

Chapter 1

Carl pushed the oatmeal around in his bowl with his spoon as he sat at the breakfast table. He just didn't feel like eating. He wished Father were at home. Suddenly he pushed his bowl away and frowned. "Mother," he asked, "isn't Father ever coming home?"

Mother Westphal stopped eating. She smiled as she pushed Carl's bowl back in front of him. "In another week he'll be home," she said. "I know it seems like a long time since we've seen him."

Carl's frown deepened. "I miss him. Why does he have to be away so much and for so long at a time?"

Mother reached over and touched Carl's arm. "I miss him too," she said. "But you know, Son, he has a very important work to do here in South America. He is the first and only Seventh-day Adventist minister in all of the country. Only one Elder Westphal for a whole continent!"

Carl sat up straight. The frown left his face, and he smiled. "I hadn't thought of that." He picked up his spoon and began to eat his oatmeal.

"I don't suppose you remember," Mother said, "how lost we felt when we first came to the city of Buenos Aires four years ago."

"Not really. I was only four years old," Carl answered.

Mother went on as if she hadn't even expected Carl to answer. "We couldn't speak Spanish. We didn't know where to buy bread and milk, or how to go to town. We had only been here one week when Father had to go off to Entre Ríos [En-tra Re-os]."

"I remember I used to cry when Father went away," Carl said. "I felt afraid without him around." He paused and then added sadly, "We had baby Helen with us then, remember?" He looked over at Mother and saw her wipe tears from her eyes. Then he saw her try to smile. "Mother is sure brave," he thought.

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“Our friend the book salesman helped us learn where things were,” Mother said softly. “Now you and I know pretty well how to get along even though Father isn’t with us, don’t we?”

“We have to help him with Spanish words.” Carl laughed. “He is always preaching in German, so he doesn’t learn Spanish as quickly as we do.”

Mother began to stack the dishes. “You are certainly a big help,” she said. “Children always learn a language so much faster than grown-ups.”

“Spanish is easy,” Carl boasted.

Mother laughed and ruffled Carl’s hair. “But English is not, and we want our son to read it and write it well. We’ll get right at our lessons before I have to get at the office work.”

Carl sat at the table with his chin cupped in his hands. He sat there for some time while Mother rinsed the dishes. Suddenly he asked, “Mom, why did Father have to go away so soon after we got here? Why couldn’t he have stayed with us and helped us get settled? It doesn’t really seem fair.”

“Son,” Mother spoke up quickly, “you know why your father was sent here to South America. There was no Seventh-day Adventist minister in the country; and a certain German-speaking family, who had become Adventists in the United States where they first lived after leaving Europe, came to Argentina. They were the only Adventists in this area.”

“You mean the Riffels?” Carl asked.

“Yes, the Riffel family. When they left the States and came to Argentina, they began to tell their friends about the seventh-day Sabbath and about the second coming of Jesus. They talked a lot about Bible teachings, and their friends wanted to know more. So the Riffels wrote to the General Conference and asked for a minister.”

“Who could speak German,” Carl interrupted.

“That’s right.” Mother Westphal nodded. “And the General Conference sent your father. And of course, that meant we came too. When we arrived, the Riffels asked Father to come to Entre Rios right away. Your father answered that call.”

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Carl began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Mother asked.

“I was remembering the story Father told about his first night. He had taken a ship up the Paraná [Pa-ra-ná] River to find the German settlement where the Riffels lived. Remember?”

“Yes,” Mother nodded. “That first night he slept on the ship, but on the second night the ship docked near a small town. No one had come to meet him, but he spied a big hay wagon and decided to climb into the wagon and ask the driver to take him to a hotel. So he got off the ship and got into the hay wagon. The driver of the wagon must have been very surprised. Your father asked him to drive to the hotel, but the man couldn’t understand English. When Father spoke in German, the man couldn’t understand that either. But at last he realized that your father wanted to go to a hotel. He slapped the horses on the back with the reins and drove up the steep hill to the hotel.” Mother Westphal paused and smiled at Carl.

“And the next morning,” Carl began, “Father found a man who spoke German and asked him if there were any Adventists around.”

“Imagine how surprised your father must have been when the man told him there were lots of them,” Mother said.

“Oh, but the next part of the story is really funny.” Carl laughed. Father stayed at the house of a German farmer the next night. The farmer gave him a big sheepskin coat to use as a blanket. He wrapped himself in the coat and lay down on the floor in the kitchen to sleep. He said the wool felt good around his neck at first. But it must have seemed strange to have the ducks and geese and chickens all sleeping in the same room with him.” Carl stopped talking and giggled. Then he said, “Can’t you just imagine Father beginning to scratch as he lay there all wrapped up in that big sheepskin coat?”

“I guess it really wasn’t funny at the time,” Mother Westphal said. “But, yes, I can imagine father lying there itching and scratching. That coat was full of fleas!”

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“I know! I know!” Carl went on. “He finally threw the coat off and got up and went outside. But it was so cold he had to walk fast trying to keep warm. His own clothes were now full of fleas too. So he kept on scratching.”

“Poor father,” Mother said. “He didn’t get any more sleep that night. He had to go inside because the dog started to bark, and he didn’t want to wake up the farmer and his family.”

“Well, that trip was a success,” Mother went on, “because as soon as word got around to the farmers in that area, they all came to hear Father preach the next night. And he preached half the night. The people were so interested they didn’t want to go home. He preached three sermons that night. It was one o’clock in the morning before the people went home.”

Father had stayed for several days, Carl remembered. “He baptized thirty-six people before he came home from that first trip.”

Mother nodded. “That’s right,” she said. “That was the beginning of the Crespo [Krés-po] Church, the first Seventh-day Adventist church in all of South America. That church grew rapidly. Now there are 200 members.”

Carl was thoughtful for a while. Then he said, “Mother, I’m glad we came to South America as missionaries. We are doing what Jesus wants us to do - telling others about him.”