need, how great God’s love is*” (as it says in German).

Soon the terrible war came to an end and the Americans came through and we were free to have meetings again in our home and fellowship with God’s people all over the world. How delighted we were when letters came to us again from our brethren near and far. We are thrilled to see so many of God’s servants come to us again from everywhere and to see His Kingdom being built up anew in our midst.

A LITTLE OF MY EXPERIENCES AT STUTTGART

By Pauline Schnitzer

As some of our brothers have asked us, I’ll give some details of my experiences during the war, when I was imprisoned. You will remember the day when we were standing at the ruins and broken walls of the Gestapo prison in Stuttgart and all those horrible experiences were again so real in my mind. We knew very well when our brother, **Fritz Schwill** was called to arms and refused to become a soldier and had to appear before a war tribunal that it would bring trouble and suffering to all of us. He was sentenced to death.

His sister Frieda and I visited him twice in Berlin, and it was a touching experience when we passed the Iron Gate, which closed behind us. Twice we got, permission to talk with him for 10 minutes, in the presence of 3 officials. Fritz talked with trembling lips, but in spite of the sad circumstances, he tried to comfort and encourage us to keep faithful and our hearts were deeply moved and touched. The officials watched and listened and were astonished by the words and spirit of Fritz and overlooked that the 10 minutes had passed long ago and so both times we had 20 minutes with him. Fritz was considered a dangerous criminal and spent 3 months in the cell of the death candidates. During this time he wrote some heart moving and helpful letters to us. Later on, he was released and sent to the Russian front and disappeared and we never heard again from him and we do not know what happened. This was in the summer of 1942 and then in the fall of ’42 our whole church was prohibited any more meetings, no coming together, no letter writing, no visits and the workers were forced to work in factories, etc.

In June 1944, The Gestapo arrested **Frieda Schwill**, sister of Fritz and a week later the **Laderer girls and myself**. **The 72-year-old aunt of Fritz and his cousin and some others** were also arrested and put into prison. We were taken to Stuttgart into a cell full of box beds, with a crowd of other people. We didn’t know why we were there. Many innocent people were there and we saw misery, sorrow, tears and suffering and hunger too.

After about 10 days we were taken to another place for trial and questioning. In the prison car we met Frieda, but weren’t allowed to

talk together. Frieda fearfully showed me her bandaged arms caused by handcuffs and ill treatment. **Later on, during the trial, we were brought face to face with Frieda and we saw her suffering. It was the last time we saw her. She was killed by the Gestapo on 30th Nov. 1944.** A few days previously, **Luise Laderer** had said 'good-bye' to her, as they were together all the time in prison.

Luise and her sister Sofie, who was in another prison, were freed. (Myself and the relatives of Frieda got free some time earlier). After the trial we were brought back to our cell in the Gestapo prison, which was an old convent in the center of Stuttgart. During the night we often heard cries of men and women who were beaten, and ill treated and often we heard shots too, so we knew what was going on. It was in a small measure the same experience as our brother **Werner Gebhard** had during his 2 years in a concentration camp. Werner was the last companion of Fritz, and I was Frieda's companion during the first 2 years in the Work.

During the 2 weeks in prison we had to spend almost every night in the cellar. The air raids became stronger, especially on the last 2 nights there; we thought we would be buried alive. There were hundreds of people in that cellar, lying on the floor with no light. We heard the explosions of the bombs and our building was badly damaged. A big air-mine was lying in the court and we didn't know when it would go off. The following night was even more dangerous. For over an hour we heard the howling of the bombs and the horrible crashes, that we thought our last hour had come.

Suddenly the door opened and the fire and smoke entered our cellar and 2 of our fellow prisoners, who were always kind to us having distributed the food and had sympathy for us and shown interest in our welfare shouted to us and helped us to get out of that place. The guards were all gone, so we could get out, but there was fire everywhere in the houses around and all the district was burning, so it was difficult to get away, for there were ruins and rubble and flames everywhere. There was no road, just heaps of rubble and burning beams, until we reached the broad King street. All around we felt a horrible draught like a storm and intolerable heat, so that we were almost suffocated.

We then reached the big square, so called "Kings Palace Square," where the new and old palaces were burning and all the big houses around in different colored flames. We were stumbling over rubble and trees and from time to time mines exploded. Finally, we reached a place with ruins of houses that had burned some time earlier. Hundreds of people were there, crying and shouting and seeking their relatives. It was like a miracle that we got through and saved our lives, but it had often been in my mind, "The Lord still lives," and I felt comforted, but where to go now? We realized that we could not escape the Gestapo, so in the morning we voluntarily went to the next Police station, where they were surprised to find out that we were prisoners. One man was kind to us and offered us a drink, as we were almost dying of thirst. The air was full of smoke, so that we could hardly breathe. The day was dark and not until late afternoon did the sun appear like a fiery ball. We had to stay in that place and experienced some more dreadful nights. Because there were no more prisons to keep us in, we were released and sent home, still being considered as in custody until January 1945.

All through these dark and hard days I was quite convinced and confident our God will overrule in everything. Even when the Gestapo was shouting aloud and seemed so powerful, I felt in my heart, there is a greater One than they, who will speak the last word and I felt a deep gratitude that the Lord has spared my life. After all these experiences we could sing with more understanding the hymn, "*We thank thee Lord for weary days*," and Psalms 71:20-24 and also Psalm 66:8-15. I'll always be grateful for your interest in our welfare and what you have done for us in the secret place. As well as in the days and years past, when our needs were varied and you helped to save our lives, which was so much appreciated and will never be forgotten.

Sincerely yours in His service, **Pauline Schnitzer**

* It was later discovered that Fritz Schille was not executed. He was captured by the Soviet Army on the Eastern Front in 1942 and was sent to a POW labor camp in Siberia, where he served on the Russian front as a stretcher bearer. He died in 1943. After the fall of the Soviet Union and many records were released from that era. Sister Workers have visited the site of the camp where he died and examined the records regarding his death there.