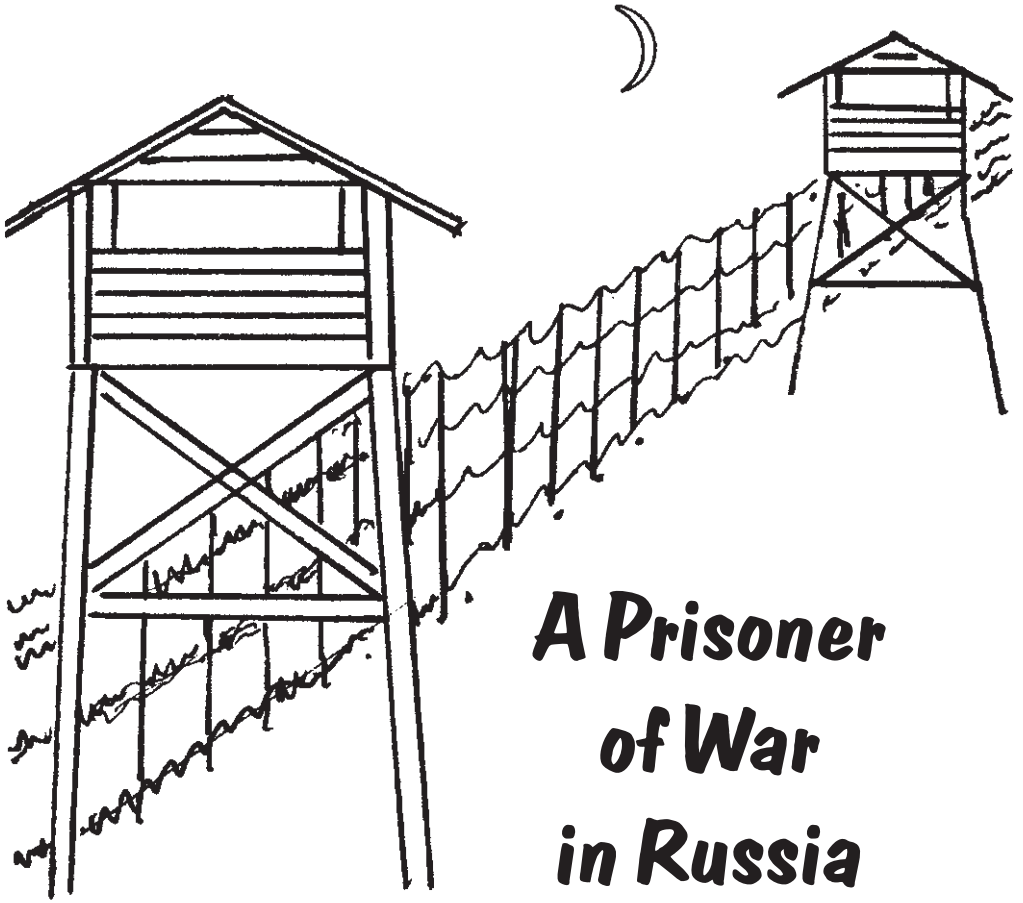

A Prisoner of War in Russia

Memoirs of
the War Prisoner Karl Hauger:
The Fight for Life and for Survival
in Various Encampments in the Soviet Union
from April 1945 until September 1948


Templin
Pyritz
Bahn
Arnswalde
Neuwedell
Schneidemühl
Schloppe
Schönlanke
Angermde.
Schwedt
Dippehne
Schorfheide
Liebenwalde
Königsberg
Berlinchen
Soldin
Woldenberg
Kreuz
Czarnikau
(Czarnków)
Bad Freienwalde
Eberswalde
Bärwalde
Friedeberg
Driesen
Filehne
Wriezen
Oder-Bruch
Oder
Mietzel
Landsbg.
Netze-Bruch
Wronki
BERLIN
Zorndorf
Küstrin
Warthe
Schwerin
Samter
(Szamotuły)
Strausberg
Müncheb.
Birnbaum
(Międzychód)
Pinne
(Piły)
Drossen
Meseritz
Rüdersdorf
Spree
Frankfurt
Zielenzig
Obra
Fürsten-
walde
Reppen
Sternberg
Neutomischel
(Nowy Tomyśl)
POSEN
(POZNAŃ)
Beeskow
Müllrose
Neu-
bentschen
Bentschen
(Zbąszyń)
Opalenica
Mosin
Fürstenbg.
Schwiebus
Grätz
Eisenhüttenstadt
Bomst
Schwieloch S.
Crossen
Züllichau
Wollstein
(Wolsztyn)
Kosten
(Kościan)
Lübben
Rothenburg
Obra-Bruch
Liebenwalde
Grünberg
221
Lübbenau
Guben
Spreewald
Cottbus
Sommerfeld
Naumbg.
Fraustadt
Lissa
(Leszno)
Forst
Neusatz
Kröben
Rydzyna


