

## SOLDAT SECTIONS

### YOUTH AND INNOCENCE

THE ROAD WAS GETTING STEEPER AND MORE CURVING, with the view around each bend becoming more spectacular than the last. The five of us in the car-Werner Friedrich, Hans Liebelt, Siegfried Ebert, Ernst Michaelis, and I-had graduated from gymnasium together just a week before, on March 6, 1936. We had all entered gymnasium together nine years ago, at the age of ten, and two years ago we began planning this ski trip to celebrate our graduation.

Friedrich was exuberant, as usual, challenging everyone to a race once we reached the ski area and assuring us all that we did not stand a chance. We were all anticipating the trip with great excitement. Finally, we rounded the last steep, sharp curve, and there, slightly below us, nestled securely in the lap of the Sudeten Mountains of Silesia, was our ski village. We found a place to leave our car-a sedan that belonged to Liebelt's father-and followed signs to the cabin check-in office in a running snowball fight. Our faces must have looked quite flushed, from both the cold air and the running, to the old man we startled when we charged through the door.

"Hello there," he said. "What can I do for you?" He peered at us over oval wire-framed glasses.

"We have a reservation for one of your cabins," Ebert said. "The name is Siegfried Ebert."

"Let's see .... " He flipped through what looked like scrap papers. "Here it is!" he said. "I am Hoffer." He extended his hand, and in turn we each shook it. His grip was firm in spite of his advanced age and his frail build. We each put our share of the money on the counter. He slowly counted the money and carefully placed it in an old wooden lock box, then sorted through a pile of keys until he found the one he wanted. "Here you are," he said. He smiled, his old eyes twinkling behind his glasses as he dangled the key before Ebert. "Have a good time, boys."

Ebert took the key, and we herded each other out of the office, eager to begin our adventure. We began to unload our gear from the car, which amounted to throwing everything into a pile.

"Here, carry this," came an order, followed by something thudding into my back. I knew it was Friedrich without turning around. As usual, he was taking charge and dividing up the gear to be carried to the cabin. When we were all finally loaded to Friedrich's satisfaction, we trudged up the mountain, toward our cabin. Although the temperature was only 28 degrees Fahrenheit, the steep climb up the mountain made us sweat.

The cabin was one big rectangular room with two windows, one facing east, or front, and the other facing the slopes to the west. On the north wall was a huge fireplace, complete with a spit for roasting meat, a bar for hanging kettles, a small iron grid for skillets, pots, pans, and other utensils hanging from the mantel. On the south wall were two sets of bunks. We had been instructed to bring sleeping bags and pillows.

"Let's ski!" yelled Friedrich.

In a rush, we got our skis out of the pile of gear. We had to go only a few paces until we were at a slope. Down we would go, then back up we would struggle, only to be unable to resist going down one more time. We one-more-timed until we could barely crawl. Finally, we'd had enough and made our way back to the cabin. We decided to eat in the village, because we were too tired to cook.

The aroma inside the cafe immediately provoked hunger rumblings in our very empty bellies. There were no customers, and there appeared to be no employees either. We were all fidgety from hunger. Friedrich and I leaned our chairs back on two legs.

*"Take it easy on the furniture!"* a familiar voice boomed as Herr Hoffer popped into the room as if from nowhere. Our chairs dropped to all fours promptly.

"Hello, boys. Can't stand your own cooking, huh? No matter, Frau Hoffer will feed you." A second later she came bustling into the room and told us what we would be eating.

Knowing that our supper was on the way, we settled down. I looked through the window. From our table we could barely see the foot of the mountain, which was muted by the soft glow of the few streetlights. A gentle lazy snowfall had begun, with large aimless flakes wafting slowly to earth. In the warm cafe, with the aroma of food being prepared, we enjoyed a satisfied sense of being free and yet cared for.

Outside, a farmboy about our age led a draft horse that was pulling a sled loaded high with hay slowly along the road. Old Herr Hoffer and another man about his age had begun a game of chess at a table near us, carrying on a constant conversation about politics as they played.

Frau Hoffer emerged from the kitchen pushing a cart laden with food. She deftly placed the bowls of food in front of us and handed us each an empty plate and the necessary silverware. Without further conversation, we ate every morsel she had placed in front of us. We all seemed to lean back and heave a satisfied sigh at nearly the same time. Frau Hoffer must have been watching us from the kitchen, because here she came again, with the empty cart. She quickly cleared the table and left us to ourselves for our own after-dinner discussion. Suddenly we were aware of Herr Hoffer's voice becoming louder.

"Hitler is going to get us into another war!" he said emphatically.

"Why do you say that?" his chess partner demanded.

"Because Hitler is a gambler, and gamblers will not quit until they lose."

"I do not know how you can say that," his chess partner responded. "He has provided people with jobs, he has restored the economy, he has stopped all the political brawling in the streets, he has built the autobahns, he has torn up the Versailles Treaty and restored

national pride, he has even reclaimed the Rhineland." The old man finally ran out of breath.

"And how has he done all those things?" Herr Hoffer demanded. "He has provided jobs by building up the armaments industry. What do you think he is planning to do with all that firepower? Admire it? And he restored peace to the streets by putting all his political opponents-and a lot of Jews as well- into concentration camps."

We all glanced furtively at Michaelis, who was Jewish.

"So why do you say that Hitler is a gambler?" the other old man asked.

"What do you think would have happened if the French had resisted when our troops marched into the Rhineland?" Herr Hoffer asked. "Our pitiful force would have been wiped out. But Hitler was playing poker, and he gambled that his opponent would not call his bluff. He won that hand, and he may win more-but eventually he is going to overstep himself, because gamblers never quit when they are winning. They always keep betting until they lose."

"But he is just getting back what the Versailles Treaty took away from us," his friend protested.

Herr Hoffer rose and walked to the fireplace, where he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "He won't stop there," he said. "He will continue until he gets us into another war. And at what cost?" He turned and waved his hand in our direction. "At the cost of these boys' lives, most likely, as well as the lives of millions of others."

"What an old grouch!" Friedrich whispered to the rest of us.

"I am not so sure he is not right," Michaelis offered in a quiet voice.

No one responded. Michaelis's being Jewish made us all uneasy in the context of the old men's conversation.

## REICH LABOUR SERVICE

ON THE MORNING OF SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 1936, I WOKE early and with great anticipation. I was to be at Augustus Square at nine o'clock to be transported by bus to somewhere in Bavaria, where I would serve the next six months in Reich Labor Service.

I breakfasted with my family. My fourteen-year-old brother, Fritz, was excited about my impending adventure and seemed to look forward to it for me. My older sister, Inge -tall, thin, blonde, and sober-was convinced that I was making a big mistake by not going directly to the university instead of getting Labor Service and the Army out of the way first and she said so.

My mother hovered maternally around me, alternately bubbly and teary-eyed. As we ate breakfast, she scolded Inge for her remark that I was making a mistake. Inge pouted a bit and said nothing. We all seemed awkward when I arose from the table.

"Well," my father said, not looking directly at me, "I guess it's time."

"Yes," I replied, noticing his discomfort and loss for words.

My throat went dry, and I swallowed in the hope of finding the appropriate action. Finding none, I merely extended my hand; he slowly raised his and gripped mine firmly, then held my hand in both of his. In the background, my mother sniffled. Then she wrapped her arms around me. Few words were spoken. Few needed to be. I looked around for Inge, but she was no longer in the room. Fritz punched me on the shoulder.

I picked up my suitcase and headed out the door. Once out in the street, I walked quickly away, my family calling goodbye.

At Augustus Square, I looked around at the milling crowd of young men my own age, hoping to see a familiar face, but I saw none. I did notice a figure in a Labor Service uniform standing near three parked buses. Shortly before nine o'clock, he bellowed in a voice of unbelievable volume: "All right! We are going to fill these three

buses front to back. I want every seat in the first bus full before a man sets foot in the second. When I call out your name, get in the bus-on the double."

As we left Leipzig, the bus moved through the streets that I had known all my life. I felt as if we were rolling out of my childhood and into a new adult world. I had been away from home on vacations before, but never for as long as six months. I was looking forward to this new adult experience.

By the time we arrived at our destination at seven o'clock, it was almost dark. We were at the village of Burglengenfeld, near the Czechoslovakian border. The Labor Service camp consisted of several buildings. The main building was a large former villa that had been remodeled to house as many as 160 people. The buses pulled up in front of this main building and disembarked their passengers.

The Labor Service man ordered us all to gather around a porch in front of the building. The buses pulled away then, making me feel very much alone in the midst of 160 boys. As we grew quiet, the Labor Service man announced, in that awe-inspiring voice he had used in the square, "Gentlemen, the commanding officer of Burglengenfeld Labor Service Camp, Abteilungsfiihrer Werner." He drew himself stiffly to attention as a middle-aged man in a fancier Labor Service uniform emerged through the door behind him.

The commanding officer appeared very straight and military as he looked out over us in his neatly tailored uniform, seeming somehow to look each of us in the eye. "Welcome to Burglengenfeld, men," he said, in a voice nearly as impressive as his subordinate's. "Now you are proud Labor Service men." He continued his brief prepared speech, informing us that our first four weeks would be training in military drill and only then would we be permitted to go to work for the Fatherland.

He finished by saying, "I leave you now in the capable hands of your leader, Gruppenfuhrer Brandt." Then he turned and disappeared into the building from which he had emerged.

After being assigned room numbers, we piled into the building. I was assigned to Room 7, which had four bunks, four lockers, and one big table with four chairs. The other three occupants of Room 7 were a fat boy named Dietl, a gangly farmboy named Fischer, and a little red-haired guy named Zimmermann.

The next morning, we were rudely awakened at five-thirty by THE VOICE, bellowing with an unbelievable volume: "On your feet!" He was standing in front of his room, which was next door to ours, projecting a volume intended to wake the whole building. We were jolted out of a deep sleep and looked at one another in wonderment. Brandt appeared in our doorway. Although short and stocky, he appeared much larger in the doorway. "One person from each room go to the mess hall and get breakfast for your room," he ordered.

At promptly six-thirty, THE VOICE ordered us out into the square in front of the building. We were divided into four squads and introduced to our squad leaders. Mine was Squad Leader Krupp, who was about twenty-one years old, tall, broad-chested, with sandy blond hair and a pleasant expression.

Each of the four squad leaders selected a different spot on the soccer field, far enough apart that each could issue orders to his squad without causing confusion among the other squads. Krupp, who seemed at ease and calm about his duties and us, was a pleasant contrast to the constantly bellowing Brandt. He patiently taught us first how to stand at "attention," then how to space ourselves apart with an "eyes right" maneuver. That was followed by how to step off on our left heels at the command of "forward march," then how to react to a "squad halt" command. We finished by learning how to do "left face," "right face," and "about face."

Finally, we were marched to the supply building and issued uniforms. We were issued different uniforms for work, for parade, for exercising, and for sports. Then we were marched by squads to the mess hall for lunch. A half hour of free time followed, during which we admired ourselves and one another in our new uniforms. The little guy, Zimmermann, kept jerking himself to attention and

saluting everybody, making a joke of it. His sense of humor helped relax everyone.

In the afternoon, we attended an hour-long class, mostly on the "New Greater German Reich." Herr Hoffer's warning crept into my thoughts during the lecture, but I forced it aside. We were learning discipline, order, and how to follow commands. These were all positive qualities, and I felt good about it.

Following the training session, we were marched back to the supply building, where we were each issued a shiny new spade. Krupp marched us back to the soccer field. I felt as if I were playing soldier, now that I had something on my shoulder as we marched. Krupp called us to attention to begin our spade instructions.

"Men," he began, "this is the Labor Service, and this spade is the symbol of work and toil. The spade you now hold will never touch dirt; it will be used strictly for exercise and parades. At all times, your spade must sparkle as if it were made of chrome. Since they are steel and not chrome, they will rust easily. Spot inspections are to be expected."

Krupp then offered instructions on how to keep the spades clean by rubbing them with wet sand that was kept in a big bin in the courtyard, and he advised us to work on the spade every day rather than waiting until rust built up on it.

After another hour of drill in which we were taught to march properly with the spades on our shoulders, we were finally released to return to our rooms. We had an hour to get cleaned up for supper and get to know each other.

In the mess hall at supper, we were instructed to meet at seven-thirty in the Assembly Hall. That meeting was to give us the next day's schedule and any announcements that needed to be made. Following the announcements, one of the squad leaders led us in some organized singing. Then we had an hour to relax before the lights were turned out at ten o'clock.

We spent the following four weeks learning military drill and routine. An important function of Labor Service was to free the Army from having to do this very basic type of training. Every-one who went into Labor Service would also be drafted into the Army, and we would enter the Army already partially trained.

We were not permitted out of the camp the first four weeks. We had a library, however, and a recreation hall with Ping-Pong tables, card tables, and chess sets. Our four weeks of training passed quickly with drill, calisthenics, and classes; we were acquiring a general familiarity with military life. At the end of the four-week training period, we were inspected by the camp commander and then released to begin our work detail.

On our first work day following our training period, we marched forty minutes to a strip coal mine with "parade spades" on our shoulders. We fell out and stacked our parade spades, like rifles, in four-spade pyramids. I worried about my spade, because I kept it perfectly clean. I hated putting it in the stack with the others from my squad for fear someone would grab mine and leave his rusted one for me to clean. We were then issued working spades.

The work we did consisted of removing layers of dirt from veins of coal and loading the dirt onto lorries (small tip-bed freight cars) that were pulled by a narrow-gauge steam engine. Brandt did not accompany us on work detail, although we were warned that it was not unusual for him to pop in to check things out. We were given forty-five minutes for lunch. Late in the afternoon, we would march back to camp, arriving by five o'clock. We would wash and have dinner, followed by assembly, which would feature either singing or a history lesson. At times, we also had to do kitchen duty or guard duty, just as in the Army.

One of our first days at work proved to be especially tiring, because the weather was very hot and humid. The work spade had worn blisters on my hands, and sweat poured from my body, making it extremely desirable to gnats, flies, and mosquitoes. To make matters worse, Brandt rode up on a bicycle while we were eating lunch. He parked the bicycle and headed directly for the pyramid of parade spades.

"You call these clean?" he bellowed, kicking the pyramids over, all the spades spattering in mud.

