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CHAPTER TWO: Who the Petersons really are and Why They're Heading for Prague

Those who have met Knut and Gudrun Peterson in *Three Things You Can't Do in Prague* know that the couple is no longer young, but not yet old; have a Norwegian heritage in an American context, with an intriguing awareness of Central European culture; are fairly naïve but determined to follow God, as they hear Him. The Petersons can be stubborn, hardheaded and dogmatic; they can also be optimistic and idealistic; as well, they can be foolishly tender and far too forgiving. In other words, they are all too human.

The Peterson's Origins

In Macon, Georgia during the years just preceding World War II, a young Norwegian immigrant met a beautiful, shy Czech girl, recently arrived from the countryside near Prague. Sven, a strapping man over six feet tall, muscular and serious, fell instantly in love with Ana, a petite blonde with delicate features and crystal-blue eyes. The couple married in Vineville Methodist Church near the Mercer University campus, where Sven was a groundskeeper and Ana worked in the cafeteria. Soon their first son, Knut, was born, with his father's sturdiness and his mother's grace. War raged in Europe, and Knut's birth during the war was attended only by his mother and grandmother; his father was fighting in France.

When Sven returned, he used his GI bill privileges to complete his education, first at Mercer, gaining a BS in Biology, and then at the University of Georgia, where he became a physician. He and Ana remained in Macon, raising Knut as a Christian, stressing hard work in academics and athletics as the path to success. The

birth of their second son Sverre brought more joy, as he became a precious little brother to under Knut's protection. Their home was a happy one, with wonderful Czech dumplings joining lutefisk for dinner as both sons grew.





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Knut, like his father before him, attended Mercer University. He first attended Walter F. George Law School, but found the curriculum was not internationally-oriented enough for his interests. From his father he gained a strong respect for bodily health, a fierce dedication to independence and a life-long love of nature; from his mother came his gentle humor and compassion. Leaving Macon for the first time in his life, Knut journeyed to the state of Washington in the sixties, to Evergreen College, where he was somewhat appalled at what he saw as the freedom and pleasure-seeking of the hippies.

Yet he became intrigued with the hippie movement—or at least with one particular hippie, Gudrun. She was blonde and pretty, like his mother, and exuded joy. Knut watched her for a few days, then asked his friend Dov if he knew this girl. "Sure," Dov replied. "She's not really a wild person—she's just unconventional."

Soon Dov became the go-between for Knut and Gudrun as they cautiously explored their interest in each other. Knut found Gudrun to be quiet and creative; she, in turn, found Knut to be honest and dependable. They began to spend time together, but never referred to their expeditions as "dates": they simply met to hike in the nearby Cascade Mountains or attend the local Lutheran church, which satisfied them both by honoring their mutual Norwegian heritage.

Knut's Dilemma

One thing Knut and Gudrun had very much in common when they met is that they both had given their life to Christ. They were eager followers of Jesus Christ and wanted to be led by Him, to advance His Kingdom on earth. This was not always the case. Before Knut decided to follow Jesus and became certain that this was the right thing not only for him but for anyone, Knut was a doubting-Thomas type. He dismissed the whole Christian message as "a wonderful old tale" and "a crutch for weak and needy people."



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Knut was certain that those few existing historical sources recording the existence of Jesus Christ could hardly be trusted. These sources include the writings of the Roman biographer Suetonius, the historian Tacitus, Pliny the Younger (the governor of Bithynia in Northwestern Asia Minor) and the Jewish writer Josephus. Just because there were historical records mentioning clearly the life, work and death of Jesus Christ, should people assume that these scholars, historians and writers were reporting the events accurately? Knut wasn't so sure.

He thought that even the Bible, which mentions the name of Jesus Christ several hundred times, could not be fully trusted because His name could have been poorly translated, Knut reasoned. His presence with all His disciples and apostles, and His presence with His followers today, may be just another chimera or a delusion.