Waldlager
Steinbruch
Kolchose
MOSKAU
GORKI
KASAN
KUJBYSCHEW
Rybinsk
Wologda
Kostroma
Kirow
Jaroslawl
Iwanowo
Kalinin
Dserschinsk
Joschkar-Ola
Murom
Rjasan
Tula
Saransk
Penza
Orjol
Tambow
Woronesch
SARATOW
Engels
Borisoglebsk
CHARKOW
WOLGOGRAD
Lugansk
Makejewka
Schachty
ROSTOW
Jejsk
Astrachan
Gurjew
Kaspisches Meer
Nordrussischer Landrücken
Wolga
Don
Donez
Ural

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Preface

It must have been around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, as I watched the events unfold in the East, that the suppressed memories of my captivity as a prisoner of war in Russia suddenly began to resurface. During the time that followed, I stayed abreast of the developments surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and watched them with great interest. I myself was once directly involved in its affairs and knew the country and its people. At the time, no one could have foreseen the events that were now taking place; neither the politicians nor the historians and, least of all, the former prisoners of war, we who intimately knew and had lived through the pressure that dominated that country.

I sat down in front of my typewriter and began to write. I recounted the experiences that I had been through, which had been reactivated by the political upheaval in Eastern Europe. As often happens in life, one day, right in the middle of writing, however, I lost interest in my writing and put the typewriter and papers away, having, by that point, written about half of the story. Sometime later, after my grandson Marcus Reuter returned from a visit to Russia, he encouraged me to finish the memoirs, at least up to the point of my release. During his time in Russia, he had gotten to know some of the customs and characteristics of the Russian people and, having read the first part of the memoirs, was interested to know what happened during the remainder of my time there. And so I brought to an end that which I had already begun.

I would like to point out that the memoirs are of my personal and real experiences in Russia. Hundreds upon thousands of other prisoners of war suffered through their own fates, as is often the case during the turbulent episodes in history. Half of the captives didn't make it out alive — dying of hunger, cold or exhaustion – while many of the ones that did survive came home beset with illness. Approxi-

mately three million people were put into prisoner encampments after the war, the majority of who were soldiers. Of these three million, many were also young men, under the age of eighteen, and men of retirement age who had been captured after their conscription into the German Home Guard (Volksstrum) near the end of the war.

For the sake of historical accuracy and fairness, I have to admit that neither the Soviet leadership nor Stalin had the intention of killing the German POWs or exterminating them as a result of hard labor. In the wake of the devastation in their own country, the Russians were overwhelmed and not in a position to accommodate and adequately feed the hordes of captives that they had suddenly amassed. The population of Russia was, at the time, suffering from supply shortages and what little there was had to be shared. The inefficiency of the socialist command economy also helped in further worsening the situation.

I would like to mention that the majority of the Russian expressions found in this book do not necessarily correspond to standard 'formal' Russian. The words have been phonetically reproduced so as to reflect the Russian language as it was employed by the prisoners when they were in contact with the civilians.

Encouragement from Marcus aside, I also wrote these memoirs on account of my own personal desire to relate to my children and grandchildren what I had experienced. Little has been published about this particular episode in the lives of the today's fathers and grandfathers who lived through the war. These accounts could not all be retold orally and, furthermore, it is likely that they would be difficult to grasp for anyone who did not personally experience them. To conclude, I would like to express my personal wish and hope that our progeny and the posterity of all the other people of the world can be spared in the future from having to endure such horrible experiences.

Karl Hauger
Rastatt, August 3rd, 1997

My Capture in April 1945

On April 27th, 1945, my flak battery was positioned near the town of Selchow, just south of the autobahn that led from Berlin to Fürstenwalde. We were near the so-called 'Selchow Lakes', named after the town of Selchow. The positions of our other batteries were unknown to me at the time. Even after later investigation, I was never able to figure out where they were at the time. The Russians started a major offensive on Berlin on the 16th of April, 1945, descending on the city in a pincer movement originating from two positions: one from north, near the city of Stettin, and the other from the south, near the city Cottbus, driving westwards. The remaining German units were defeated in the course of a few days. Complete chaos ensued in the wake of the offensive; every troop was forced to rely on itself and fought based on individual calculations of possible dangers. My unit made a retreat from the Oder River to southeast of Berlin in the course of eleven days and suffered great losses in the process. Many men in my unit, at least those that were familiar with the area, made a run for it, realizing that the war had been lost and was likely to end in the near future. Everyone started to busy themselves with getting out alive, making their plans either secretly or in small groups, taking into account the fact that no one was to be trusted.

Carrying out an escape wasn't without its dangers, despite the general disorder. There remained functioning SS-units that were convinced that victory could still be achieved and obstinately continued following obsolete orders. Furthermore, the military police was still active and on patrol. Its members were nicknamed 'chain dogs' by the other soldiers on account of the steel plates attached to chains that they wore on the breast of their uniforms. If a deserter or a straggler was found by the chain

dogs and upon capture couldn't prove which unit he belonged to, his days were likely to be numbered. Without due process, he would be declared a coward and shot on the spot or hung from the nearest tree. Caution was therefore essential. I personally did not intend to die a hero in the last days of the war after having made it all the way to the end and wasn't planning to be killed by a group of crazed fanatics. There were desperados out there who deep down sensed that everything was over and knew that they had nothing left to lose. A few days later, after my men and I had been taken prisoner, we heard stories of entire groups that had shot themselves dead, from fear of being imprisoned by the Russians.