I gulped, knowing that mine had been clean, and I had strategically placed it so I would know which one was mine. Now they all lay like identical matchsticks covered with mud.

"Tonight, we will polish spades from ten o'clock until mid-night. And we will do it every night until all these spades are clean," he said.

A groan arose, because we were already exhausted and knew we had another half day of work in this heat and humidity. At ten o'clock, as promised, we were called together to clean spades. My muscles ached, my blistered hands hurt, and I had someone else's grimy spade. As I scrubbed and scraped with wet sand, Inge's face appeared before me, laughing in an "I told you so" manner. I blinked her away, only to have Friedrich's face appear with the same look.

In June, we received a five-day furlough to go home. We traveled again by chartered bus from Burglengenfeld to Leipzig. We were unsupervised this time, except for the bus drivers, and we knew each other for the trip home. Our conduct was a good deal more boisterous during the all-day ride, but by the time we reached Leipzig we had tamed down considerably. As we entered the outskirts of Leipzig, we began to see the familiar Leipzig trolleys, with their distinctive green-and-beige colour or designs that were unique to the city of Leipzig. I had not consciously felt homesick during my three months in Labor Service, but the sight of the first Leipzig trolley brought an unexpected lump to my throat, and I realized for the first time how much I had really missed my home.

The buses took us to Augustus Square, and I caught a trolley to my parents' apartment, arriving in early evening. I cannot describe the feeling of warmth and security that came rushing back when I was in the midst of my family again. My mother's face beamed from ear to ear, and she fed me until I thought I would burst. Fritz asked questions so incessantly that I hardly had a chance to answer them, and my uniform so impressed him that he could hardly wait to enter Labor Service himself. Almost in spite of herself, even Inge was

curious about my experience. Her presence reminded me of the muddy-spade episode, which I did not mention. My father just smiled happily and was content to let everyone else have center stage.

After three days at home, we departed by chartered bus again from Augustus Square. The trip back to Burglengenfeld was not as lively or enthusiastic as the trip home had been. I did not know how a few days could make such a difference, but I felt that I was somehow older and more mature when we arrived back at camp that night.

We quickly returned to our old routine of calisthenics and jogging after breakfast, marching forty minutes to the strip mine, singing as we went, working all day, marching home, cleaning up, having supper, going to assembly, and going to bed.

On weekends, we were free from 4:00 P.M. on Saturday until 10:00 P.M. on Sunday. Three or four of us would go by train to a nearby city that seemed interesting to us. We would visit the cathedrals and museums and other noteworthy buildings. We would have lunch in a restaurant and go to a movie or maybe to a dance and meet girls. Our parents supplemented our pay, so we could afford to do these things. For our labor, we were paid a half mark a day, which was just enough for snacks and incidentals. We were paid each week.

The final leg of Labor Service occurred with the selection of those of us who would parade at a huge political rally the government was planning to stage at Nuremberg on September 8, 1936. The Army, the SA, the SS, the Labor Service, and the Hitler Youth were all to parade in a grand spectacle. Tens of thousands would be participating in the parade. The purpose of the political rally, called the *Reichsparteitag*, was to unify the German people and to impress the rest of Europe with our military strength and martial spirit.

Only those of us who demonstrated the greatest skill on the parade ground were selected. To my delight, I was among the 10 percent of my *Abteilung* to go, as was Fischer. Those selected to go to Nuremberg began to work less and do extra drill in preparation for

the rally. We practiced drilling by ourselves for two weeks, and then we went to Amberg for two weeks of drilling in a company-size unit composed of elements from several different Labor Service *Abteilungen*.

We went to Nuremberg, which was not far away, by bus. We arrived the day before our parade and disembarked from the buses in the city. We marched the two miles from Nuremberg to a virtual tent city that had been erected for all of us who were taking part in the parades, through the traffic-cleared and flag-lined streets of the inner city. The sidewalks were packed with cheering people, and bands were placed at strategic locations- all playing martial music for us to march to.

More than fifteen hundred tents, each accommodating six people, were arranged in neat rows, with grass streets running between the rows of tents. Many tens of thousands of people were participating in the parades, which were to continue for five days. We had already been assigned tent numbers and even bunks in the tents. We arrived in late afternoon, and by the time we got settled in our tents, evening was beginning to descend. We were marched to a huge tent mess hall and fed. Then we were marched back to our tents and dismissed.

Fischer and I decided to walk around the tent city and see what was going on. It was almost a carnival atmosphere. Every- one was excited about being in Nuremberg on such an auspicious occasion. Everyone knew that Hitler, Goring, Goebbels, and all the other high party people would be in the reviewing stand watching us march. The excitement of possibly seeing them swelled in my chest.

Lanterns appeared in the tents as darkness began to smother daylight. Card games sprang up in some of the tents. Here and there, groups of young men would break lustily into marching songs. The smell of kerosene drifted through the air from kerosene fires that glowed atop ten-foot columns spaced approximately fifty feet apart in every direction throughout the camp. Everywhere, young men milled about in the grass- and-dirt streets, talking, laughing, and practicing drill steps. Every-one was giddy with excitement and anticipation. I had never seen so many people in

one place. We went to sleep that night eagerly anticipating the great honor that tomorrow would bring.

At ten o'clock the next morning, we performed a carefully timed march into the stadium. We stood at parade rest and watched a precision presentation by sports units consisting of teenage boys and girls who performed intricate maneuvers and then marched past the reviewing stand. Shortly before noon, the tension began to rise in us as our turn neared. We still stood at parade rest, facing the reviewing stand, with its enormous granite swastika below the German eagle.

"*Achtung!*" boomed over the loudspeakers, and we snapped to quivering attention. At one command, ten thousand spades went up, with the sun reflecting on them dramatically. The spades would turn with every move, the sun flashing on them. On command, we formed a series of large rectangles and then went through a series of maneuvers with the spades (turning them, putting them up, putting them down, presenting spades, etc.).

We had to be careful not to bash the man in front of us with the spade; it was heavy, and a spade is more difficult to handle than a rifle. It must have been a tremendous spectacle, and from the reports we received, the Labor Service parade was the most impressive of the parades that year.

Then we were ordered to parade rest, and after some martial music someone made a speech. From my vantage point as one of ten thousand Labor Service men, I could barely see the reviewing stand, but we all knew that Chancellor Hitler, Goring, and all the important government figures were there watching us. That knowledge induced a peculiar tingle of excitement in us. We felt ten feet tall and indestructible!

This was pageantry of the highest order, and it inspired enormous national pride in us. It was a jubilant extravaganza with the unmistakable message that Germany was being reborn. I felt extremely proud.

## **INTO THE ARTILLERY**

ON OCTOBER 15, 1936, I BOARDED the train that would take me from Leipzig to Jena, some forty miles away, to begin my new life as a soldier in the artillery. My father had been a naval gunnery officer before and during the World War, and all during my childhood he had told me many thrilling stories about the big guns. Whenever I had thought of myself as a soldier, I had always thought in terms of those glamorous big guns.

For two years our newspapers had been full of stories about the technological advances that had been achieved in mechanizing our modern Army, including the artillery, and I had volunteered for the artillery with visions of driving self-propelled mechanized artillery.

As the train neared Jena, I saw a large complex of barracks. Turning to the middle-aged man sitting next to me, I asked if he knew what they were. He looked up from his newspaper to tell me they were infantry barracks. A little closer to town was another barracks complex; my seat companion, who was a bit portly and starting to gray at the temples, told me this was the artillery. Then to my dismay I saw horse stables and horses, and my heart began to sink. I turned to my seat companion in consternation.

"You mean they still pull the artillery with horses?" I asked, hoping desperately that it was not true.

"Yes, I am afraid so," he said softly, sensing my disappointment.

Suddenly the artillery lost all its glamour and appeal. Instead of driving massive mechanized artillery, I would be driving horses. I wanted to turn around and go back home.

At the Army barracks, an *unteroffizier* sat at a desk. He asked my name, found it on his list, put a check mark beside it, and said curtly, "Room 29." He was clearly bored with the routine.

When I looked at him quizzically, he responded, "Second floor."

The door to Room 29 was open, and a soldier in uniform sat at a table inside. When I walked up to the doorway, he stood and

smiled. I am Oberkanonier Baresei," he said. "I'm going to be your room commander."

I shook his hand and introduced myself. He had me select a bunk. I unpacked my satchel and stored my belongings in a case next to the bunk. The room had six bunks and lockers and a table with six chairs. My other roommates began to trickle in. First was Ernst Rausche, who had been an assembly line worker in a factory. The next was named Peter Wohlthat, a farm boy. Next came Boris Weinreich, a tall, strikingly handsome specimen who was from East Prussia, the son of a schoolmaster. Our final roommate was a city urchin named Vogel.

I went to bed that night still disappointed that the artillery was horse-drawn, but I finally drifted into a sound sleep.

A whistle woke us rudely at five o'clock the next morning.

"Out of bed!" Baresel shouted.

"What!" someone shouted, "It's still the middle of the night."

"Well, a little stable duty before breakfast will bring morning around." Baresel grinned. "You have exactly one minute to be assembled in front of the building if you do not want extra duty."

We all jerked our heads toward him, startled, and began frantically to pull on our clothing. Shivering in the early-morning cold and darkness, we assembled in front of the building. Baresel led us to an area and arranged us in a formation with other men from other rooms.

Baresel and the other uniformed Room Elders remained outside the formation. An *obergefreiter* appeared, called us to attention, and marched us to the horse stables. I still could not believe I was actually in the horse-drawn artillery. It all seemed so backward in this modern age!

"One man per stall," the *obergefreiter* instructed. We tentatively moved toward the stable. "Move it!" he shouted.

We ran to our posts, selecting our stalls at random. When we had taken up our positions, he called us to attention. "I am *Obergefreiter* Sebastian, and this is stable number one," he bellowed. He was a paunchy, older man in his thirties, with a mustache. "Note the number of the stall behind you when you are dismissed. This will be your permanent stall to keep clean. A shovel is clipped to the post behind you. You will not be trusted with pitchforks for a few weeks, until we can be sure you can handle them without stabbing the horses. The horse in your stall has been haltered and tied. Take careful note of how the halter fits and how the horse is tied to the ring in the corner of the stall. I will demonstrate it for you once."

He disappeared into a stall and re-emerged with a horse in tow. He showed us how to remove and replace the halter and how to tie a quick-release knot on the lead rope. With his demonstration horse now tied, he showed us how to push the horse's body from side to side so we could clean the area under it. I only hoped that all the horses were as easygoing as the demonstration horse.

The stable had twenty-three stalls down one side of a large center aisle and twenty-three down the other. The horses were tied with their heads to the wall and their rumps to the center aisle. The "stalls" consisted of beams that hung from the ceiling to separate each horse from the one next to it. Only officers' horses had real stalls. Two wheelbarrows were now pushed into the center aisle by uniformed soldiers.

"When you clean your stalls, bring the manure to the wheelbarrows in the center aisle, then return the shovel to its attached position on the post," the *obergefreiter* instructed. "Anyone whose stall does not pass inspection will be assigned extra duty. Now fall out and clean your stall."

I turned and looked at the rump of my new ward. "Great," I thought. "Now I am going to be *hausfrau* to a plowhorse." I had never been this close to a live horse before. It obviously outweighed me by at least a thousand pounds. It seemed impossible that I could move this huge brute by simply pushing it. I hoped it

was a tame one as I removed the small, short-handled shovel and entered the stall.

I inched nervously toward my target, wondering what one says to reassure a horse. Stretching the short shovel as far as I could reach, I scooped up the offensive pile of manure and retreated hastily to the safety of the center aisle, depositing the contents of my shovel into the wheelbarrow. To my delight, the horse had simply ignored my presence.

Recalling the *obergefreiter's* warning about extra duty, I returned to make sure I had left no traces. The horse turned his head to look at me, took a deep breath, and returned to munching hay. I returned my shovel and clipped it securely in place.

We were called to attention again and the *obergefreiter* marched us back to the barracks building, where we were informed that we had one hour to clean up and have breakfast. After breakfast, Baresel instructed us to form a line with the other recruits in the center hallway of the barracks, and we were led to another part of the building, where our hair was cut very short.

Then we were issued two sets of uniforms—one for drill and stable work and another for everything else. We were also issued riding boots and riding breeches with leather seats, since we were in the horse-drawn artillery. We were especially proud when we were issued steel helmets and cartridge pouches. That made us feel more like real soldiers. They tried to give us the right sizes, but sometimes they could not fit us and we had to take what they had and exchange it later.

Although the first day was busy, it included nothing of real substance—mostly just getting us checked in. Things did not start in earnest until the next day. Following stable duty and breakfast the next day, we were called into formation and introduced to *Unteroffizier* Max Krall. He was a very small man of about twenty-three, with dingy blond hair, a ruddy, scarred face, and pale blue eyes. He stepped up onto a portable platform, took a deep breath, puffed himself up to all the height he could achieve from his

five-foot-four- inch frame, and stared down his now-raised nose at us for a long moment of silence.

"I am *Unteroffizier* Krall," he said finally through clenched teeth. The skin on the back of my neck began to crawl. "It is my responsibility to make soldiers out of the sad specimens I see before me," he gritted. "Obviously, they expect miracles of me. But I am going to do it if I have to work you day and night for the next three hundred and sixty-five days. From the looks of you, that is what it is going to take." He paused.

Then, appearing to draw himself up even straighter, he asked, "How many of you are *Abiturenten*?" mispronouncing *Abiturient*, the German word for gymnasium graduate. I raised my hand; I could see Weinreich's hand go up, and I thought I could see two others. "Take a good look at me," he growled threateningly. "I plan to take especially good care of *Abiturenten*."

Krall broke us into squads and turned us over to *obergefreiters*, whose styles and attitudes were not much different from his. They went to work on us, assuring us that, Labor Service notwithstanding, we not only did not know how to march, we did not even know how to walk. Then they went about teaching us, in their own way. It was beneath them to recognize our Labor Service training, so they taught us to march and drill all over again.

We were issued rifles and taught how to clean and care for them, as well as how to disassemble and reassemble them. Our instructors disparagingly assured us that we were not carrying spades on our shoulders now. Although we would never have admitted it to our instructors, we were proud to have rifles on our shoulders now instead of spades. In the afternoon, we attended classes on Army ranks and on German history before returning to the parade ground for yet more practice and drill.

