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## Filled with Thanksgiving

James C. Schaap

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## Filled with Thanksgiving

### Abstract

"Once Otto and Becker start working together, Otto comes to the realization that this man—and the others, for that matter—don't feel so much like an enemy."

Posting about a story of thanksgiving from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/filled-with-thanksgiving/>

### Keywords

In All Things, thanksgiving, Iowa, prisoners of war, Germany

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# in things

November 25, 2019

## Filed with Thanksgiving

**James Calvin Schaap**

It's 1944. Otto Steinke is too old to be drafted, his son just a few months too young. Besides, both are needed because the Allied cause requires mountains of food, food the Steinkes can produce on their Iowa farm. Not everyone can be a soldier—even some who really, really want to be.

Come harvest, Otto faces a crucial shortage of help. No hired men are to be found—some are off to the South Pacific, some to Europe. Harvest holds enough anxiety as it is, but not knowing exactly how he's going to get his crop in without enough help is enough to keep him awake. In fact, so many men are gone that choir music at church begins to sound like a women's chorus. You really can't enlist women for field work either, because threshing crews test women's perseverance in ways that nothing else does—even those long, long days and nights in the kitchen.

Just down the road there's a POW camp where hundreds, even thousands, of young men don't do much at all. The government puts out a shingle, and Otto Steinke, whose mother tongue is German—his mom never really learned English at all—decides to take a chance on the enemy, so to speak. One day, he goes down to the POW camp and asks for the help of a few young men. It's harvest, after all. They're needed.

One of the POW men who comes to work at his farm is named Becker. Steinke quickly discovers that his new employee is hardly a Hitler fan. Becker had been conscripted, drafted against his will. He hated the way his country was treated after the Great War. Once Otto and Becker start working together, Otto comes to the realization that this

man—and the others, for that matter—don't feel so much like an enemy. At first, it's very strange.

Then, it's not.

When harvest is over, Becker stays on. Otto can use help around the farm, and he's working ground down the road for neighbors as well. Although he and Becker are circumspect about using their German language in public, when the two of them are together in the barn or shed they communicate like brothers in the old country. When the war in Europe finally ends, the two are fast friends, so much so that when Becker is returned to Germany—as all POWs are—tears are shed in the Steinke home.

“Write us, for sure,” Otto's wife says on that last day. “If something there is what you need, let us know.”

Becker nods.

However, the Germany Becker discovers when back home is not the Germany he left. The country is ravaged. When he leaves the bombed-out cities, he is surprised and blessed to find his house still intact, and his family safe.

But, the economy is in shambles—no work, no money, and no food. When Hitler's dreams turned into death and debris, the country was ruined.

One day, Becker decides to see for himself if what his wife has told him about in the dead of night is true. She told him that when the Allies came, they forced everyone from town to see what Hitler had done to those he hated. A death camp was hidden in a forest not that far away.

He finds the trail she told him to take. But, once he comes to the camp there are no bodies, no starving prisoners, no crying children. When he walks in, the suffering had still somehow lingered: he can see it, smell it. It will infect you, he tells himself. Even what's *not* there could kill—just imagining.

Becker remembers Otto Steinke and his family—the good food on that round table in the kitchen, fresh milk and butter.

Yet, he can't help but remember too how that fear was simply lifted. He remembers the Steinke family with a fondness that once more makes him reach for the rag of a handkerchief in his pocket.

“Write us, sure,” Otto’s wife had told him. “If something there is what you need, let us know.”

That he simply cannot do. In Iowa, he was treated like an honored guest. Here, in this place where he is standing, he knows all too well what his wife has told him: that people were treated like vermin, that they died from nothing to eat. He doesn’t dare write the Steinkes. He is so greatly ashamed of what he knows happened here.

When he returns, his wife comforts him, but tells him to write his old American friends—not for his sake, nor hers, nor Germany’s—but for his children’s sake: “because they are suffering, they are really, really suffering. Can’t you see?”

He can see. So, he does write. In the letter he tells the Steinkes what his wife saw, and what he did even though there were no people left. Then, he asks.

Relief comes as he knew it would: “ten packages: food, clothes, chocolate, and things impossible to get.”

Becker and his family, or so the story goes, were filled with thanksgiving.

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*Based on a story among many collected by Linda Betsinger McCann in Prisoners of War in Iowa (Des Moines: Tandem, 2018).*