Now back to my flak unit near the Selchow Lakes: There was a small peninsula on one of the lakes that protruded out into the water like a finger. At the tip of this peninsula was a small village. It consisted of two or three farms, as well as a number of summer residences of the prominent from Berlin, dating back to the 20s and from Nazi times. From the tip of this peninsula, one could look over to the opposite shore and see the town of Bugk and as well as a country road that ran north and south. The town had already been captured by the Russians and bustling truck traffic had commenced on the road. Our unit, which was equipped with 8.8 cm flak cannons, had been deployed with orders to engage tanks. In this particular case, we had received an order that we were to engage the operating Russian supply units on the other shore in order to eliminate the supply chain to the advancing troops. The operation was completely illogical and useless considering the amount of Russian troops we were supposed to take on. In the end, we didn't get very far in our mission.

In order shoot an out-of-sight target with artillery, a forward observer (FO) must be sent forward to get a clear view of the

target and direct fire from the unit. Our battery leader—an elementary school teacher, with whom I was at loggerheads for several months due to differences in political and ideological views—commanded me to assume the post of FO. I was trained in this task and had done it many times, but in this particular case I had the distinct impression that he intended to get rid of me by sending me on this suicide mission. An FO is also accompanied by two additional men: a radio operator and a back-up man, in case the FO is lost.

The radio operator was from Switzerland and had voluntarily joined the German army. He had already accompanied me on several FO posts, but I hadn't had much contact with him despite the fact that he was a particular good radioman. My back-up man and I, on the other hand, had a good rapport. His name was Jobst Franken, nicknamed Jo. He was a student from Stuttgart, had a foul mouth and was, for this reason, also not on the best terms with our battery leader. He was a parodist and sometimes did impressions of the German propaganda minister, Dr. Goebbels, as well as other Nazi leaders, which was very risky at the time. He was also lacking on the personal hygiene front, being covered with lice from head to toe. His mother was a doctor in Stuttgart and I got to visit her once after the war.

Secretly, I was actually glad to have been ordered to this post. It gave me a chance to get away from the rest of the unit and I had no one controlling me anymore. We set off for the tip of the peninsula. On the way there, I told Jo my plan to defect as soon as I found an opportunity and, if possible, slip my way through the German and Russian fronts and fight my way home. There was news that the French and the Americans were in Baden and that the war had ended there. It would be a bold undertaking and Jobst Franken couldn't decide if he would join me or not.

On our way to the peninsula, we passed by an area that was

covered with dead Russian soldiers. It was clear that a battle had taken place here a few days prior and that the Russians were forced to retreat some kilometers back. When we reached the base of the peninsula, we met a German tank battalion. The leader was from Karlsruhe and he found our plan to set up an FO station at the tip of the peninsula nonsensical. He told us we would have to be prepared for a Russian counter-attack. But we pushed through the barrier as ordered and, as luck would have it, a Russian tank battalion attacked the German unit behind us, a mere ten minutes after our departure; we had marched less than 300 meters away from the front edge of the Russian tank battalion, wholly unaware of its presence. The battle unfolded and moved in the direction of the country road to the south, thus cutting off our return path. I immediately ran for cover and when I looked behind me, I watched as a German soldier sprang out of a foxhole and attempted to shoot a Russian T 34 with his rocket launcher. The T 34 was one of the largest and best-known Russian tanks of the Second World War.

My unit sought a hiding place and we soon held our own war council. I told the others that the war was over for me and that I was going to attempt to make a run for it. Jobst and my Swiss back-up man unfortunately did not see eye-to-eye with me. They thought it would be better to penetrate the German lines. I tried to argue that their idea was much too dangerous. In the end, however, I was unable to change their minds and had let them go their way. I was able to view what happened in the few minutes that followed through a clearing in the woods. About 200 meters away, I saw Jo spring into the air and then heard the sound of a gun volley as he disappeared into a trench. After that day, I never heard anything from either of them again. Even the investigations later carried out by Jo's mother bore no results.

I took a few moments to recover from the horror I had just

witnessed and made my way through a clearing in the pine forest, and moving in the direction of the peninsula. The way through the forest was sandy and bordered the shores of the lake at some stretches. I was fully overcome with emotion; the decisive moments were now upon us — the end of the war, the transition from the Hitler regime to a new era, and the approaching hours of danger, which would require the utmost attention and concentration. Any small miscalculation could be deadly. I had almost no real notion of what Russians were like other than the few blurry propaganda pictures I had seen. We were led to believe that we would immediately be shot if captured as a single soldier with a weapon. Realizing this, I promptly threw my carabine, my 9 mm pistol and even my military soldbuch (pay and identity book) into some reeds on the lake. I would later come to regret my decision to throw my military soldbuch away.