Our training began in earnest the next day with six weeks of infantry training. This included handling our rifles, shooting them on the firing range, moving on the ground under fire, and digging in. Of course, that was in addition to marching, drilling, and learning to parade. We kept cadence while marching by singing. We also had

training with hand grenades and machine guns. This portion of our training was conducted primarily by *Stabsgefreiter* Weizsacker, who made a special point of riding the gymnasium graduates. All we could do was hunker down and endure his abuse.

We received only six weeks of infantry training, compared with twelve months for the infantry soldiers. It was important, however, because the part of the artillery that accompanied the forward observation officer, called the battery troop, was always up front with the infantry.

During this infantry-training period, we would get up at five o'clock, perform stable duty, have breakfast, fall out, and begin a very full day that ended only when we fell into bed, exhausted, at ten o'clock. The training was interesting, well planned, and well organized. Lunch was our main meal of the day. The food was good, and it was well prepared. After lunch, we would get fifteen minutes or so of rest, then we would typically change uniforms (the clothing was prescribed for different activities) and get a lecture on espionage or German national history.

We stood guard in the stables at night. We had to keep a wheelbarrow handy, and whenever a horse at our end of the stable let something fall, we had to take the wheelbarrow and scoop it up so the horse would not lie down in it. Guard duty was boring and unpleasant, but it was only for two-hour stretches.

We had calisthenics regularly, as well as handball training; the batteries played handball against each other or against nearby infantry. Around December 1, 1936, we ended our infantry training and began three months of basic artillery training. We were divided into two groups: those who would handle the horses (usually those from farms) and those who would handle the guns (usually those from the city), although each group had to be familiar with the other's duties.

We had to learn everything about the horse side of the business and the gunners' side of the business. Basically, the horse handlers were learning equine care and how to bridle and harness horses. Those of us who were gunners practiced going through the motions of firing:

taking the gun off the ammunition cart, placing the gun in the proper position, loading it with a dummy shell and bags of sawdust for powder, aiming it at a fixed point, making corrections, and firing on command. We went through these exercises every day in the training area, just going through the motions without live ammunition. The horse handlers (*fahrers*) and the gunners (*kanoniers*) exercised constantly but separately.

A gun crew consisted of one gun leader (an *unteroffizier* or *unterwachtmeister*), five *kanoniers*, and three *fahrers*. The direction gunner was the key *kanonier*, because he handled the sighting and the aiming of the gun. The others handled ammunition, loaded the gun, and helped camouflage the gun with branches.

After a couple of weeks of the *kanoniers* and *fahrers* practicing separately, we came together for the first time. From then on, *fahrers* and *kanoniers* practiced together daily, and once a week all four gun crews would come together and practice as a battery.

Christmas was approaching, and we began looking forward to a break in our training routine. Half of us were to get five days of furlough at Christmas, and the other half were to get five days at New Year's. Rausche, Wohlthat, and Baresel drew Christmas furlough, and Weinreich, Vogel, and I received our furloughs at New Year's.

When the first group left, just before Christmas, everything seemed suddenly very strange, because our total regimentation had been broken. We had to police the area and keep everything spic and span, but most of our routine training was discontinued until after New Year's, and we had free time to lie around and be lazy. Most of the higher-ranking non-commissioned officers had managed Christmas furloughs, leaving mostly *stabsgefreiters* in charge. *Stabsgefreiters* were a unique group in the German Army, because this was a rank reserved for losers: career soldiers who could not handle responsibility and would never hold a rank higher than *stabsgefreiter*. Christmas furlough was an opportunity for them to exercise authority, however, and they took full advantage of it.

The *stabsgefreiter* in charge of us in Krall's absence was Wezsacker, and we were more than a little apprehensive about him. He seemed to be a very sadistic sort who liked to throw his weight around when he had a rare opportunity. Since Weinreich and I were "intellectuals," we knew we would be in trouble if we ever found ourselves at his mercy.

Weinreich and I drew stable duty on Christmas Eve. At least we were trusted with pitchforks by now. Stable duty consisted of cleaning the stalls and sorting out the straw. The straw could not be too dirty, so new straw had to be placed on top of the old straw. The underneath mattress of old straw would already be pressed down and the new straw would be placed on top of that so the horse would not get dirty when it lay down. The stable had a cement floor, and we had to learn how much straw to take out and how much to leave. About every three weeks all the straw would be removed, the cement floor would be cleaned with water, and all new straw would be put down. An immense amount of new straw was needed to make the required mattress. After enduring the odor of removing the old straw, we found the fresh scent of new straw an unforgettable pleasure.

Weinreich and I drew the unenviable duty of removing all the soiled straw from a section of the stall and washing down the cement floor. We had hardly begun when *Stabsgefreiter* Wezsacker came marching Vogel into the barn, shouting at him about extra duty. Weinreich and I stopped our work and looked around to see what was happening.

The moment we stood up, Wezsacker pounced on us. "Ah ha! The intellectuals are loafing," he shouted gleefully, momentarily forgetting about Vogel. "Well, if you have so much free time, I have a perfect solution-especially designed for intellectuals and smartmouths." He grinned at Vogel. Wezsacker motioned for Vogel to get into the stall with Weinreich and me. "Now, let's see you guys clean this place out with your hands!" Our expressions must have reflected our shock, because he grinned even wider. "That's right," he said. "Hang up your pitchforks."

Vogel started to protest, but quickly thought better of it. Wezsacker's half-moon grin was topped by a round, bulbous nose and small close-set eyes. He was obviously enjoying his rare experience with authority. "I will be back in thirty minutes," he said, "and this stall had better be empty and spotless." He turned and strutted importantly toward the door.

Vogel picked up a tiny piece of horse manure and flipped it at the departing Wezsacker, who fortunately never saw the defiant gesture. We began picking up large sections of packed straw with bare hands, trying unsuccessfully to avoid the overpowering stench of horse urine that arose as the straw was removed, and carrying it to the wheelbarrows. With nearly superhuman effort, we had our part of the stall completely cleaned and washed down when Wezsacker returned thirty minutes later.

He came stalking into the stable, looking smug and self-important, like the Italian dictator, Mussolini, in newsreels I had seen. When he saw the empty stall, his face fell. He clearly had thought it would be impossible for us to do the job in thirty minutes and was looking forward to imposing more extra duty on us. He seemed confused upon finding that he had no excuse for further punishment. "It is a damn good thing," he muttered, as a way to save face, and stalked out of the stable.

It was not exactly an ideal Christmas Eve, but we survived it, and actually in fairly good spirits once the filthy task in the stable was finished.

Five days at the mercy of the *stabsgefreiters* left me more than ready for my own furlough. Being home again was very pleasant, however brief. The total lack of regimentation seemed unnatural and strange at first. Having my mother hovering to serve my every wish made me feel that I must be in another world, a dream world. My father was interested in comparing my experience to his experience in the Navy twenty years earlier. Fritz, of course, was fascinated with both sets of stories and sat at our feet as we related them. Inge was friendlier than I could ever remember her being before, but still reserved. Grandma came to visit, of course, and to brag about her handsome young soldier-grandchild. My father had

got out of the wholesale grocery business and was now operating a restaurant and night-club.

I found Liebelt, Michaelis, and Ebert and learned from them that Friedrich was also home on furlough. I was delighted that we could all get together for an evening before Friedrich had to return to Dresden, where he was in training to become an officer. Of course, since he was a *fahnenjunker-unteroffizier* and I was but a lowly *kanonier*, he strutted about, playfully shouting orders at me.

"We should plan another ski trip to the Sudeten Mountains when Knappe and Friedrich get out of the Army," Liebelt suggested.

"I wonder if old Herr Hoffer would still be there," Friedrich said.

"I don't know if I will still be in Germany," Michaelis said gloomily. "My father is talking seriously about moving to England. He does not trust the Nazis, because we are Jewish."

"I hope you're still here," Ebert said. "It wouldn't be the same without you."

"Let's toast the five of us, just in case," Michaelis suggested, raising his glass of wine. "To us and to the future."

We all drank to Michaelis's toast.

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In the summer, the battalion (all three batteries) came together for the first time, and in late summer we worked together with the infantry for the first time. For this, we had to leave Jena, our garrison town, and go to a military reservation at Jiiterbog, near Berlin, where we could fire live ammunition. Working with the infantry was the highlight of our training.

We seldom practiced with the infantry in garrison because of limited space, with the farms all around. We could practice in the fall, after the crops were in, but even then a lot of damage was done and the farmers did not like it. We had to take the farmers' fences down and

then put them up again. We had to be very careful with the fences, which was time-consuming and difficult.

We marched from Jena to Jiiterbog. We were roused out of bed at 4:30 A.M. and had an hour to feed and water the horses and have our own breakfast. Then we hitched the teams to the guns and wagons and moved out. The infantry led the way, with the artillery following. The infantry marched on foot, and we in the artillery either rode horseback or rode on the guns or wagons. The guns were pulled backward, with their barrels pointing behind us. The battery commander led the Eighth Battery on horseback, followed by the forward observation officer with the battery troop. Then came the battery officer with the four gun crews and the ammunition and supply wagons.

Suddenly we received word that the infantry in front of us had encountered resistance and we were to deploy and support the infantry. The battery commander and the forward observation officer, with the battery troop, moved up to join the infantry. After being advised of the infantry battle plan, the battery commander rode back to instruct the battery officer and determine the gun positions, designating the exact spot for each of the four guns.

The guns were unhitched and positioned by hand by the *kanoniers*. The ammunition was unloaded from the limbers, which the *fahrrers* then took back to cover, where they dismounted and cared for their horses. The battery officer selected a reference point that could be seen from the gun position. The forward observation officer selected a target for sighting purposes and gave directions to the battery officer (as well as the position of his reference point), who then gave orders to the guncrew of gun number two, which did the initial sighting for all four guns. After each round, the forward observation officer called back adjustments. When gun number two was zeroed in, all the guns fired on the target-live ammunition for the first time-and the roar of the guns was deafening.

When we received word that the enemy resistance had been broken, the *fahrrers* rode back to the gun positions and hitched the horses to the guns. We communications people restored our

equipment to their containers and remounted them on our horses. We then resumed our cross-country march, but we were all flushed and excited from actually going through the whole coordinated action and firing live ammunition for the first time; we were considerably less disciplined than we had been before, but only for a short while. We were soon back in our disciplined routine.

While we were at Jiiterbog, Hitler ordered a big parade for the benefit of Mussolini, who was visiting Germany and whom Hitler wanted to impress with German military might. I think this was one of the few times when a whole division went on parade. As participants, unfortunately, all we saw was dust, with an artillery regiment of four battalions totaling forty-eight cannons, each pulled by a team of six galloping horses. Nearly three hundred horses and one hundred cannon wheels raised so much dust that not only could we not see, we could barely breathe.

## **A MILITARY CAREER**

I ARRIVED AT KRIEGSSCHULE POTSDAM IN MID-OCTOBER 1937, looking forward to an exciting new experience. I had abandoned the idea of university, and decided to make the army my career. I took a train to Potsdam, a relatively small town near Berlin, and then caught a bus to the school, arriving in late afternoon. Kriegsschule Potsdam was a very large and modern complex, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence on a concrete base. The whole complex looked very military and official.

A *gefreiter* at the gate inspected my orders and directed me to the administration building. There a clerk directed me to Room I-C, where I found a lieutenant seated at a wooden desk.

"I am Lieutenant Breker," he said. "Welcome to Kriegsschule Potsdam. I am going to be your platoon leader while you are here." He sat back down at the desk, opened a folder, and began to look through some papers as I stood before the desk. A photograph of Chancellor Hitler adorned the wall in back of the desk, along with a photograph of General feldmarschall von Blomberg, Commander in Chief of the Wehrmacht. "You established quite a good record at Jena," the lieutenant commented finally. "I am sure you will do just

as well here. You have been assigned to Barrack 3, Suite L. Your training will begin tomorrow morning."

I crossed a parade ground to four barrack buildings, where I found Barrack 3 and Suite L and learned that a suite consisted of a large study room with four desks and a large bedroom with four beds, four lockers, and four individual washing facilities. Weinreich greeted me at Suite L, a big smile on his face.

"Welcome to the manor, Herr Knappe," he said.

I looked at him with both surprise and suspicion. "Are we rooming together again?" I asked.

"No. I asked the lieutenant if he would put us together," he said, with a shrug and a palms-up gesture. "He could not, because every suite must have people from different branches of the service. But I am in the suite next door."

My other roommates arrived during the afternoon. One was an infantryman named Hans Bottler, another was a cavalryman named Gustav Hoffmann, and I don't remember the fourth one.

After a breakfast the next morning, we were all called to an assembly, where we were greeted by the commander of Kriegsschule Potsdam, Oberst Wetzel. We learned that we were but one of four kriegsschules and that the others were at Munich, Hannover, and Dresden. Anyone who became an officer at that time had to graduate from one of them. Each had approximately a thousand students.

We were then divided into two groups of five hundred each, labeled Group A and Group B. Suite L was assigned to Group B. Each group was commanded by an *oberstleutnant*, Group A by *Oberstleutnant* Eduard Burkhardt and Group B by *Oberstleutnant* Erwin Rommel. Rommel's name meant nothing to us

then, but we would soon learn that he had been quite a hero in the World War and that even today, at the age of forty-five, he was something of a celebrity in the German Army.

His feats of bravery and effectiveness in combat were astounding. We learned that he had received the Pour-le-Merite, Germany's highest decoration, during the World War as an oberleutnant in the Alpine Korps on the Italian front. He had been a brilliant tactician even then. He had just this year, 1937, published a book on tactics, called *Infantry Attacks*, which we were to use as a textbook. Once a week, we were to have an assembly of both groups, at which Rommel would teach tactics.

Within each group were sixteen platoons of thirty-two men each. Each platoon was commanded by a major, who was assisted by a lieutenant. After the commander's presentation, Rommel was introduced and gave a little speech about the importance of a strong officer corps and what an honor it was for us to be selected to become officers in the German Army.

We were then separated into platoons and introduced to our platoon commanders. Mine was Major Kassnitz, a man of about forty, with thinning hair that was already turning gray. We got another short speech from him. He told us that at the academy we would be taught to lead an infantry battalion in combat. We would all be treated as infantry, even though many of us were in the artillery, the cavalry, and the panzers (tanks).

