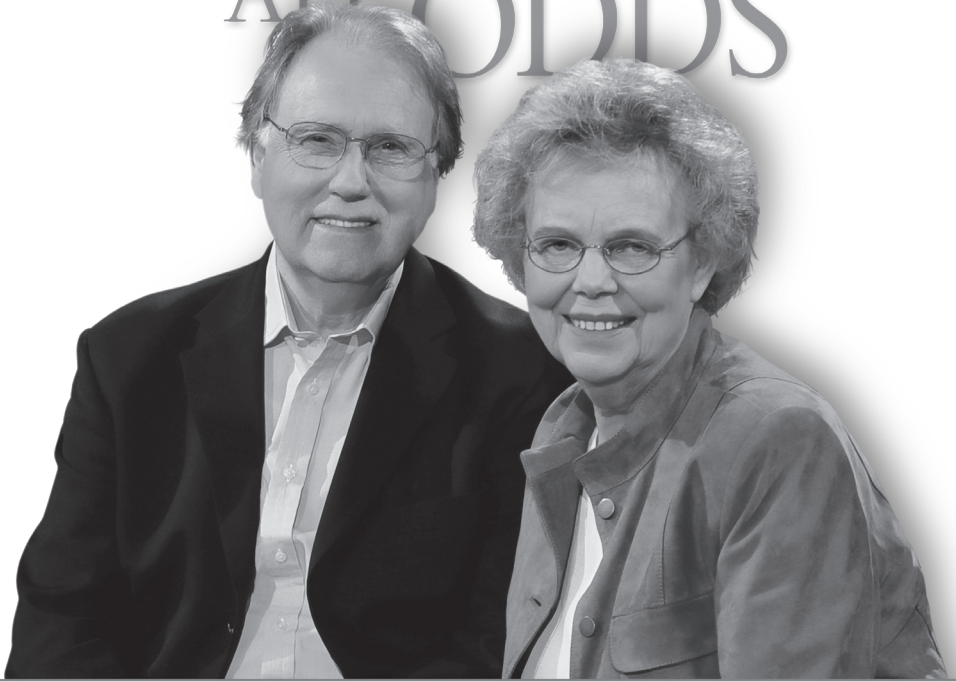


A TRUE STORY

# AGAINST ALL ODDS



K A R I   P A U L S E N



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## Introduction

**T**HE KITCHEN OF MY CHILDHOOD home in Norway was a magical place. I watched my mother at work at the long table where she carefully undid the seams of old clothing. She would study the fabric, holding it up and turning it this way and that, considering what new garment she could make. A new pinafore for my sister or me. A new coat to help ward off the chill of sub-zero arctic winters. Having made her decision, she'd lay the fabric out on the table and begin cutting out shapes with quick snips of her dressmakers' scissors. Soon, I'd hear the rhythmic hum of her hand-powered Singer sewing machine as she began to transform a long-discarded dress or coat into new, smart clothes for her family.

It was the early 1940s, the first turbulent years of World War II. Our family's home was located in a quiet valley of East Norway, just five kilometers from the small town of Notodden. Our valley was usually a tranquil, rural area, yet this isolated place played a major part in one of the most dramatic affairs of the war—the race between Hitler and the Allies to produce an atomic bomb.

At the center of the drama was a mysterious substance known as “heavy water,” which scientists both in Germany and Great Britain realized was an essential piece of the puzzle in producing atomic energy. This “heavy water” helps transform common uranium into weapons-grade plutonium. When war broke out in Europe, Norway was the only country in the world with a commercial heavy-water plant. The main factory was Vemork, a hydroelectric power plant outside Rjukan—located about seventy-five kilometers from where

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we lived. But Notodden, our closest town just three miles away, also housed a power station where scientists connected with heavy water production worked.

I can still hear the sounds of the Allied planes flying overhead at night. The whole community was pitched in darkness, with every window covered by heavy black roller blinds. There was the lighter, quicker *thrum, thum, thrum* of the smaller fighter planes—I didn't mind *that* sound too much. But the bombers . . . I can still almost feel the deep, resonant, drumming vibrations of those heavy planes as they passed over our house, headed toward the Norsk Hydro heavy water production plants. We would wait and listen . . . Would they strike Notodden tonight?

Our nearness to these power plants meant that the Norwegian resistance was active in the region. The railway line ran past our property just a few hundred meters away down a steep embankment—it took just a couple of minutes for us children to slide down the slope from our home to the railway station.