After about a 20 minute march on foot I saw a small village in front of me — I could still hear the sounds of the fight behind . I approached very carefully and was amazed to see that the inhabitants were all walking about, as though completely unaware of what was going on around them. Most of them were civilians, mainly women and children. There were also some defected soldiers there, lounging around lethargically. It seemed that none of them were planning to become martyrs for the Vaterland. I spoke to a low ranking infantry officer and he told me that they had all decided to let the Russians come, not planning to offer any resistance. The man was about my age and, as far as I could tell, seemed to be quite intelligent. As we were talking, he also informed me that he intended to change into civilian clothing as soon as it was certain that the German troops would no longer recapture the village. I, in return, reiterated what I had been through those last couple of hours to him. It

soon became clear that we were cut off and now on our own, as the noises from the battle were drawing ever further away. I told the young officer of the plans I had made, and it turned out that the both of us shared similar ideas and came to the conclusion that we should carry out the undertaking together.

Reinhold Pannek was the man's name and he came from Göttingen. We quickly befriended each other. He had already gathered supplies for the escape and was also known by some of the inhabitants of the village. Most of the inhabitants were from Berlin and had relocated to the village as a result of the recent events in the war. I could tell that these people were not particularly poor; some of them were likely even members of the party elite. But that was no longer important — everyone wanted to save their own skin and no one could predict what the Russians would do or how they would act once they found us. Civilian clothing was in abundance and could be freely taken. I found myself a pair of pants that fit, were comfortable and suited my plans well. It was now about 10:30 in the morning and the noise from the battle was faint and could be heard coming from the direction of Berlin. I found a leather bag and stuffed it full of emergency provisions and also came across a paratrooper jacket that I took in the case of bad weather and a civilian hat as well. I looked quite ridiculous by today's standards, but at the time didn't appear all that exotic. Reinhold also changed his clothes and once we were finished, we set off to explore the village.

We realized that, along with the Germans, there was also a large number of plain-clothed foreigners in the village, including women. They were members of various foreign offices and embassies, who, on account of the air raids, had fled to this secluded and relatively safe peninsula to wait for the end of the war. I noticed that some of them spoke with accents from the alpine

regions that I recognized, and after getting into conversation with them, was told that they were Swiss diplomats who had moved to Berlin with their families.

It seemed that all was peaceful in the village and a surreal, almost dreamlike, mood hung over the village. But one also had the sense that great events were soon to unfold. A feeling of doom accompanied by a sense of optimism combined into a spiritual tension that I had never experienced before. The Swiss all lived together in a small farmhouse, almost directly at the center of the village. The stress of expectation was suddenly displaced by restlessness and a slew of activity. Groups spontaneously formed among the inhabitants and the message was circulating that the Russians were coming.

As though acting out a theater performance, or at least as though they had previously rehearsed, the leader of the village suddenly appeared with a white flag, flanked on either side by men, and they made their way in the direction of the oncoming attack. After about 100 meters they stopped, with the flag held up, and waited. One could hear single shots and commands in the distance. Then the first Russian officers and some soldiers came into view and proceeded directly to the men carrying the flag. They negotiated for a few minutes and surrounded the men. The Russians then turned around, gave some orders to their men and made their way to the center of the village with machine guns and revolvers, ready to attack. The Russians would have terminated the three flag bearers at the first sign of resistance.

Just before the Russian troops marched into the village, the inhabitants took up positions at the side of the road, as if waiting for a festival procession to arrive. This had probably also been rehearsed. Remaining inside the houses would have been dangerous, as the Russians, drawing from their experiences of often being shot at from inside buildings, would have probably set

any house on fire if someone was seen inside. It was a simple precaution, instructed by one experienced in the field, and proved worth doing—not a single house was set aflame.

Now the rest of the Russian soldiers were closing in on the village from all directions, carrying with them their well-known and feared Russian machine guns. Complete silence set in—everyone turned pale with fear but not the slightest sound was made. As the soldiers approached, we could see that they were dirty, drenched in sweat and—what struck me as odd—waddled like ducks. I had noticed this same waddle on other occasions and always wondered why it happened. It was obvious that the soldiers had just been through days of fighting. Many of them had Asian facial features, hailing from the southern, Muslim and Mongolian areas of the Soviet Union.

Reinhold and I stood at the very front of one of the rows, wearing our civilian attire. When the first soldiers were directly in front of us, one of them came up to me, lifted up his hand and yelled, "Urr-urr-urr!" I knew right away that he was after my watch. "Well if that's all he wants", I thought, relieved, and handed over my pocket watch, an old piece of junk, which wasn't worth anything anyways, and one which I had schlepped around with me the entire war. He also took a medallion with the image of the Virgin Mother of Lourdes from my wallet, which a French girl had given me in St. Jeans de Luz on the Atlantic in 1941. At that time, I hadn't realized that the town was a place of pilgrimage. The girl told me that the medallion had been consecrated in Lourdes by a bishop and that it would bring me luck. Although it had absolutely no material value, I kept it by my side for over four years—up until the young Russian soldier took it away. Frankly, when the girl gave me the thing, my attention was on her and not the Holy Virgin. I still hope to this day that the medallion brought luck to the Russian

soldier that took it, and that he survived the war unharmed.