Our training began immediately and continued without letup until Christmas. We studied only military subjects, because we were all gymnasium graduates who had just completed thirteen years of intensive academic studies. Our major subject was tactics, and we spent most of our time on it. Other subjects included topography and reading maps, engineering (mostly building and blowing up bridges), basic artillery, horseback riding, drilling on the parade ground with rifles, cooperation With the Luftwaffe, and physical education.

We spent six hours each day in the classroom and three hours in the field. We learned everything an infantry battalion commander had to know in any kind of pre-combat or combat situation. At the end of our training we would theoretically be able to command an infantry battalion in combat.

Every week we would have a test that was graded, very much as in gymnasium. We were not normally assigned homework during the week. In the evening, we would look over what we had studied during the day and go over it again so the next day we would be better acquainted with what had been discussed.

We got homework every second or third weekend. In an attempt to put us under stress similar to a combat situation, they gave us very little time to do the assignment. They would give us a situation in which we were a battalion commander. Our battalion was given a certain goal for the day and we were marching to meet that goal. Suddenly we would receive a message that the enemy had been spotted.

Then we might get a contradictory message. Then we would encounter something else that would alter the situation. The problem was written out and we would read it as if we were seeing it. From all the information given us, we had to make our decision. Three or four possibilities might be equally correct. We had to judge the situation and make a decision on the basis of what we knew. We had to write the orders we would give to implement that decision. We had to explain why we made the decision; it was not so much that we had to make a patent decision as how we came to it, how we defended it, and how we executed it.

We would go out in the field and "play" battalion commander. One person would be designated as the battalion commander and the others would make up his staff. The staff would include an adjutant (an executive assistant to the commander, principally for administrative duties), three company commanders, a communications officer, and so on. An assault had to be prepared and orders issued. Major Kassnitz would make the assignments and distribute the rules for playing. Then he would keep notes on how well everyone handled himself. Sometimes the school commander, Oberst Wetzel, would also observe. After the exercise in the field, we would go back to the academy in a bus. Often the most warlike action of the day was the run toward the bus to get one of the better seats.

In tactics, we studied how to attack, how to retreat, how to march, and so on. We studied military history, mostly Prussian battles from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and battles from the great World War. We studied how tactics and strategy were used in the battles.

Often our three hours a day in the field would be infantry practice, for which we would wear our field uniforms, steel helmets, and gas masks. We would march about twenty minutes from the academy, with machine guns and the ammunition for them. We would march and then deploy. We marched three abreast; then when we "came under fire," one person went left, one went right, and one went straight down. We would practice attacking, defending, retreating, and so on. We did this to make sure that everyone knew infantry tactics even if he was in the artillery or panzers, because tactics usually determined the outcome of a battle.

We also did some basic infantry training, like target shooting, firing machine guns, throwing hand grenades, and so on. Sometimes in studying engineering, we would go out and lay barbed wire and put up antitank obstacles. We learned where to apply dynamite to a bridge so it would collapse and not remain usable.

We also studied how to deal with mines. We studied all these things both in the classroom and in the field. We had to take riding lessons also, even those of us in the cavalry and artillery, who already knew how to ride.

Our lives were quite pleasant at Kriegsschule Potsdam. We could study in our room, which was equipped with four desks and chairs. The mess hall was not much different from the soldiers' mess at Jena: a large hall with tables for ten or twelve people each. The mess hall was used only for the noon meal. We were issued a two-pound loaf of *Kommissbrot*, or "Army bread," every other day, which we kept in a special food compartment of our lockers. For breakfast, we would have *Kommissbrot*, butter, jam, and coffee.

Somebody had to go to the mess hall every morning and get the butter, jam, and coffee and bring them back to the suite. For our evening meal, someone would also go to the mess hall to get butter

and either liverwurst or cheese to go with our *Kommissbrot*, and we would also eat this in our suite.

We had a lounge adjoining the mess hall where we could go at night and on the weekends and have a drink if we had the time. We could order beer, wine, cognac, or any other kind of drink. On rare occasions, someone would get drunk, but learning to drink socially without getting drunk was part of the training. An Army officer who could not hold his liquor would present a bad image. Sometimes we drank a lot if we had something to celebrate, but almost everyone knew how to handle it.

As students, we sometimes made excursions away from Potsdam. Major Kassnitz would go with us on these trips, because he had to observe us in all kinds of different environments. Some of the excursions were for skiing (a skill considered necessary for winter combat), and others were to visit different battlefields.

We made one early trip to East Prussia that lasted two weeks. On one trip we spent a week skiing in the Sudeten Mountains, and I thought often of my trip with Michaelis, Liebelt, Ebert, and Friedrich.

At each battlefield, we would study the campaign and then go and tour the battlefield to get a feel for how these battles were fought—flank attacks, retreats, defense, and counterattacks. We would study the battle in the classroom, and then when we visited the battlefield, one of us would be designated to explain the battle. Then Major Kassnitz would criticize our explanation of the battle. It would be an all-day affair.

On the way to a battlefield, we might visit a castle or a fortress. The excursions gave us some historical insights in addition to military insights. We studied the tactics of Alexander and Caesar, the battle of Hastings, and Roman and Greek battles. We learned why things went right and why things went wrong.

Social affairs were arranged so we could practice our social graces and be observed and evaluated. We often had dances to which daughters of the older officers were invited. Anyone who had not learned how to dance properly had to learn now. There were dance

schools in Potsdam for those who needed them. The dances were held in a large ballroom, with live orchestras. Many of the officers at the kriegsschule and their wives attended these dances. They were quite formal; the men wore dress uniforms and the women wore ball gowns.

There were perhaps four dances during the nine months I was at Potsdam. Major Kassnitz was always watching and evaluating us. His wife and his two teenage daughters also attended the dances. At one of the dances, all the thirty-two men in my platoon were introduced to Rommel's wife. We had to kiss her hand properly and exchange a few words.

Shortly before graduation, I was ordered to report to Major Kassnitz's office. When I reported, he returned my salute with a smile and invited me to have a seat.

"Knappe, in the combined military academies, approximately four thousand new officers will graduate next week," he said.

"*Jawohl*," I said, a bit perplexed.

"Of those four thousand, your grades place you twenty-fourth from the top," he continued. "That is no small achievement, and you are to be congratulated."

"Thank you, Herr Major," I said.

"But in addition to your grades, your athletic achievements and your demonstrated leadership ability led me to submit your name as a candidate for the Inspector of the Kriegsschules' Award for outstanding achievement," he went on. He then stood and extended his hand across his desk. "I am proud indeed to inform you that you have won that prestigious award," he said. "Congratulations! "

I was dumbfounded, but extremely proud and pleased. "Thank you, Herr Major," I said, shaking his hand. "I am very flattered. I had no idea that you had submitted my name."

## **FIRST MOVES OF AGGRESSION**

Then came the occupation of the Sudetenland, a part of pre-World War Germany that had been given to Czechoslovakia by the Versailles Treaty and that was still heavily populated by ethnic Germans. As early as May, while I was still at Kriegsschule Potsdam, the newspapers had been full of stories about the abuse of the ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland by the Czechoslovakian government.

The stories had continued through the summer and become increasingly worse. We did not know, of course, that much of it was the creation of Goebbels's propaganda machine. The only news we received was from the controlled press, and it never occurred to us to question it.

At the Nuremberg rally in 1938, Hitler had threatened to see to it that the Czechs gave justice to the Sudeten Germans. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had been negotiating with Hitler since mid-September. In a speech at the Berlin *Sportpalast*, Hitler had announced that he would have the Sudetenland by October 1, even if he had to take it militarily.

We received orders to be prepared to march and were moved up to the Czech border on September 26. I recalled Herr Hoffer's gloomy predictions of war barely thirty months earlier, as we now prepared to invade the Sudeten area near where I had met him. I had seen some of the Czech fortifications on skiing trips in the Ore Mountains (Plauen was only thirty-five kilometers from the Czechoslovakian border, and the best skiing area was just across the border).

Then on September 29, Hitler and Prime Minister Chamberlain met again, along with Daladier of France and Mussolini of Italy. On September 30, the announcement was made that Czechoslovakia had accepted our peaceful occupation of the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia. The occupation was to begin October 1 and be completed by October 10. We all felt that we had righted a wrong that had been done to us by the Versailles Treaty.

We were ordered to be ready to pull out at 7:00 A.M. on October 1. I was up at 5:00 to see that everything was done properly and went smoothly. The cook's hot tea was a real bracer against the early-

morning chill at this time of year. The horses were fed and watered, and then the men were fed. The big difference between this operation and maneuvers was that this time the men were issued live ammunition for their rifles. We did not expect resistance, but the issue of live ammunition had a sobering effect on everyone.

All the units were lined up, and precisely at 7:00 we pulled out. We followed the roads instead of going cross-country, which means that we went south first and then turned east into Czechoslovakia. Although we did not expect resistance, we had full equipment, were well trained, and could have gone into battle if necessary.

As it turned out, the Sudeten Germans we encountered all greeted us enthusiastically, and we did not encounter any Czech Army units. They had apparently withdrawn from the Sudetenland prior to October 1. I felt comfortable in the Sudetenland because I had skied here so many times. We went into Czechoslovakia only thirty-five to seventy kilo meters all along the border.

## **BROKEN GLASS & MEIN FUHRER**

Shortly after, *Kristallnacht* (directly translated as "Crystal Night," but known widely as "The Night of Broken Glass.") occurred. A young German Jew whose family had been sent to concentration camps had walked into the German embassy in Paris and shot to death a minor German official.

In retribution, the Nazi Brownshirts during the night of November 9 rampaged across Germany, burning synagogues and destroying stores, buildings, and apartments belonging to Jews. In a few places Jews were killed when they tried to resist, and many were wounded. The event was called Crystal Night because of the broken windows.

I hoped fervently that Michaelis was not among them. It was reported on the radio and in the newspapers as a spontaneous expression of moral outrage by the German people. It was nothing of the kind, of course, and everyone knew it. We did not talk about it in the barracks, because we were ashamed that our government would permit such a thing to happen.

We did not want to admit it to ourselves, much less to each other, so we did not talk about it. Strong anti-Semitism had always been just beneath the surface in the German population, but no one I knew supported this kind of excess.

We all felt that Hitler had been very good for Germany-solving unemployment, eliminating political street brawls, restoring national pride-but there was a coarseness about him that we silently abhorred. His hatred of the Jews made no sense to any of us, and we just wanted to distance ourselves from the ugly side of his character. Herr Hoffer's face appeared to me in a dream that night-a dream that was haunted by the refrain "At what cost?"

During my New Year's furlough, Friedrich, Ebert, Liebelt, Michaelis, and I got together again. But this one was not a happy meeting. It started off well enough, but as the evening progressed, Michaelis became more and more quiet. Finally I asked him why.

"We have to leave Germany," he said softly. "And it is the only home I have ever known."

"Why do you have to leave?" Friedrich asked.

"Because we are Jewish. The Brownshirts destroyed my father's medical office during Kristallnacht, and his patients are afraid to come to him now. They are afraid of what the Brown-shirts might do to them."

Silence fell over the group. We avoided one another's eyes, trying to think of something we could say that would not sound hypocritical.

"That is awful," Ebert said finally. "It feels so different when it happens to someone you know."

"Let's not let it get us down tonight," Michaelis said, shaking his head and attempting to smile. "It will be my last night with my friends. Let's enjoy it."

It was the last time any of us ever saw Michaelis. His family went to England, where he probably continued his studies.

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In February 1939, I received an order to report to Major Kordt.

"Come in," he responded to my knock. He returned my salute and motioned for me to take a seat. "This came for you today," he said, handing me a piece of paper.

It was an invitation to a reception being given by Hitler at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin!

"Your performance at Kriegsschule Potsdam has earned you this honor," Kordt said, smiling. "Only the top graduates from the four kriegsschules are invited. My congratulations!" Kordt was obviously pleased at having one of his officers going to the reception.

It was an exciting experience. The room was furnished with green leather chairs, and there was a lot of marble. It was tastefully done, with many sculptures and paintings. All the top Army brass were there, Goring, von Brauchitsch (Commander in Chief of the Army), and others. Himmler and other high-ranking politicians were also there. All the famous leaders looked just as they did in the newsreels. It was quite a heady experience for a twenty-two-year-old officer.

We were standing around in groups, just chatting with each other, when Hitler came in. The room felt charged with his presence as he began drifting from group to group, making small talk. We gave our names to Hitler's military aide, a major, who then introduced us to Hitler.

"Leutnant Knappe," the major said to Hitler when they came to me.

Hitler smiled warmly and extended his hand. "Good evening, lieutenant," he said. "I am happy to meet you. Where are you from?"

"I am from Leipzig, Mein Fuhrer," I said.

"And where are you stationed?"

"At Plauen, in the 24th Artillery Regiment."

"Congratulations on your performance at *Kriegsschule*," Hitler said as he moved on.

Hitler was at the height of his power. Everything he had done had turned out in his favor: the reoccupation of the Rhineland, the buildup of the armed forces, the annexation of Austria, the takeover of the Sudetenland. He radiated enthusiasm and energy to everyone in the room. Everything he had done except annexing Austria had been to correct an injustice -that had been imposed upon us by the Treaty of Versailles, and Austria had been annexed by plebiscite of the Austrian people. He made us extremely proud to be young German officers, and I am sure he sensed that pride in us.

On March 15, 1939, the German Army invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, unopposed, but my unit was not part of that operation. Now, for the first time, I experienced moral reservation about my government's action. The Sudetenland had been taken from us, but our subjugation of all of Czechoslovakia was unprovoked and I saw no justification for it.

## **POLISH ENEMIES AND RUSSIA FRIENDS?**

There were now more and more warning signs that war was getting closer. The Polish Corridor, a strip of Germany that had been given to Poland by the Versailles Treaty in order to provide her with a port on the Baltic Sea, separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany, and Hitler seemed determined to regain it, as well as the former German city of Danzig, which had been made a "free city" by the Versailles Treaty. More and more, however, it looked as if an invasion of Poland would not be as easy as Hitler's earlier conquests had been. France and England were now publicly stating that they would fight if we invaded Poland, and events seemed to be leading inevitably to such an invasion. I recalled Herr Hoffer. Was Hitler about to take the gamble that would prove fatal?