The heavy water was transported by train, and so sometimes at night the Norwegian resistance would detonate explosives on the railway tracks near our house, bringing a swarm of German soldiers to search nearby farms. The soldiers would go from room to room in our house, moving furniture aside, pulling down pictures from the wall, and thrusting their bayonets into any space they deemed large enough to harbor a man. I still shiver when I remember how one soldier drove his bayonet down into a large antique rose-painted *kiste*—or chest—where Mother kept spare blankets and linens. I knew there was no one hiding inside, but for a child with an over-active imagination, just the sight of that blade being plunged down so forcefully through the blankets was horrifying. What if there *had* been someone crouched inside?

A sense of anxiety had invaded old relationships in our community. Longtime neighbors began to look warily at each other, wondering who was sympathetic with our Nazi occupiers and who was a member of the resistance. Who would report forbidden radios, tuned to the BBC war bulletins? Who could be trusted?

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On the wall of the small, one-room schoolhouse I attended, there was a large map of Norway. We children knew, however, that the teacher had pinned underneath the map a photo of exiled Norwegian King Haakon VII. Our teacher was a kind man and a good teacher—someone who cared deeply for the students in his charge. Yet this did not save him when two students, whose parents were Nazi sympathizers, told local authorities about the forbidden picture behind the map. Our teacher was sent to a prison camp in the north, far up above the Arctic Circle, where he suffered dreadful hardship for the duration of the war. But at least he survived.

In some ways, everyday life during the occupation continued as normal: the seasons came and went; our parents continued with their work; we children went to school—although after our teacher was taken away, we relied on a succession of substitute teachers and often the school was closed. Yet, it wasn't long before each day became a struggle to find the basics of life. Yes, we had coupons for food rations and clothes—but our coupons only had value if there was food on the shelves or clothes and shoes to buy, and too often the shelves were empty. If we needed medicine, there was often none to be had. If we children grew out of our clothes, or if we wore holes in our coats and shoes, there was nowhere to buy replacements, even if we did have coupons.

And so, sitting at our kitchen table, my mother continued to weave her magic on old garments. There's no doubt she was a skilled seamstress, but in hindsight I realize that her most important gift was her imagination. She had an amazing ability to look beyond worn fabric and outdated styles; she would hold up an old shirt or dress to the light and see the potential for something new and fresh.

It has been more than seventy years since I watched my mother sitting in front of her old black Singer machine, but I can still see her clearly in my memory. Since then, my life has taken me on a path that I could never, in a million years, have predicted. It has taken me a long way from that quiet Norwegian valley, from a family life filled with tensions and unhappiness, where religion played no meaningful role beyond the expected christenings and confirmations.

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Instead, life took me on an adventure—from Africa, to Europe, to the United States—where Christ walked alongside me, through both adversities and joys. In recent years, especially, as wife of the president of the Seventh-day Adventist world church, I had a front-seat perspective on how the Lord is leading us, His people, in extraordinary ways around the world today.

Yet along with adventure, life has also handed me a few “gifts” that I could happily have done without. There have been challenges and some heartbreaks, as well as a life-changing illness that for the past forty years has shadowed me each day and kept me from doing many things I would have loved to do.

I’ve written this book because I’ve come to recognize the powerful gift that my mother gave me all those years ago as she pulled apart the seams of old clothes and laid the fabric flat on her kitchen table. No matter what old, discarded material lay in front of her, she looked at it and saw the beauty she could create. She demonstrated over and over again the truth of an old European proverb, “You must cut the garment to fit the cloth.” In other words, you have to work with what you’ve got. You have no choice! It’s no use lamenting what you wish you had—whatever life hands you, you have the opportunity to take it and fashion it into something meaningful.

If you’re like me, your life probably doesn’t look perfect. You may have worries about your children or finances, or you may not have the job you wish you had, or you or a loved one may be dealing with discouraging health news.

You can’t wish challenges away, but I’ve learned—often the hard way—that you can choose every day to “cut the garment to fit the cloth”; to work with the circumstances you have—whether they’re good, bad, or indifferent. Try holding the fabric of your life up to the light, and turn it this way and that. Look closely at the material and try to see past the worn places. Study the fabric itself and search for its original beauty. Are there possibilities there? With the Lord by your side, could you reshape it a little, perhaps trim it here or there, and make something new? Something beautiful?