Soon, the first cries of the women, who weren't willing to give up their wrist watches and had them then forcibly taken from them, became audible. We could see that the soldiers, mostly young men, had bundles of watches tied to their belts, which reminded me of stories of the Indians that collected scalps. The combat troops scoured the village and, to our surprise, then quickly moved on, leaving us to our own again. I thought to myself, "That couldn't possibly have been all." Inside, I felt liberated and relieved, since it appeared that I had come out of the war alive. These events happened between 12 o'clock and 1 o'clock and we were then standing around in groups and discussing what had just happened. No one had imagined that the transition from the Nazi times to Bolshevism would happen so easily and painlessly. After some debating, a jovial mood set in among those present. Reinhold and I were invited into the Swiss's house for coffee and cake.

We sat around a large round table in the living room of the farm house, about 15 of us in all, and started conversing about the new era, which was dawning for us individually, as well as politically in Europe. The women started baking plum cakes, the emergency provisions were plentiful and no one had to fear going hungry. Our food supplies were plentiful on account of the fact that we were in an agricultural area and since the diplomats had made sure to bring along lots of provisions when they fled. All was well in our world and this was how I had imagined the peace to be. The weather at the beginning of that spring was very pleasant and unusually mild. I secretly played with the idea of travelling back with the Swiss, since that they were so friendly and since my home wasn't very far away from Switzerland anyway.

But my dreams were soon to be abruptly and painfully shat-

tered; as though out of the blue, the door to the farm house swung open and two large Russian officers started yelling, demanding to see our documents. They had pistols in their hands, were immaculately dressed and spoke flawless German — I was astounded and horrified at the same time. They didn't look at all like the Russians we had pictured in our minds — creations of Goebbels's propaganda. For us, the wheat was now being separated from the chaff. I had foolishly thrown my soldbuch into the reeds just that morning and was now lacking any sort of documentation to prove my identity — Reinhold had exactly the same problem. The Swiss each had an international schutzbrief, a document assuring their protection, and thus remained in safe hands. The Russians took the two of us outside, to a removal commander who was already waiting for us. I was allowed to bring my provisions bag along, which I had put together for emergency situations. I was now a prisoner of the Russians. It was the 27th of April, 1945, around 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I was 23 years and 3 months old.

The Russians had also rounded up other men — some of them soldiers and others older civilians. There was a mass of people from the army, which we had no clue about, who had hidden themselves. Allegedly, they were afraid of being found by the German SS and were taken out of hiding by the Russians. The whole lot of us was then taken to a barn at the edge of the village. When we arrived, we could see that the barn was already guarded by troops and half filled with other captured prisoners. It was a type of hayrick that was high and fitted with two large, wooden gates. More and more prisoners were being brought in and the barn started to become crowded. Reinhold and I tried to remain together and to position ourselves near the exit; I was thinking of possible escape routes. We seated ourselves on the ground at the front of the barn, able to look out through a crack

in the door and see as new prisoners were brought in. We also caught sight of a young Russian soldier sitting on the floor with a machine gun through the crack. By the time night set in, the barn had been filled to the brim and no one was able to properly stand, soon setting off squabbles between the prisoners. Around 10 o'clock, the gate was opened and some Russians came in and set up a field kitchen. Each of us made our way to the front, with our bowls in our hands, and we were given some soup — comprised merely of broth and some pieces of pork. Bread was also given out. This meal turned out to be particularly significant for me, as it was to be the last time for the next three and a half years that I would have the taste of meat on my tongue.

Considering the cramped quarters that night, sleeping was practically out of the question. I managed to get right up to the crack in the gate, so that I was sitting directly on the other side of the Russian watchman. Countless bon fires were burning outside and we could hear the Russians singing and see them dancing. Many of them were drunk and the liquor was flowing in torrents. They were also playing instruments like harmonicas and balalaikas. The soldiers set up camp on their panje wagons, which were pulled by small horses from the steppes of Russia that I was seeing for the first time in my life. We could also hear female voices, some of them screaming, indicating that rapes were taking place in the village. The soldiers were in victory euphoria, having just survived many violent battles, knowing that the war was soon to end. The mood in our hayrick, on the other hand, was anything but euphoric. It was my first night as a prisoner; a strange situation to find oneself in after being the one who had imprisoned others for such a long time.