We were all startled, if not shocked, by the announcement of a German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact late in the evening of August 21. The government had always preached against the Soviet Union, and suddenly-overnight-the countries were friends. We did not know what to make of it.

Goebbels's propaganda tried to put a positive face on it by reporting the importance of the raw materials we were to get from the Soviet Union, yet nothing could logically explain such a total and abrupt reversal. We young officers were troubled by the strange behavior of our government, but we felt that it was not our place to question such political decisions.

On August 27, 1939, the government announced the rationing of food, soap, shoes, textiles, and coal. The German newspapers and radio were reporting extremely serious provocations by the Poles; they made it appear that Poland was about to attack Germany, and we had no reason to doubt what we were being told. It was getting very serious, and now we felt certain that war would come. We felt, however, that if it came we could deal with it; we were highly trained and ready.

Then late in August 1939, we were placed on war alert. A short time later, our armies invaded Poland. I was not part of the attack group, but we heard the stories of the first casualties among the men who had served with us at Plauen. One was a forward observation officer who was badly wounded by fire from his own battery when a round fell short and hit his observation post. The news had a chilling effect on me, not only because I knew him but because it could just as easily have been me had fate sent me to Poland with my old battery. The news made war considerably more real for us.

On September 3, the worst news came: Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany. It was indeed to be another great war. Herr Hoffer had been right after all, and we would certainly not be able to deny that we had started this one. We had subjugated Czechoslovakia without provocation, and now we had invaded Poland, even though it was done to regain Danzig and the Polish Corridor, which had been taken from us by the Treaty of Versailles.

On September 17, Russia invaded Poland from the east. By then, the Polish Army had all but been defeated by the German Army, and the Russians encountered hardly any resistance. Apparently, this was a part of the price for our new relationship with the Soviet Union. It all seemed very cynical to me. My attitude toward my government was beginning to be a little less trusting.

Our troops were now calling our present status guarding the border against the French and British "*sitzkrieg*," a term the gossiping supply wagon drivers carried from unit to unit. In other sectors, the French or German artillery would occasionally lob a shell across the border, but not even that much occurred where we were, because Belgium and Luxembourg had not fortified their borders, since we were not at war with them.

At the end of September, we received orders to pull back to villages a little farther from the border where we could be more comfortable, living in homes and barns instead of bunkers. Apparently, the Supreme Command of the Army had decided that the French were not going to attack, even though they had declared war on us.

On May 10, 1940, the German army took matters into its own hands, and invaded France. My group was to be part of a second wave, providing additional security or reinforcements, as needed. I was not part of the first invasion force, and had not yet seen a real battle.

On May 21, 1940, my group finally crossed into France as well. On that date, we were also unexpectedly detached from Army Group A and assigned to Army Group Kleist (named for *Generaloberst* Kleist). We then went almost in a straight line to the Somme River.

So far, things had been very much like maneuvers for us, except that we were following in the wake of real battles, covering the same ground where the battles had occurred a few days earlier and seeing the residue of real war. We were familiar with the dust and the smells of burned powder and gasoline from maneuvers, but this was our first exposure to the smell of death.

Dead cattle and other livestock were everywhere, the victims of bullets, mortars, artillery shells, and bombs. Their bloating carcasses lay in the fields with their legs sticking up. I learned that the smell of rotting flesh, dust, burned powder, smoke, and gasoline was the smell of combat. This was my first exposure to it, but it was an odor that was to become all too familiar to me during the next five years.

My first sight of a dead soldier was an unexpected shock. We had been trained to deliver death quickly and efficiently, and we knew that in war people get killed. But "knowing" it intellectually was entirely different from seeing and experiencing it. We had known officers from our own regiment who had been killed in Poland, of course, and we felt a sense of loss-but the word "killed" still had a clinical connotation about it compared to its meaning when you saw lying on the ground before you a bloodied, mutilated, foul-smelling corpse that had previously been a vital, living human being. Now the former human being was just a gruesome, lifeless thing on the ground.

The first dead soldiers I saw were French Moroccans. They had been killed in a cemetery, and they lay where they had fallen, their limbs in grotesque positions, their eyes and mouths open. The experience was impossible to forget. This was what we were doing to people and what they were doing to us.

It was devastating to realize that this was what we had to look forward to every day, day after day, until the war was over. From that moment on, death hovered near us wherever we went. We had been trained for combat, however, and we had to learn to accept the ever-present nearness of death.

We marched from Englancourt to Guise, which had been virtually destroyed. Burned-out tanks littered the streets, and the road exiting the town was steep and narrow and congested with abandoned French vehicles. We crossed the Oise River at Proix, the Somme Canal at Morcourt, and then we bivouacked on a large farm at Omissy. Then to Moislains, and from there to Henencourt.

Maneuvers had not prepared us for the refugees and the empty houses. We did not go through big cities with our horses and cannons, but stayed to the countryside. The farms had been abandoned, and we often encountered the refugees from them. They had left their homes because they heard the sounds of battle coming toward them. Because they did not know what else to do, they had panicked and run away. It was sad to see them: women, children, and old men with bicycles and horse-drawn carts loaded with whatever they could carry, going they knew not where. People jammed the roads with their carts and wagons loaded with whatever personal belongings they had hurriedly thrown together.

Actually, a blitzkrieg attack was like a tornado that would pass quickly, and the best thing they could have done was to go into their cellars and wait for the battle to pass them by. We always told them to go back, that the battle had passed on and there was nothing left to fear, but they often seemed dazed and uncomprehending. I felt sorry that we had to do this to them. They were paying a terrible price because France had declared war on us.

### **UNDER FIRE / RUSSIAN ENEMIES?**

In the afternoon of the day after our arrival, the French attacked us with a heavy artillery barrage. The sound of the exploding artillery shells was nerve-racking at first, but I was surprised at how quickly I got used to it. The duel between their artillery and ours continued for what seemed an eternity, during which our world was filled with explosions, the smell of burned powder, trembling earth, and frenzied activity. Our gun crews, pumped full of adrenaline by fear and excitement, hurled shell after shell at the French. When it was over, we were almost in a daze-from exhaustion, from excitement, and from the sudden silence following the incredible roar of combat. We actually felt light-headed.

I began to check with the batteries to determine casualties and found everyone extremely excited. We had taken casualties, however, and Hauptmann Wagner, battery commander of the Third Battery, had been seriously wounded by shrapnel. He was treated by medics at a field station and then sent to the rear for

hospitalization. As soon as his physical condition permitted, he would be returned to a hospital near his home in Germany.

Wagner's battery officer, Oberleutnant Karl Schumann, moved up to become Third Battery's new battery commander. When Wagner was hit, I began finally to be seriously aware of my own mortality. It was clear that it could just as easily have been me, or any of us, and that in fact any of us could be next. It was difficult for me to realize that I was not immortal.

Shortly after, we were ordered to move into position just south of Tremblay. Paris had been declared an open city (meaning that the defenders would not resist in order to prevent further damage to the city) the day before, but some French troops firing from the other side of the canal were sailors who had been drafted for the defense of Paris and apparently had not received word that they were not to resist. A bridge over the canal had not been blown, and these French sailors were defending it with machine guns.

It was a heavily wooded area, dotted with little villages. The canal was at the south end of one of these villages. A street ran through the village, flanked on each side by stores and houses. About thirty yards beyond a sharp bend in the street was the bridge. Our infantry had been pinned down at the bridge by the French machine guns firing from the other side of the canal, which was about twelve meters wide. After trying and failing to silence the machine guns with mortars, the infantry asked the artillery for help.

We could not shoot from behind with an observer up front, as we normally did, because it was in a wooded area and the distance was too short. The only way was to bring a gun forward and fire directly into the machine-gun positions.

I was up front with the infantry, and when they asked for help I called for a 105mm gun from the First Battery to come up. The infantry commander showed me a house across the canal, to the right side of the bridge, from which the French machine guns were firing. I went to the gun and gun crew to get things ready. We had to have the gun ready to fire, push it around the bend (behind which we were protected by a building), aim, and fire at the

machine guns about twenty-five meters away before they could get us with their fire. It was not my job to do this, but I wanted to do it to make sure it was effective. Seven of us manned the gun. The crew was headed by a *wachtmeister* instead of the usual *gefreiter*, apparently because the *wachtmeister* also wanted to make certain that nothing went wrong.

The crew loaded the gun, and I checked to make certain nothing had been overlooked and everything was ready.

"At my command, we will push the gun around the corner, and I will aim the gun and give the order to fire. Everyone understand?" I looked around, and all the six men nodded. "Let's go!" I ordered.

We pushed the gun around the corner of the building at the bend. Pinpoints of light flashed from the machine guns in the basement across the canal as we aimed the gun and jerked the cord. The French had got their rounds off first, and by the time our gun fired, all seven of us were sprawled on the ground.

I knew I had been hit in the left wrist, but I peered across the canal to see if we had knocked out the enemy machine guns. Only smoke now came from the basement where the machine guns had been located, and our infantry were already dashing across the bridge.

I ducked back to safety around the corner of the building to examine my wrist. A bullet had entered through the back of my hand and exited through my wrist. Blood was oozing out of the wound. It felt numb now; the pain would come later. I quickly inspected the rest of my body. Although no other bullets had touched my flesh, I found a hole through the side of my jacket, one through my sleeve, and one through my map case. I silently counted my blessings that I had only been hit in the wrist. The machine gunner was obviously a good shot, especially for a sailor! Although three of the other men had also been hit, no one had been killed.

The bridge was now open to us, and the next morning the division was in Paris. We were moved from there to Cande, and charged

with administering the village and maintaining security. I was sent home until my hand healed, and later rejoined my men.

The French people in Cande were living quite well, considerably better than the German population in big cities. We lived better in Cande than I had at home on convalescent leave. In Germany, everything was rationed-food, clothing, gasoline, etc. But in Cande, we could go to restaurants and get anything we wanted without ration cards. We could buy any food we wanted from local farmers.

I was even able to go to a tailor and have riding breeches made and buy the best riding boots without a ration card-and they had the leather to make them. This was both because France was less densely populated than Germany and because the French population was less regimented and controlled. For example, a German chicken farmer had to give a certain percentage of his eggs to the government; nothing like this was being done in France.

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## **RUSSIA?**

When we moved into the new village, we investigated the terrain for practice exercises as we would normally do when we moved into any new location, and we began our usual training routine. Then one day Major Raake summoned Schumann, Witnauer, and me-his battery commanders-to his office. He had a greatly enlarged map of the area posted on his office wall.

"Gentlemen," Raake said, "study this map carefully. We must determine the best position for our guns in the event of an attack on Russia."

We stared at him, speechless. We had a friendship treaty with Russia, and we were at war with England. Things were not adding up.

"Why would we attack Russia?" I asked.

"It is just an exercise," Raake said. "A hypothetical situation."

We studied the map and, with Raake, determined the best positions for the guns of each battery. We then went out and found the positions assigned to us. It could have been just another exercise, but none of us really believed that. We did not have orders to move our guns into the positions, only to be familiar with our assigned locations and ready to move our guns into them. This had formerly been the border between East Prussia and Poland, but now that Germany and Russia had divided Poland between them it was the border between East Prussia and Russia.

The Russians had created a no-man's-land on their side of the border by removing everything that was there in order to provide an unobstructed view. Then they had installed a barbed-wire fence and sentry towers to keep watch. There were no changes on our side; rye and potato fields, as well as patches of birch and fir trees, almost bordered the fence.

Schumann, Witnauer, and I were then summoned to Raake's office again. Raake looked very serious and tense this time. "You are each to send a work detail of men in civilian clothing to load three hundred rounds of ammunition for your guns into farm wagons and take the rounds to your assigned gun positions," he said. "Your men are to look like farmers doing farm work, and your ammunition is to be camouflaged after you unload it."

We did not look at each other. It was evident that we were going to invade Russia even though we had a friendship treaty with her.

"When are we going to invade, Major?" Schumann asked.

"It is only an exercise, Schumann. A purely hypothetical situation. But we have to make it look as real as possible."

"*Jawohl*, Herr Major," Schumann said. Raake apparently was still not at liberty to tell us the truth and was obviously very uncomfortable with the position he was in.

I returned to my office and called Schnabel in.

"Select a work detail of twelve men, Schnabel," I said. "Have the men borrow civilian work clothing from the local farmers who are stabling our horses. They must also borrow wagons from the farmers. The detail is to move three hundred rounds of ammunition up to the gun positions for an exercise. They are to look to the Russian sentries like German farmers going about routine farm work. Of course, the rounds are to be camouflaged in the wagons and when they are unloaded."

"*Jawohl*, Herr Oberleutnant," Schnabel said.

We had been in Prostken about three weeks by now, and the horse handlers knew the farm families where their horses were being kept. Getting civilian clothing was no problem for them. They simply asked the farmers to lend them civilian clothing and farm wagons. This assignment was something of a holiday for them because it was different from normal Army routine. The rather comical-looking crew loaded the ammunition into the farmers' wagons and then, pretending they were farmers doing farm work, they hauled the ammunition to the designated positions, unloaded it, and covered it with brush.

The next day, June 21, 1941, battery commanders were finally officially informed of what was about to happen.

"Before daylight tomorrow, we will invade the Soviet Union," Raake said simply. "I was forbidden to tell you until now."

"Why are we invading Russia?" Witnauer asked.

Raake shrugged his shoulders. "We are soldiers," he said. "We do as we are told."

It seemed inexplicable to me that we were getting ready to invade the Soviet Union. We were at war with England. We had a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and there had been no government propaganda against Russia. However, the propaganda started almost immediately, even in the official Army order we received: "The communist regime in Russia is imposing cruelties upon the Baltic and other ethnic minorities, as well as the Russian people;

therefore, we must destroy this cruel government and the communist commissars."

The justification was simply that they were communists and we had to fight them. The German government at that time used the word "communist" to excuse anything it wanted to do to Russia, just as the Soviet Union and the western powers later used the words "Nazi" and "fascist" to justify anything they wanted to do to Germany.

I did not know a lot about the Soviet Union at the time: I knew it was a backward country, I knew the communist government had persecuted landowners, I knew about the fighting between the Red and White armies during the Russian revolution, I knew about the forced collectivization and the mass starvation of large segments of its population, and I knew about the purge of the officer corps in the Soviet Army.