Knut knew that, according to some people living today, the Jewish Holocaust during WWII is really no more than a delusion. Knut's Austrian friend Albert told him, "I have been living in Austria more than 50 years and never saw a Jew. Why should I believe in the Holocaust? Isn't it just American propaganda?" Not everyone trusts the historical record. Just because millions of people today clearly give testimony to experiencing the presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ is no indication that Jesus Christ is alive. Knut just thought that they might be suffering from a delusion.

There were "a few remaining questions" about God and His Son which troubled Knut a bit on occasion in those years, but he was otherwise quite content to write off the whole "Christianity thing" as irrelevant, boring and probably untrue, to quote Alpha presenter Nicky Gumbel, whose series of lectures on Christianity successfully dispute all these judgments.



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"Why should I trust the words of some old dead Roman historian whom I have never met?" thought Knut. "And isn't the whole Christian culture, at least in Europe, pretty non-convincing and discredited today?"

A few troublesome questions

Yet those few troublesome questions Knut had would not go away. If God did not create the universe and the planet Earth, who did? Did everything just appear one day from nowhere? Isn't it more likely that the world was created by some super-Islamist who blasted the whole universe, producing the "big bang" that jump-started life? And then there were even bigger questions: is there any continuity in life beyond a person's lifetime? What is, really, the meaning of life?

Perhaps precisely because he was a doubter, "the few remaining questions" started eventually to gnaw at Knut and really bother him. First, there was the question of why the Western world is using A.D. (anno Domini) or "the year of our Lord" for dating events. Knut wondered why the Romans, who used a dating system based on the beginning of their community "ab urbe conditta" [A.U.C.], or from the founding of the city of Rome, would not only tolerate but approve of and switch to using a new method of historical reckoning that centered on the pivotal role played by Jesus Christ as "the hinge of history," if Jesus Christ never existed in the first place. Why would practical-minded Romans suddenly start to date events B.C. (before Christ) and A.D.? And why, more than twenty centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, is this dating system still in place?

"Why there are more Christians today than ever?" Knut wondered. Why do more than two billion people living today claim to be Christians? Weren't the Christians originally, (if they ever existed at all) just a small band of believers in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire?



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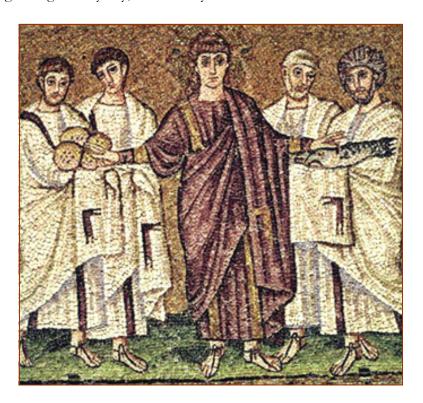


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How could such a small group of people (without even a leader) inspire a movement that spread throughout the world, transformed countless lives and is growing stronger every day, after 2000 years?



"What if Christians actually were right?" thought Knut, as he pondered the essential questions of life. While he wavered, his grandmother Inge continued to pray for Knut's conversion and salvation, as she had since the day he was born. Both his parents also prayed for him, as did the believers at Vineville Methodist Church, his aunts and uncles in Norway and in Czechoslovakia, and even his friend Dov.

With so much prayer, Knut's resistance finally collapsed. He decided to follow Christ. And with typical Norwegian wooden-headedness, when Knut decided to follow Christ, he did it all the way. When asked why he did it, Knut would only say "Ja, I gave Him my life then. So that is that."



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Gudrun's flirtation with "the wild side"

Gudrun had a different story. Her childhood had been a time of worry and fear, as her family had suffered from relentless attack by satanic forces. Her dear parents' weaknesses were exploited by the evil one, causing pain and grief for everyone in her family that Gudrun loved. Since the age of four she had known Jesus as well as she knew anyone, yet Gudrun nursed a feeling of resentment for her family's trials and tribulations.