I started making gestures, trying to make contact with the watchman. He was a young, good-natured guy, most probably

from a small village somewhere in Russia. He began eating, and I continued making gestures with my hands. It paid off and he ended up giving me some rind from his knackwurst and some bread. I gave Reinhold a piece and we did our best to eat it up without the others taking notice. The Russian kept calling me 'civiliy', since I wasn't wearing a uniform. This would also come to be my last piece of sausage until my return home in September of 1948.

The first night was spent in this fashion — far more miserable than comfortable. The night was extremely cold, but it didn't matter since most of us had hardened during our time in the war. At some point the next morning, the gate swung opened and a Russian stood behind it. He raised his arm and shouted: "Heil Hitler! Well, have you been able to heal your Hitler after all?" We all looked at him in shock, our mouths agape. Then a verbal lashing began and we were made brutally aware of all the lies and deception that we had been fed in the past years. Some of the men tried to act as though they had always secretly been aware of the Nazi fallacies and even covertly opposed them. Some went as far to claim that they had been communists all along, while others had always opposed to the regime. Everyone claimed that it was an embarrassment to have been part of the Nazis. We were all anti-fascist — now and also back then. But the Russian wasn't having any of it and went on having his fun at our expense. He had likely witnessed the same pitiful scene and received the same reaction from other prisoners before. I got the impression that the Russians were well familiar with the reactions of their newly captured enemies and now took pleasure in making morbid jokes. The Russians were now in a position of dominance and went about mocking the Nazi superlative and the German pomp and circumstance. We weren't sure if we should laugh or cry, feeling extremely ashamed.

Then we were instructed to exit the barn. Reinhold and I tried to remain together the best we could. More Russian watchmen had gathered and the prisoners were put into groups of 15. The officer that had greeted us earlier with his Hitler greeting then shouted, "You're now all going to be taken out to be shot." The first group was marched off and disappeared behind some houses. Feelings of anguish, fear and pure horror descended upon us. Was the propaganda we had heard on the last days of the war painting a realistic picture of our enemies after all? The fact that the Russians would shoot those of us that had been taken prisoner had been drilled into our heads from day one. The optimism that had set in when we first encountered the Russians the day before had now turned into sheer pessimism — the skeptics had now gained the upper hand. The second group was marched off 10 minutes later. The rest of us listened intently for shots in the distance, but nothing was heard. I was marched off with the third or fourth group. We formed two rows and proceeded through the village and along the shores of the lake in the direction of Storkow. I was well acquainted with the path having traversed a part of it the other day and knowing the rest of it from maps I had to study on my FO missions. Our treatment by the Russians started to deteriorate as we were marching and our chaperones began to enforce random discipline. The instant one of us attempted to break ranks, the Russians would start yelling and waving around their machine guns. As far as I can remember, I wasn't that struck with fear during the marching. It was probably being suppressed by my concentration on finding opportunity to escape. Deep down, I knew that the Russians weren't actually going to shoot us—and this gut feeling later turned out to prove true. They were just toying around with us and getting a kick out of seeing us so petrified at the threat of eminent doom.

On the way to wherever we were headed, we marched over a field that had recently hosted a battle. The sight was horrifying: the houses and fields were destroyed and the whole area was littered with corpses and broken battle equipment. We could see other soldiers marching in columns towards Berlin. Far off in the distance we could also hear the thundering sounds of the cannons from a battle taking place in the capital of the Reich.

On that march I learned my first Russian words: 'Davay, davay,' meaning 'move ahead'. 'Bystreiy', meaning 'faster'. I put two and two together and realized that 'davay bystreiy' meant 'move faster.' I would hear this particular command daily during my capture, up to the day that I was released. The Russians marching past us would yell out mockingly, "Friiitzy, Friiitzy!" It was the Russians' nickname for us (a reference to the common German name 'Fritz') just like our nickname for them was 'Ivan'. Some also called out, "Berlin, kapuuut" (Berlin, broooken) or, "Gitler kapuuut," or, "Vayna kapuuut," which meant, "Germany, Hitler and the war: finished and destroyed."

By the time that the first houses in Storkow came into view, we had been marching for about three hours. Storkow was a relatively large town and was now filled with Russian troops. Several Russian posts and command offices had already been established in the town. The whole place was bustling with activity—a continuous coming and going, like an ant hill. As we marched through the town, I looked on as a woman fell screaming from a window, her hands bloody and stretched in front of her—it looked as though her veins had been slit open. We assumed that she had been raped, which, as we would later discover, happened with extreme frequency during the occupation. We were like slaves and now knew, for the first time in our lives, what it was like being captured and completely helpless. We also had other things to worry about; anyone with a good

pair of boots had them hastily taken away by the Russians. I was quite lucky to have normal lace-up shoes on — I was better able to march with them and they didn't interest the Russians. We were taken to a central gathering place outside of Storkow and were put together with another large group of captured men. There were altogether about a hundred of us and more were added every hour. As they came, the watchmen also increased in number and became ever more reckless. Up to this point, we had been confronted with troops from the front, who were relatively humane, but now we were getting acquainted with the Russians from off the field.