I did not think the Red Army could be very effective, not only because of the purge of its officer corps, but because they had a political officer in every unit who could overrule the orders of any military commander- and I could not see how that could possibly be made to work. (Ironically, something similar was initiated in the German Army in 1944, after the assassination attempt against Hitler, except that the political officer could not overrule the military commander.)

I also knew that trains were moving back and forth daily between Germany and the Soviet Union, carrying goods that were being exchanged between the two countries in agreement with the trade terms of the friendship treaty. The whole thing seemed almost dreamlike in its lack of recognition of existing reality.

Although I was deeply troubled about invading a country with which we had a friendship treaty, I assumed there were things that I did not know. I also found the very thought of communism repulsive and honestly felt that the Russian people would be better off if we removed their communist government. Perhaps I was rationalizing, or perhaps it was just the innocence of youth. I do not think it even

occurred to me or anyone else that we would fail to defeat the Soviet Army. Our confidence was absolute.

Our guns were still in the village several kilo meters away. When darkness descended, we moved the guns from the village to their designated positions. The noise of bringing all our guns into position and bringing the infantry into position had to be clearly audible to the Russian sentries in their watchtowers.

Their towers were no more than four kilometers from our gun positions, and the infantry moved even closer, to within three hundred meters of them. Of course, they might have been sleeping. It is a very boring job to sit in a sentry tower day after day. There was no major road, railroad, or anything else of special importance nearby, and they had been watching for two years with nothing happening.

## **RUSSIAN INVASION 1**

I SPENT THE NIGHT CHECKING OUT MY BATTERY, MAKING sure that everything was in order and everyone was in the right place. I realized only now that the same thing must be happening for hundreds of kilometers along our border with Russia. The woods along the frontier were surely swarming with German troops who were resting, sleeping, waiting to go into battle.

A bright moon shone over the forests of East Prussia, spreading its light through the trees. It was the same moon that had watched countless other battles through the ages; the same moon had shone when the Persians marched into Greece, when Napoleon marched into Russia, when the Kaiser's army fought in France.

A few kilometers away, the village that would be our first objective lay sleeping, bathed in the comfort of soft moonlight. The scene looked like a beautiful painting, but I knew the reality would soon be very different. War was about to fill the new day with noise, fire, smoke, rubble, lead, corpses, and the bloodstained bandages of the wounded. Those who lay sleeping now would not soon go to sleep again with the sense of peace they now knew.

The strong scent of pine needles permeated my consciousness as I wandered among the 180 men of my battery, checking things out. From somewhere in the moonlit night came the slow mournful hoot of an owl. I became more aware of the men as individuals than I had ever been before. Some were timid, others brash; some were gloomy, others easily amused; some were ambitious, others idlers; some were spendthrifts, others misers.

The diverse thoughts that lay behind their helmets as they waited for battle only they could know. Love of country and sorrow at the prospect of dying in battle were surely common to all of them. One soldier was humming softly to himself in meditation. Some were no doubt full of foreboding, and others were thinking of home and loved ones.

The men were strong and sure of themselves. They had practiced constantly, and they knew they could do their job well. Their confidence was total, like that of a diamond cutter taking a chisel to a priceless gem. Now they sat about in groups, joking bravely about everything except what lay immediately ahead of them. I was confident the world had never seen anything like them. Their native intelligence, their conditioned bravery, and their practiced skills would flow into one channel and coalesce, and when that happened they would be unstoppable. Lieutenant Steinbach was circulating among them, joking with them and trying to relax them.

I checked our forward observation post, where Jaschke and his battery troop were waiting. Jaschke seemed a little edgy, so I tried Steinbach's approach of joking and laughing with him and his men. His radioman, Gefreiter Seldte, and his telephone man, Oberkanonier Hugenberg, seemed more relaxed than Jaschke was.

## **RUSSIAN INVASION 2**

At the designated time in the very early hours of June 22, 1941, my battery opened fire on the small village of Sasnia, a few kilometers from our guns. I was not in the front line with the infantry but at a little hill about a half kilometer away, which I thought would be a good place from which to watch the effectiveness of our fire. I could see our shell bursts clearly from my observation post, as well as the

oily black-and-yellow smoke that rose from them. The unpleasant, peppery smell of burned gunpowder soon filled the air as our guns continued to fire round after round. After fifteen minutes we lifted our fire, and the soft pop-pop-pop of flares being fired replaced it as red lit up the sky and the infantry went on the attack.

As the infantry moved forward, the morning darkness was filled with the sounds of shouting, the crack of rifle shots, the short bursts of machine guns, and the shattering crashes of hand grenades. The rifle fire sounded like the clatter of metal-wheeled carts moving fast over cobblestone streets. Our infantry overran the barbed wire the Russians had erected on each side of their no-man's-land and stormed the guard towers and pillboxes the Russians had built immediately beyond the death strip. Although we met with some resistance, the Russians had been taken by surprise in spite of the noise of our preparations.

Our infantry had short but bitter firefights with the surprised Russian troops. Our men took as prisoners those Russians who surrendered and killed those who resisted. Some of the Russian soldiers in Sasnia tried to pull back and got caught in a bottleneck at a bridge, where Stuka dive-bombers decimated them. They lay where they had fallen, in earth-brown uniforms, the first combat dead I had seen since the invasion of France. Although I was no longer shocked by the sight, I had not become accustomed to it either.

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Somewhere between Minsk and Smolensk, we ran into resistance, and our infantry regiment commander called for a conference of his battalion, company, and battery commanders in a wooded area to plan what to do. It was not a wise thing to do, because we had all the regiment's key officers together in one small area. He should not have done that, especially in the woods, but the resistance was unexpected and it had been a long time since we had received artillery fire.

As about fifteen of us were planning our response to the resistance, a chilling howl sent us all diving to the ground, pressing our faces

into the earth. Then came the frightful blast of the explosions. A salvo of artillery shells exploded about ten meters above us, on making contact with the trees, and shrapnel slammed into us like machine-gun fire from heaven. I was unharmed, but I had seen the man lying next to me jerk with one of the explosions and I knew he had been hit.

"Medic!" I yelled. I reached for him, but it was immediately evident that he had to be dead. He had serious wounds in both his head and his back. Beads of sweat popped out of my skin and a sudden chill made me shiver.

We spread out quickly, because we did not know whether they had an observer in the trees and really knew what they were doing or whether it had just been a lucky hit. We had two dead and five or six wounded. Medics quickly came and took the dead and wounded away. Since we received no additional fire, we assumed that it was again just a lucky hit for them.

The *oberleutnant* killed beside me was a reserve officer. One moment we were discussing our plans, and the next moment we lay side by side in the dirt, one dead and one unharmed. That I happened to land where I did and he landed where he did was just a throw of the dice. He remained where he dropped and I walked away. How much longer would fate keep me alive? I knew the next time I might very well be the unlucky one who would drop in the wrong spot.

I had to become fatalistic about it and assume that eventually it would happen to me and there was nothing I could do to prevent it. I did not wait for it to happen or stand up and present a big target-I tried to be as small a target as possible-but I knew that I was going to be killed or badly wounded sooner or later. The odds against my escaping unscathed were impossibly high, and I accepted my eventual death or maiming as part of my fate. Once I had forced myself to accept that, I could put it out of my mind and go on about my duties; I would not have been able to function had I not done so.

At Orsha, between Minsk and Smolensk, the Russians had a prepared defense line that we had to overcome before we could proceed to Smolensk. A prepared defense line always consisted of several consecutive lines of trenches or foxholes, and when we attacked we had to overrun them all. The standard procedure in all combat until now was that when attacking infantry passed over the first line of trenches or foxholes, the enemy soldiers who had been overrun and were still alive and not badly wounded would stand and raise their hands in surrender to the soldiers advancing behind the first line of attacking troops. The captured enemy soldiers, including the wounded, would then be collected and taken to the rear.

While advancing in a large wooded area near Orsha, we were spread out in a line. I was with the point company, in the center of the line. The Russian soldiers in the first line of defense were dug in so that only their heads were out of the foxholes, and they had branches over their heads, so they were very difficult to see. We received rifle fire from them, and we returned their fire and kept advancing. Then the fire became heavy. All around us were the crack of rifles, the boom of mortars, and the hollow chatter of machine guns.

We overran their first line and were attacking their second prepared line when we were suddenly aware that we were taking rifle fire from behind as well as from in front of us. Advancing German soldiers were being shot dead from behind. The Russian soldiers in the first line of trenches, who should have surrendered, had turned and were shooting us in the back, and some of our people were killed and wounded by this fire.

Of course, their country was being invaded by the German Army and they were desperate. Still, this was at a personal level, and no German or Russian soldier could have that code of honor broken by the enemy without going almost mad, because it was the combat infantry soldier's only hope of survival in a hopeless situation. If that hope was taken away, death was certain-and nobody wanted to die! In a combat situation, the soldier is under inhuman stress to begin with, and when he sees a friend he has been sharing his life with suddenly drop because he was shot in the back, it is too much.

Men who share combat, become brothers, and this brotherhood is so important to them that they would give their lives for one another. It is not just friendship, and it is stronger than flag and country.

Our soldiers went berserk, and from that point on during the attack they took no prisoners and left no one alive in a trench or foxhole. I did not try to stop them, nor did any other officer, because they would have killed us too if we had. They were out of their minds with fury. If the Russian soldiers had put down their weapons and stood up with their hands raised, they would have been collected and marched to the rear as had always occurred in the past. Their cause was lost; they could only be taken prisoner or die. As it was, they were all killed, without mercy or remorse.

That evening was a turbulent one for me, because I had never before experienced such brutality in combat. It was a quiet evening after such savageness, with blue-gray smoke rising from our field kitchen as burning logs crackled under the coffee and tea. Dusk dimmed the birch and fir trees around us. Some of the infantrymen sat about, smoking and drinking coffee or tea from the field kitchen. Some ate their rations, some repaired their boots, some wrote to their wives or girlfriends or parents-at a time when it would seem impossible for them to think or to feel anything but horror and exhaustion. They had clearly adapted to this new type of combat better than I had.

Perhaps they felt avenged. We had buried our dead beside the trenches and foxholes where their surviving comrades were now writing letters, shaving, eating, and washing in improvised baths. These young soldiers were just glad to be alive one more day; in fact, they felt almost astonished each evening to have survived another day. I was learning to know them, and I knew that when a friend was killed it was as though some particle of life inside them had died, and yet amid the deafening roar and horrors of battle the next day their dead comrade's voice still sometimes would make itself heard at strange moments.

I went to Kreuger's command tent to prepare for the next day's attack, as I did every evening when we expected to attack the next morning.

"Hello, Knappe," he said when I entered. He drew back from the map he had been studying and motioned toward a folding chair. He looked at me for a long moment. "You did not like what you saw today," he said finally. It was not a question.

"No," I admitted. "But I understood it."

He looked at me for a long moment again, as if to see if my actions and facial expressions matched my words. "Good," he said finally. "That is important. There is nothing you or I or anyone else can do about an incident like that. The Russians took control of the situation out of our hands."

"*Jawohl*, Herr Major," I agreed. "About tomorrow morning..."

## **BOGGED DOWN**

We launched a new offensive in early September. From Smolensk on, the Russian resistance grew stronger as we got closer to Moscow. Somewhere between Smolensk and Vyazma, our tanks and infantry had surrounded a huge number of Russian soldiers, although at the time we did not realize it. The infantry we were supporting encountered resistance, so my battery went into position to support them. I was up front with Major Kreuger when night came, so we stopped for the night with the intention of attacking at dawn. It was a typical situation, the type we studied at Kriegsschule Potsdam and practiced so much. We march, our forward scouts draw fire, and our point battalion deploys and tries to find out how strong the resistance is. I was with the infantry, so I called back to my battery officer, Leutnant Steinbach, to get the guns into position to fire the next morning.

About an hour after midnight, all but the sentries were wrapped in their blankets and sound asleep. Major Kreuger and I were still working on our plans for the assault at dawn when we were startled to hear rifle fire behind us, in the direction of my guns. We looked

at each other with immediate concern. That could only mean that a battle was taking place in back of us instead of in front of us, where we thought the enemy to be- back at the approximate position of my battery. The telephone rang. It was Steinbach, my battery officer.

"Herr Oberleutnant, we are under attack from the south," he said with just a touch of fear in his voice. "But their main attack appears to be farther back, where our ammunition handlers and fahrrers are with the limbers, wagons, carts, and the field kitchen."

"What weapons are they firing at you?" I asked.

"Only rifles. No machine guns or mortars."

"Good. Keep me informed, especially of any change in the situation."  
"

"*Jawohl*, Herr Oberleutnant."

The surrounded Russians, of whom we had not been aware, apparently had decided to try to break out under cover of darkness. They were attacking my battery, which apparently lay directly in their path, and my men were defending themselves and our guns and horses, although they had only rifles with which to do so. They could not see the Russians they were shooting at, but they could hear them-and they could smell them!

The Russian soldiers smelled of makhorka tobacco, which had a very strong unpleasant odor. It was made of the stems of the tobacco leaves instead of the leaves (only Russian officers were issued tobacco made of the leaves). This awful smell got into their thick uniforms and could be smelled for quite a distance.

I relayed the report I had received from Steinbach to Kreuger, who passed it on to regiment headquarters, and it went from there to division. Kreuger ordered his reserve infantry company into the attack. This stopped the Russians, but the battle continued until morning with heavy losses on both sides. My battery lost a few men, the infantry company lost over a hundred, and the Russians

lost many more. They were very disorganized and confused, and they surrendered when daylight came because they did not have heavy weapons and did not stand a chance in the daylight.

We counted our losses, buried our dead, and took prisoners. Hundreds of dead Russians lay everywhere. There must have been more than a battalion of them; it may have been a corps staff or something like that. We organized a defense line against the same thing happening again the next night, and then we stayed there a day or two, licking our wounds. By then, the resistance we had encountered in front of us the day before had been fought down to small mopping-up actions, and when we started forward again, even the small actions had been cleaned out.

Because the division had taken a lot of casualties and needed to rest and replenish, we stayed here for three days. The mail caught up with us, and I received a letter from my parents with the news that my brother, Fritz, had been gravely wounded with Army Group North in September, about halfway to Leningrad. A bullet had entered his neck and lodged in his spine. He was paralyzed from the neck down, and the doctors could not remove the bullet without running the risk of killing him. He was in the hospital in Leipzig, where my parents and Inge visited him daily.