This feeling of resentment turned into an idea that she could run her life very well with no help from anyone, including God. Gudrun decided to follow her own inclinations, which led her to Washington and a "flower-child" lifestyle. She reasoned that at least the hippies were not hypocrites, like all the respectable people of the Moral Majority, pretending to be Christian while practicing racism, sexism, and any number of pernicious "isms." Better to be an honest heathen than a fake Christian, thought Gudrun.

By God's grace, Gudrun came to her senses before she had harmed herself with her selfishness and foolish pride. She had started to attend the small Lutheran mission church near her university campus, and was delighted when Knut eagerly joined her for Sunday services. Soon enough Knut and Gudrun felt that God was calling them to live as man and wife. They traveled to Friday Harbor, their favorite spot in the San Juan Islands by ferry and were married on the pier overlooking the steely grey water of December.

Their pastor and a few close friends joined them for a seafood feast after the brief ceremony. Knut and Gudrun traveled around the Pacific Northwest for a few days, beginning with the small town of Anacortes, then going on to Chilliwack, Harrison Hot Springs and Garibaldi Provincial Park in British Columbia, Canada. Thus their married life began amidst the grandeur and majesty of God's creation.



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The next twenty years passed in happiness and joy, as Knut and Gudrun raised their two children Lief and Sigrid. Knut became a professor of international relations, while Gudrun founded a small publishing house. They had a nice old house with a spacious back yard and garden, their puppy Comenius and a Volvo station wagon. Their lives were as normal as could be.

Then came 1989, and the collapse of communism. The Berlin Wall fell, and by November the Czech communists had, with remarkably little fanfare, vacated Hradcany, the historic castle overlooking Prague, the seat of government. Knut's mother, Ana, traveled back to Prague for the first time in decades to visit relatives and friends. She had in her mind the picture of a strong and vibrant Czechoslovakia. Created from the defeated Hapsburg Empire after WWI, Czechoslovakia made, in just two decades, significant political and economic gains made during the Czech First Republic (1918—1939); in fact, prior to WWII, the Czechoslovak economy ranked as the 7th largest in the world.

But Ana returned to the U.S. with alarming stories of neglected buildings, a shattered economy, and people with sad, closed faces. During its 40-year experiment with the "demolition-derby" communist economy, Czechoslovakia had dropped to #76 among the world economies. "Any country that has a downward spiral in which it slips from among the first 10 to not being included in the first 50 world economies can hardly be seen as an example of supreme stewardship by the Communists," Ana observed wryly. Her sharp comment was an example of the traditional Czech black humor that enabled the Czech nation to exist under centuries of rule by political philosophies all across the spectrum, from Right (three centuries of Austro-Hungarian Monarchism) to Centrist (two decades of Czechoslovak Parliamentarian Republicanism) to Right (6 years of Nazism) to Left (40 years of Communism) to a return to Centrist parliamentary republicanism, with political democracy and a free-market economy, in 1989. No wonder the Czechs distrust all politicians!



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Called by God

Knut and Gudrun, devoted Christians but not yet called to a life of direct service to God, felt a stirring within. They began to ache for the Czechs, without knowing why. The ache persisted. The Petersons undertook a prayer vigil, spending a weekend at a nearby Episcopal convent under the spiritual authority of the nuns, trying to figure out why the plight of the Czechs mattered so much.

It would be nice and neat to say that God revealed His call to Knut and Gudrun in a shiny package, all wrapped up with silver paper and a big red bow. But this was not the case. The nuns were certain that the Petersons were anointed by God for some task, but couldn't say exactly what. Both Gudrun and Knut heard God's voice, but couldn't quite make out the words. The Czechs were somehow at the center of it all, but just how, the Petersons could not say.

So the Petersons decided to take another retreat, this time to the seaside, one of their favorite places to pray and meditate on God's will for their lives. It was in 1991, during a weekend trip to Jekyll Island, Georgia, they began discern what God wanted them to do.

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you to bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, He may give you. (John 15:16)

It took several years before Knut and Gudrun finally understood how this scripture applied to their lives. And it all began with a series of "coincidences."





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