Prisoners were constantly brought in the whole day. Civilians and men from the local militias — who often were clad in ridiculous uniforms — were also among those brought in. The mass of prisoners on the field was growing larger and larger, surrounded by a growing ring of watchmen. An escape was now out of the question. As the evening came, we did our best to settle ourselves on the ground and get as comfortable the conditions allowed. We still had some emergency food provisions left over, which kept the hunger in check for the time being. We had to remain on our guard, for there were those among us who were hungry but didn't have the luxury of possessing leftover food provisions. Some had already started to steal or forcibly take away food from those others that weren't in a condition to defend themselves.

The night that followed was bitterly cold and I was quite happy to have my padded camouflage jacket. Everyone simply laid themselves on the ground where they had been standing. We also had to guard our shoes since they could easily be stolen if taken off or even once we fell asleep with them on. Once dawn broke, we were greeting with the now familiar, "Davay, davay!" and we had to get up and arrange ourselves in rows of five. I

then learned a new word in Russian: 'papyat' or 'davay – papyat', meaning 'columns of five'. It was a bit awkward for us at the beginning, since rows of four were standard for marches in the German military. After much discussion, the marching column finally got under way, flanked on either side by watchmen with machine guns. Reinhold and I managed to march in the same group. I determined, based on the angle of the sun that we were marching to the northeast, in the direction of Fürstenwalde. The platoon ground ahead slowly. We had to stop again and again, as the supplies from behind weren't moving along as quickly as planned. The prisoners totaled about 3,000 men, by my estimates, and it was obvious that it wasn't going to be easy to get such a mass of people, arranged in rows of five, to move ahead in a quick and orderly fashion.

We were somewhere between Storkow and Fürstenwalde by that the time I was able to count to five in Russian. "Rass, tva, triy, tchitiry, pyat." The word for water was 'voda' and hungry was 'golod'. I decided to try to learn some simple Russian expressions as quickly as possible, since I knew that I would be spending some time with them.

The weather on that day was splendid; the sun was shining and it was unusually warm given the time of year. The first thing that struck me, however, was how thirsty I was. Many of us had food provisions, but supplying enough water for such a huge mass of men proved problematic. Whenever we would pass a stream or a well, someone would break out of formation and rush over to fill a pot with water. That usually resulted in a negative reaction from the watchmen, who would start shouting, firing their guns into the air and hitting the escapee with the butts of their guns until he was back in formation. After several such incidents, we were informed that anyone who broke formation would be shot immediately. The threat proved only mo-

derately effective, as every now and then a man would again break free and rush to a source of water. The result was generally a severe beating but no one was ever actually shot.

Sometimes we passed by other marching columns going in a different direction. During one such encounter I caught a glimpse of an old comrade of mine — Otto Weratschnik. Otto was a farmer from Kärnten, whom I had had some rather bold adventures with on our way back from France. I managed to yell over to him and he saw me and made a gesture before disappearing behind the mass of people. Despite searching for him once I returned home, I was never able to find him again.

At one point, I saw a young man from Upper Silesia among the watchmen and who had, just a few days prior, fought in my unit against the Russians. Since he spoke Polish quite well, he had probably offered himself up as an assistant to the Russians. It was also possible that he was a defector and I would have to keep my eye on him, since the mood was tense and the situation quite dangerous. He still wore his German army jacket but had a Russia armband on — with the hammer and sickle — and also wore a Polish military hat on his head. Back when we were in the same unit, we never had anything to do with one another and I only recognized his face. He probably didn't recognize me dressed like a civilian and I figured it best to remain undetected. His participation in the German military was likely the result of the general chaos that reigned in his home region. Like many of his fellow countrymen, he — either voluntarily or involuntarily — was conscripted into the German military. Now that the war was over, he, and many others living in the border regions, had, through the historical circumstances of the fluctuating borders, trouble acquiring citizenship. Luckily for him, he was able to take advantage of the situation and switch to the side of the victor. I would have done the same in his situation,

using any means necessary to survive the war — a war which I myself didn't wish for or orchestrate. All I had known was that that a new and interesting time was about to begin in Europe and I wanted to be part of it. Our neighbors in South Tyrol and Alsace were confronted with the same dilemma. I, however, had little choice in avoiding the matter, living directly on the Rhine and in the middle of the upheaval.

The beginning of the war was a test to see how each person, whether intelligent or dumb, could manage how to leave behind the past and segue successfully into the nebulous and unknown future. Everything was uncertain as far as we were concerned.