By December, we were no more than twenty-five kilometers from Moscow, but the temperature was paralyzing. Heavy snow fell on December 1, and the pitiless cold became unbearable. Our world had become a huge frozen abyss in which the white snow glittered in the flashes of our gunfire and turned pink or green in the light of signal flares. Mortars were of little value because the explosion was muffled in the deep snow.

Although we were freezing, we still provided enough warmth for the lice that fed on us. We had become, quite simply, frozen and exhausted men who were being constantly tormented by vermin. We felt like livestock rather than human beings. The snow seemed to fill the air with a soft mist, bringing the earth and sky together into one meaningless blur. It drifted about over the level ground, swirling and forming strange and surrealistic patterns. Frostbite was beginning to account for many casualties, sending men home with

amputated toes or fingers. I had not worn clean clothes for two weeks. I tried to imagine what it would be like to stand under a hot shower and scrub my back with a stiff-bristled brush. The image was maddening, and I quickly ejected it from my mind.

On December 4, we were in Rasskazovka, a village just outside Moscow. We had established a defensive line around the village the evening before. In the early hours of a freezing, disagreeable morning, just as my battery was about to lay down a barrage on the next village, we saw a group of thirty to forty Russian soldiers moving toward us across open ground. Our infantry opened fire on them with mortar and machine guns and drove them back.

A while later, they attacked again, this time in company strength of 150 or so men. Again, the infantry drove them back. Then they attacked in battalion strength, with about five hundred men! We could see them moving out about three kilometers away. I got my guns ready and opened fire on them, but they kept coming. It was just suicide, because they were out in the open and they had no tanks or artillery or protection of any kind. They got as close as two hundred meters before they were totally decimated.

Because I could not believe they would behave so irrationally, I went out to learn anything that might shed some light on their reason for such suicidal behavior. Hundreds of dead and wounded lay in the reddened snow, horribly mangled and splattered with blood, their eyes growing dim as their lives ran out. Our medics moved among them, tending to those who were still alive.

"They all appear Mongolian," a voice said behind me. It was Kreuger. He was also apparently looking for clues. "All the Russians I have seen until now have been Caucasian."

"You are right," I agreed. "What do you suppose that means? And why in God's name would they waste infantry against artillery? That is worse than stupid-it is criminal to waste lives that way."

"Maybe they thought we were so weakened by the cold that they could just walk in and take us because they had fresh troops," Kreuger speculated.

If they had waited until night they would have had a better chance, but they did not stand a chance in daylight when we could use artillery against them.

As we approached the outermost suburbs of Moscow a paralyzing blast of cold hit us, and the temperature dropped far below zero and stayed there. Our trucks and vehicles would not start, and our horses started to die from the cold in large numbers for the first time; they would just die in the bitter cold darkness of the night, and we would find them dead the next morning. The Russians knew how to cope with this weather, but we did not; their vehicles were built and conditioned for this kind of weather, but ours were not. We all now numbly wrapped ourselves in our blankets. Everyone felt brutalized and defeated by the cold.

The sun would rise late in the morning, as harsh now in the winter winds as in the heat of August, and not one fresh footprint would be visible for as far as the human eye could see. Frostbite was taking a very heavy toll now as more and more men were sent back to the field hospitals with frozen fingers and toes. Many infantry companies were down to platoon size.

On December 5, the temperature plummeted to 30 degrees below zero. It was almost impossible for the human body to function in such numbing cold. We reached our objective, Peredelkino, by noon. Our feet felt like awkward blocks of ice as we struggled to put one foot in front of the other and keep walking. I found myself wondering if anything could possibly be worth such suffering. The flesh on our faces and ears would freeze if we left it exposed for very long, and we tried to wrap anything around our heads to prevent frostbite.

I could not help thinking of Napoleon's army retreating from Moscow. Our fingers froze even in gloves and stuffed into our overcoat pockets; they were so stiff from the cold that they refused to perform any function. We could not have fired our rifles. I could not help wondering if our superiors in Berlin had any idea of what they had sent us into.

Such thoughts constituted defeatism, I knew, but that threat seemed of little consequence at the moment. Instead of moving on immediately after reaching Peredelkino, as we normally would have, some of us went into a peasant hut to get warm, because the cold was surely going to kill us if we did not. Oberleutnant Schumann, battery commander of Third Battery, and I, along with our forward observation officers and an infantry lieutenant, went into the same hut to try to warm up.

We should not have congregated the key officers from two artillery batteries in the same spot where we could all have been killed en masse, but the cold was beyond human endurance and we had to get warm if we were to survive.

We were sitting on the stone stove in the middle of the hut, just beginning to thaw out, when we heard the sharp cracks of tank cannons. We had received no warning from our infantry, and we had just got up to investigate when a tank shell crashed through a corner of the hut and exploded. Shrapnel blasted through the room, scattering broken and bleeding bodies, filling the room with smoke, the smell of burned powder, and the astonished cries of wounded soldiers.

Two people were killed instantly. Although he was alive, Schumann's face was covered with blood from a head wound that was obviously very serious, and blood was coming from his arm and neck as well. The blast had knocked me down, and when I tried to get up I fell again. I realized that I had a head wound also and had lost my sense of balance. Seeing blood on my sleeve, I inspected my arm and discovered that a chunk of flesh about the size of a large coin was missing from the fleshy part of my upper left arm.

Further inspection revealed a piece of shrapnel sticking in the metal insignia of my collar, which had obviously spared me a very nasty neck wound. Everyone in the room was dead or wounded. I called for a medic to come and tend to Schumann. Schumann could speak, but he was very seriously wounded. He was a big man, six foot five and well over two hundred pounds; perhaps he had just been too big a target. The medics applied rough bandages to our wounds.

Eight or ten Russian tanks had been able to slip past our weary infantry unnoticed. We had not seen Russian tanks for some time and were probably not as alert as we should have been. They had found an area of depression in the terrain that they could slip through undetected. Letting them catch us unawares was a poor performance on our part. If we had not all been so concerned about getting in out of the cold, it would not have happened.

Their tanks did not have infantry with them, however, so they just came close enough to the village to shoot into the houses and then withdrew, because tanks without infantry were very vulnerable.

The first time I had been wounded, in France, I had been surprised, but when it happened the second time I just thought, "Okay, it has happened again and I am still alive, so I am lucky and I hope I am just as lucky next time."

Once again, I was sent home to Germany to recover. Perhaps luck was with me. I was not present at Stalingrad, when we had our most brutal losses in the war. Many of those I knew died there.

## **ON THE DEFENSIVE**

Stalingrad was the turning point of the war for us. There had been little Stalingrads before, all of them brought about by Hitler's incredibly stupid orders to stand and fight to the last man, even though it meant the wholesale slaughter of young German men, instead of intelligently retreating to regroup and fight again. Such battles of desperation were becoming more and more frequent, our casualties were increasing, and the Russian Army was beginning to break through our defense lines more frequently.

Not only were we suffering more battle casualties, but now many German prisoners were being taken in large numbers by the Russians. A whole German army corps had earlier been encircled and lost, for example, with all its equipment. It had been getting worse for some time, but it was the loss of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad and the withdrawal of Army Group South from the Caucasus Mountains that made it painfully clear to me that we were not going to defeat the Soviet Union.

Goebbels's propaganda continued to try to put a good face on things, but after Stalingrad every thinking person knew we could not win this war against Russia. We had now had to give up capturing the rich food-producing Ukraine and the oil-producing Caucasus, without which we had no chance of defeating the Soviet Union. Even so, we did not even dream at this time that the Russians would ever be able to invade Germany. Our assumption of superiority was still intact-even after a defeat of the magnitude of Stalingrad!

That illusion was irrevocably broken during my stay back in Germany to recover from my wounds. We found ourselves on the retreat, with the Soviets pushing us back through all the territory we had gained at so great a cost. In time, we found them within Germany itself. I returned to action, not on some distant front, but in my own country. We were simply not prepared any longer, and everything we did was a reaction to the initiative of the enemy.

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The Russian attacks continued undiminished, and we began to have difficulty maintaining contact between the Third and Ninth armies. Our 9th Parachute Division reported the final disruption of their contact with the Third Army's 101st Korps to the north. Then, after five days of massive attacks, the Second Russian Armored Army succeeded in breaking through our front, threatening our left flank. Parts of the 18th Panzer Division began arriving, and, in desperation, we threw them into the battle piecemeal as they arrived.

With that, we managed to stop the Russians on our left. On our right, Panzer Division Miincheberg was engaged in fierce fighting with Russian tank forces, and here we lost contact with our neighboring corps on the right during the evening. To prevent our being outflanked on both sides and giving the Russians unimpeded access to Berlin, Weidling decided to fall back to the Miincheberg-Waldsiefersdorf line, just 10 minutes outside of Berlin itself by car, which we had determined would be our next main defense line.

In places, however, the Russians had already breached the Miincheberg-Waldsieversdorf line. By 6:00 P.M. we could hear machine-gun fire, and mortar shells were exploding nearby.

Therefore, we moved our corps headquarters to Kolonie-Herrenhorst, a small community on a pine hill south of Strausberg. By 8:00 P.M., we were again ready to conduct combat. The SS Division Nordland arrived during the night. In addition, the heavy anti-aircraft units in the Strausberg area were put under our command. Unfortunately, they had only immobile, pivoted 88mm guns, but they could at least prevent a surprise tank attack into our deep flank.

I drew up their orders for Weidling's signature and advised the anti-aircraft units of the combat situation. Our single corps was now facing an entire Russian army group, which they called a "front." If not an army group, we should have been at least an army instead of a corps. Obviously, we were not going to be able to hold out here any better than anywhere else and would have to fall back to Berlin proper.

Already, the Russians were shelling the city. Finally, in the early hours of April 20, I could close my eyes for a few hours. While drifting off to sleep, I thought of the stirring speech I had heard Goebbels make on the radio recently about new wonder weapons that would yet enable us to win the war. The endless slogans and propaganda coming from the government in Berlin sounded to us at the front like sheer childishness. Our headquarters then was in the home of a railroad employee, who had been utterly believing as he listened to Goebbels. Although I could not tell him and his wife that the Russians would probably overrun their home within thirty-six hours, I advised them to send their sixteen-year-old daughter away. The stories of the Russian soldiers raping women and young girls were all too believable.

I was awakened by detonations of light shells all around. I decided that it was probably fire from tanks that were still a mile or so north of us. Our new main defense line was already in Russian hands in some places. Russian tanks and infantry had broken through to the right of us and were already southwest of our corps headquarters.

We threw the SS Panzer Division Nordland against this enemy force with orders to secure the corps' southern flank.

We explored a new line of resistance toward the south, in the lake area of Strausberg. If we could secure all the land between the lakes in this area before the Russians arrived, we could hope to make another stand there. If only Goebbels had sent his civil defense battalions here instead of where he had sent them!

From the divisions came reports that the frontal attacks of the Russians were becoming stronger again, and we had to dispatch our last reserves. In some places, the enemy already had broken through the narrows between the lakes or had unexpectedly crossed the lakes in boats. That meant that now we had no other choice than to put all troops able to fight into the direct defense of Berlin, although there, too, break-ins had already occurred in the north, near Altlandsberg.

In Kopenick on that day, I witnessed a truck, loaded with bread and stopped because of traffic, being looted by passing women, children, and old men. The driver stood there, unable to do anything about it except make parrying gestures. His truck was emptied within a few minutes.

We got orders to leave the north bank of the Spree River, connect at our left to the Berlin defense line at the Treptow Park, and prolong the right flank along the Spree River to the southeast to gain contact with the Ninth Army again.

For this night, it was too late to make these movements. The orders were issued to the divisions for execution during the next night. For the remainder of the night, I could sleep on a bed for about three hours. I was awakened in the small hours of April 22, 1945, by the fire of light artillery and mortars in the surrounding area. I went to the air raid shelter of the Children's and Senior Citizens' Institution next door, where our headquarters had been prepared in the meantime. Three or four rooms had been emptied for us there. The other, larger rooms were occupied by forty or fifty children and fifteen to twenty nurses.

Outside, it was becoming more and more dangerous because Russian tanks that had broken through at Kopenick were driving around nearby. German tank-hunter groups with bazooka-like panzerfausts were chasing them, and the tanks were shooting wildly in all directions. All divisions reported new Russian attacks with tank support. The Russian pressure was especially strong on the right flank, where the advance had been stopped successfully before the Spree River. In the north, the Russians marched into a wide gap that occurred at Werneuchen, toward the west.

On the morning of April 22, we moved our headquarters to Rudow, seven kilometers southwest of Kopenick. I was to stay at the old headquarters until 9:00 P.M. and then follow after all our divisions had reported. During the day, I could hear the sounds of infantry fighting coming closer and closer. It appeared as if the children's home would be in Russian hands by the time I was to leave at 9:00 P.M. I posted guards so I would at least get a warning in time to escape capture.

One after another, the divisions reported abandoning their present headquarters. At about 8:00 P.M., the operations officer of the 9th Parachute Division and my General Staff College classmate, Major Engel, appeared. He had been my closest friend at the General Staff College. We talked about the situation that he was reporting to me and I was reporting to the Ninth Army. The fight was obviously hopeless, and we could not understand why the government did not sue for peace and stop the senseless slaughter.

Slogans and propaganda were not going to throw the Soviets out of Germany! At the most optimistic, we could continue to resist a couple more weeks. We had not during the entire war had the kind of firepower the Russians were now unleashing against us on one small front, and what was happening to our troops was inhuman. They were now fighting with little more than determination, desperation, and raw courage. I recalled the name many were now sarcastically using for Hitler: *Grofaz Grosster Feldherr alter Zeiten*, "the greatest general of all time."

Engel and I discussed the situation as personal friends rather than as corps and division operations officers. I gave him the picture of

the overall situation as it looked according to our information. In the west, the Western Allies were at the Elbe River, with a few small bridgeheads on the east side of the river, but they had stopped there without carrying out an attack farther to the east.

This had stunned us, because we had fought so fiercely against the Russians in the hope that we could hold them off until the Western forces arrived to take Berlin. Now it seemed obvious that they had no interest in taking Berlin to keep the Russians out.

The Russians had torn open the front of the Fourth Panzer Army of Army Group Schorner near Guben and Forst and were marching behind us. We had to deal with a breakthrough between the Ninth and Third armies through which motorized Russian infantry were streaming toward the west without resistance, passing by Berlin. Unimpeded traffic out of Berlin would probably be possible for only a short time.

For a brief moment, Engels and I discussed getting into my car and leaving this witch's caldron. The end had to come with the encirclement of Berlin by the Russians. To stay meant Russian captivity or death. If we escaped to the west, it would mean freedom, or in the worst case British or American captivity, which was not too disturbing. But it also meant abandoning those men who were still fighting so desperately, and neither of us could bear the thought of deserting such brave men.

We decided to stay and do our duty to the end. There was no question that, with the red stripes on our trousers and the corps flag on my car, we would have made it through all the road blocks and controls. No one in our respective staffs would have questioned our disappearance; they would have assumed that we had not been able to get away from our old headquarters and had been killed or captured. But our pride and sense of duty would not let us do it.

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During a trip to one of the sectors in the southeast of the city, I witnessed an event that said everything about the state to which Germany had been reduced. Water pipes in the city had been

ruptured by the bombing and the shelling, and people had to stand in lines for hours for water at the few sources still available.

The food problem was even worse; some storage houses had been destroyed by bombing and shelling, and the others had been plundered by civilians. I was in a kubelwagen, and the part of the city I was driving through was under continuous artillery fire. In spite of the artillery bombardment, civilians-mostly women-were queueing in front of the food stores and water spigots. Just as we were about to drive past such a line, an artillery shell exploded beside the line of women. As the smoke began to clear, I could see that many of the women had been hit.

Those women who were unhurt carried the dead, the dying, and the wounded into the entrances of nearby buildings and cared for them-and then again formed their queues so they would not lose their places in line!

## **END OF A REICH**

The city's defenders-the remaining remnants of our 56th Panzer Korps and General Mohnke's one thousand SS troops defending Fuhrer Headquarters-were red-eyed and sleepless, living in a world of fire, smoke, death, and horror. Much of Berlin was burning like a bonfire. The fighting was being shared by soldiers and civilians alike. When the shelling got bad, the women queueing up for water would press closer to the building walls to hold their places in line.

Since such a front could not possibly be held for more than a few days, Weidling decided to make a determined plea to Hitler to break out as long as the route to and across the Pichelsdorf Bridge remained open.

Once again, von Dufving and I went over the plan to break out of Berlin to the west and northwest, across the Pichelsdorf Bridge. We worked through the night, preparing the necessary orders and issuing them to the divisions. Only the code name "Spring Storm" was necessary to set everything in motion.

Our plan to break out in three groups promised real safety for Hitler and the other occupants of Fuhrer Headquarters. A group of SS shock troops with about a dozen self-propelled guns would open the way, the twenty-five or so tanks that were still operational would surround the armored personnel carriers containing Hitler and his entourage to provide flank protection, and the infantry now fighting the Russians in the eastern sectors of Berlin would provide the rear guard.

The plan was to start at midnight and be out of the city by morning. We had broken out of encirclement before, in Silesia, and we knew that those riding in armored personnel carriers in the center of such a fighting force would get through safely. Once out of Berlin, we would have to march for a few days to the northwest, toward Lubeck. The Russian Air Force was not a big threat because it was not very efficient, although it would certainly lob some bombs at us.

At about noon, General Weidling and I took the maps and departed for Fuhrer Headquarters. Outside, conditions were more dangerous than ever. Since morning the Russians had held the Lichtenstein Bridge, and before the day was over the entire Tiergarten would be in Russian hands. Russian artillery shells were exploding everywhere, causing the earth to tremble and sending dirt, pavement, bricks, and other debris high into the air to fall back to earth and injure anyone below.

The roar of flames from burning buildings and the crunching sound of falling walls were terrifying. We dashed from doorway to doorway in short bursts to avoid not only shrapnel and other debris from the artillery shells but also rifle and machine-gun fire. At twenty-eight, I did not find the running especially strenuous; at fifty-seven, General Weidling had a more difficult time.

When we arrived at Hitler's headquarters several flights of stairs below ground level, the situation briefing had just begun. General Weidling was announced to Hitler and immediately admitted to the briefing room. I waited in the large outer chamber with detailed maps that Weidling might need. The bunker smelled damp, and the sound of the small engine that ran the exhaust system provided a constant background noise.

After about forty-five minutes, the meeting in the briefing room ended. Hitler emerged, followed by Dr. Goebbels, General Krebs, General Weidling, and some other people. I saluted, and Hitler walked toward me. As he neared, I was shocked by his appearance.

He was stooped, and his left arm was bent and shaking. Half of his face drooped, as if he'd had a stroke, and his facial muscles on that side no longer worked. Both of his hands shook, and one eye was swollen. He looked like a very old man, at least twenty years older than his fifty-six years. Weidling presented me to Hitler: "Major Knappe, my operations officer."

Hitler shook my hand and said, "Weidling has told me what you are going through. You have been having a bad time of it. "

Being accustomed to saying "*Jawohl*, Herr General," I automatically said "*Jawohl*, Herr ... " and then, realizing that this was wrong, I quickly corrected to '*Jawohl*, mein Fuhrer,' Hitler smiled faintly, and Goebbels smiled broadly-but Weidling frowned because his subordinate had made a social error.

Hitler said goodbye, shook my hand again, and disappeared in the general direction of Goebbels's quarters. Although his behavior had not been lethargic, his appearance had been pitiful. Hitler was now hardly more than a physical caricature of what he had been. I wondered how it was possible that in only six years, this idol of my whole generation of young people could have become such a human wreck. It occurred to me then that Hitler was still the living symbol of Germany-but Germany as it was now. In the same six years, the flourishing, aspiring country had become a flaming pile of debris and ruin.

Weidling and I left the bunker through the basement hallways of the Reich Chancellery. We had found a safe passage through the basement all the way to a window facing Herrmann-Goring- Strasse.

"Did he approve the plan?" I asked with trepidation.

"No," Weidling said angrily. "But it was the way he did it!"

This man whom I had seen remain calm under even the most adverse circumstances was so furious that his voice quivered. "He listened to my proposal, and then he said, 'No, Weidling, I do not want to risk dying in the streets like a dog.' Our soldiers have been dying in the streets of Europe for the past six years- at his command! For him to imply now that such a death is somehow dishonorable is loathsome."

Weidling was so angry that he was throwing caution to the wind. If someone had overheard and reported what he had just said to me, his life would have been in very great danger.

But our men had been dying in the streets of Berlin every day and every night since we had arrived in the city, and they had died in the streets of other cities before Berlin. For Hitler to be so disrespectful toward the men who were sacrificing their own lives every day just to keep him alive one more day filled me with anger also. Many men who had served under my command had died since the beginning of the war. My own brother had died "for Fuhrer and Fatherland." No wonder Weidling was angry.

We had both been in the war from the beginning, and we had both seen countless deaths in our almost six years of war. As soldiers, we had accepted death-even our own if it came-as a natural part of our lives. We accepted it as a price we had to pay for a cause we had thought just, at least in the beginning. We were perhaps only now, at the last possible moment, beginning to see clearly what kind of man we had been following.

When I reported to the Fuhrer bunker the next day with the daily situation map and saw Hitler going from one room to another in the bunker, my hand moved involuntarily toward my pistol. I had a terribly strong urge to kill him and stop all the suffering. It would have been easy to do, since he had no personal bodyguards inside the bunker. I would not have got out alive, since SS guards were at all the entrances and exits, but I could easily have killed him. Certainly it was not fear of death that stopped the movement of my hand to my pistol. With the escape plan out of the question, my fate was sealed and unavoidable.

The Russians had been shooting captured German officers following every battle in their march across Germany. My life would undoubtedly be over in a few days in any case. In the instant I had to make a decision, I must have instinctively concluded that I should not risk making a martyr of Hitler and possibly creating another myth that "...we could have won the war, if only we hadn't been stabbed in the back ..." in this case by a traitorous artillery officer.

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In the conference room of the Chief of the General Staff of the Army, I met Weidling, von Dufving, and the others from our staff. Weidling somehow looked completely different. Something had happened that had thrown this man, who could not be discouraged even in the most hopeless situation in battle, completely out of kilter. Weidling informed me quietly that Goebbels had told him last night that Hitler, after first marrying Eva Braun, had taken poison, together with his wife, and shot himself. (None of us had known about Eva Braun before, but now it occurred to me that she must have been among the women in the bunker whom I took to be secretaries.)

The corpses were rolled in carpets, drenched with gasoline, and burned in the courtyard of the Reich Chancellery so that they would not fall into the hands of the Russians. Goebbels had Weidling come to the bunker so he could continue leading his troops from there.

I was stunned. For some reason, it had never occurred to me that Hitler would commit suicide. If he planned to commit suicide, why had he not done it long ago, when it was obvious that the war was lost? Why had so many people had to die so senselessly, right up to the moment the Russians were knocking on the bunker door? Such selfishness was unbelievable to me.

Von Dufving and Krebs had gone to the Russians to explore the conditions for a surrender (both spoke Russian), but the Russians had insisted on unconditional surrender.

After a few days, the decision was made to surrender unconditionally. Those who wanted to try to flee, did so. Those that could not bear capture, shot themselves. I could not bring myself to do either.

## **INTO CAPTIVITY**

I carefully took inventory of my personal things in order to decide what I might need most as a prisoner of war. The biggest question was whether to take my sleeping bag or my fur-lined overcoat. With my previous experiences with the cold winters in Russia firmly in my memory, the fur coat prevailed, even though summer had hardly begun. I exchanged my tailored uniform for a regulation uniform because it would not call attention to me and would be more comfortable. I pulled a pair of tanker's coveralls over that to cover the red general staff stripes on my pants in case they should prove to be a liability.

My best shirts and underwear, some food, my photographs and letters, and a few packs of cigarettes for barter completed my luggage. In spite of my throwing away a great many things, my knapsack must still have weighed over thirty pounds. And on top of that, I put my heavy fur-lined uniform overcoat. But if necessary, I could always throw some things away later.

Of course, there was no thought of any sleep now. I had slept during artillery bombardments and I had slept knowing that attack was imminent-but now the uncertainty of what lay ahead drove sleep away. I wandered outside, into the Berlin night. The mild spring night contrasted with the flaming ruins around us. An almost ghostly silence lay about us. It seemed almost tangible after the constant noise of battle during the past few weeks. As I surveyed the ruins around me, the question "At what cost?" ran through my mind.

The cost of this war had been far beyond the capacity of mere humans to tabulate. Did I feel in any way responsible for it on this night? Did I feel any moral guilt? Not yet, although it was to come later, when I learned much that I did not know on this night. For

now, I regretted only that we had lost the war, and my first priority was surviving what lay immediately ahead of me.

A thousand questions about my destiny went through my head in the early darkness of that Berlin night. What would my new life as a prisoner of war of the Russian Army be like if I were not shot? How long would captivity last? How would it end?

I knew that when we had recaptured German towns from the Russians, we often learned that they had murdered the German officers they had captured. I felt that I had to assume that my life was now over and I would be shot. The biggest question was how things were at home. Had everyone survived the fighting in Leipzig?

I drew my pistol from its holster, disassembled it, and threw the pieces as far as I could in different directions. I did not want it to become a souvenir for some Russian soldier. This symbolic act was my final resignation and surrender.

I stood in the darkness and listened in amazement to the warbling of some thrushes nearby. I had not heard such sounds for so long, and it seemed incredible that they could have survived the final battle. It was spring, and the thrushes would be preparing to raise a new generation of themselves.

Could there possibly be rebirth after such total destruction? In my present state of mind, I could not believe it. In any case, my world had ended.

Losing the war also preyed on my mind. Being captured had always been a real possibility for all of us, but surrendering our country . . . I felt stunned now, almost as if I were in someone else's bad dream. The war had shattered my life and left only a deep void. Home and a normal life were things I would probably never know again. I had to learn to adjust to our total defeat and my status as a prisoner of the Russians. It was a feeling of complete desperation. Germany was divided both geographically and ideologically, and it was unlikely ever to exist again as a whole nation.

I spent much of those first three weeks going over Germany's experience of the previous six years. Where had we gone so wrong? I felt that Germany's claim to the Rhineland, the Sudetenland, and the Polish Corridor had been justified because they had been taken away from us at the end of World War I by the Treaty of Versailles.

Hitler annexed Austria as a result of a plebiscite by the Austrian people. I felt that our invasion of France had been justified because France had declared war on us. Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands had not declared war on us, however, and yet we had gone through those countries to get to France. Occupying them had been just a matter of convenience; obviously, in retrospect, that was wrong.

We had done it during World War I and we automatically did it again-and perhaps because we did it the first time, it seemed acceptable when we did it again.

We had needed Norway for its raw materials and to protect our northern flank from England- but now that I had time to consider our actions, I had to concede that we had no right to invade and occupy Norway. It was only now beginning to dawn on me that our treatment of other nations had been arrogant-that the only justification we had felt necessary was our own need. As for the Soviet Union, we had hated the concept of communism and felt that the Soviet government was cruelly subjugating the Soviet people, but that hardly gave us the right to violate their sovereignty.

Of course, we were not just fighting communism; the concept of Lebensraum, or living space, would have been our justification for annexing the Ukraine for its food-producing capability and the Caucasus for its oil reserves. We had operated under a "might-makes-right" theory.

As these things all went through my mind, I began to realize that I should have thought them through at the time of their occurrence- but I was a soldier, and a soldier does not question the orders of his superiors. I had unquestioningly accepted the brutal philosophy that might makes right; the arrogance of our national behavior had not even occurred to me at the time.

Although such blind obedience was probably the only military way to keep soldiers focused on the task at hand, the realization that I had allowed myself to become a non-thinking cog in Hitler's military machine depressed me now. What had begun-at least in our minds-as an effort to correct the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles had escalated far beyond anything that any of us could have imagined. In retrospect, I realized that I-and countless others like me-had helped Hitler start and fight a world war of conquest that had left tens of millions of people dead and destroyed our own country.

I wondered now whether I would ever have questioned these things if we had won the war. I had to conclude that it was unlikely. This was a lesson taught by defeat, not by victory.

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*The story of Knappe's captivity and abuse at the hands of the Russians, is a long one. However, he did survive, was eventually released, and moved to America.*

\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\*