Suddenly, a Russian came rushing in on a horse yelling, "Na Sibir, na Sibir," which was pretty easy to translate: "Off to Siberia with you all. That will be your punishment." The scene was rather exceptional. Apparently the man had drunk too much vodka and had some pretty bad experiences with the Germans behind him. All of the watchmen, except for those that had to adhere to a strict regimen of self-discipline, were, like most Russians, good-natured and even had a touch of innocence to them. This explained another sentence in Russian that was repeated to us over and over and has left quite an impression on my mind: "Skoro domoy," which translates to: "Going home soon." These words — shouted by the Russians on countless occasions — fostered an ambivalent hope in the minds of many of the Germans, who were of a different mentality than the Russians and didn't really know what to make of this promise. As I was later to learn, this statement stemmed from a deep-rooted sympathy in the souls of the Russians that was directed at repressed and tortured beings. This trait even managed to find its way to the surface in the face of an enemy, even after the atrocious battles and experiences that had been lived through. I would come across this very characteristic later during my times

as a prisoner in Russia. I am grateful to the Russians for possessing this trait and even venture to believe it is the reason that I survived my three and a half years of imprisonment.

The colorful mess of prisoners and watchmen then continued its way east, just south of the autobahn from Berlin to Fürstenwalde. At some phases of the march, we were on country roads, at others on dusty farmlands, on the Märkisch Moorlands, and past ravaged towns and farms — we continued on further and further at a slow pace, without breaks to rest. Soon, the men that had foot troubles made started to complain and slow down the march. Reinhold and I were constantly looking for a possibility to escape, looking for just the right patch of bushes to make our escape through. But it turned out to be speculation and idle dreaming, and any actual attempt to escape would certainly have resulted in our deaths. Rumors made their way back and forth between the rows of the marching column. Most of them were wishful thinking but some of the rumors foretold of the terrible fate ahead of us.

Later that evening, probably somewhere south of Fürstenwalde, the marching column was herded into a make-shift rectangular holding pen — likely built by Russian soldiers —, outfitted with watch towers on each corner. Square blocks had been constructed inside of the pen, all separated by 5-meter-wide pathways for the watchmen to pass through. This allowed the guards to keep us under easy surveillance and control. About 500 men were fit into each of these blocks and, in my estimation, the entire holding area contained somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 prisoners. We were now finally able to spread ourselves out a bit and get into somewhat comfortable sleeping positions. Water was also distributed in cans, but unfortunately no food. Those who didn't have any provisions with them had the chance to experience starvation. Most of us were already

used to the rough life in the field; I myself hadn't slept in a real bed in months and found the current circumstances bearable. There weren't only soldiers, but also administrative personnel among us — paper pushers, cooks and the like — who probably didn't have the easiest time getting accustomed to the new conditions. Cigarettes had already started being used as a form of currency. One could trade pretty much anything with some cigarettes. Thank goodness I wasn't a heavy smoker at this particular point in my life—I was more concentrated on eating and didn't have to worry about nicotine withdrawal.

At various points during the night, I could hear the sounds of gunfire and screaming — perhaps some of the prisoners were trying to make their escape. At dawn the commander shouted, "Davay – bystreiy, pa piat," – "Get ready to move on." The mass drudgingly got itself together and started marching on towards the east. I now managed to get my bearings again. We passed through areas that had recently seen heavy fighting, in the direction of Frankfurt on the Oder. The terrors of the previous days were clearly visible: destroyed tanks and equipment were strewn everywhere. There were still corpses lying about and we could see that civilians were being commissioned to remove the bodies. The roads were badly damaged and littered with craters from grenades and other bombs. At the time, we all figured that it would take decades to repair all that had been damaged.

After about an hour of marching, natural selection started to play itself out. The ill, the wounded and those with troubles walking began falling behind. They would slowly start lagging and the gap they made within the rows would be filled by those behind them able to keep up. I started to wonder what would happen to the stragglers. A rumor had spread, saying that the men who were unable to keep up would be shot. This made a sobering impression on the rest of us and had the effect of mi-

raculously boosting our health and endurance. A bit of commotion broke out as we started marching past the edge of a forest. We soon passed the corpses of three infantry men lying on the back of a wagon. The three of them were covered in blood and the sight was terrifying. Immediately next to them was a sign that read: “This will be the fate of those that attempt to flee.” We were all horrified by the sight and started to reconsider our grand plans of escape. This scene became the primary topic of discussion for a long while after that.

During the march I made a point of observing everything that was happening and had happened to the left and the right of our route. Everything I saw struck me as new and forced me to fully reexamine my view of the world. It had also become obvious that much, if not most, of the Hitler propaganda that we were fed about ‘Ivan’ was knowingly falsified.

There were still several powerful Russian army units pushing their way West. I was astounded to see how many of the units were still outfitted with panye wagons with their small horses from the steppes. This proved to me that the percentage of those living an agrarian life was much larger in the Soviet Union than in the West. The soldiers, their horses and the wagons somehow fused together into one large organism in my eyes. Apparently, in the far reaches of Russia, these army units existed en masse, making quick work of the advancing German troops and forcing the German commanders to re-strategize. It went to show that these seemingly primitive military installations could become lethal to a modern army when in large numbers.

Another thing that immediately caught my attention was the great number of women who also served in the units. Women of all ages, from young girls to older dames were present and it seemed that they were even treated as equals. Judging from their badges, many of them also served as officers, much to my asto st

of them wore lipstick and had perfect hair styles — something that we only associated with French women. In Germany, such a mixture would have been frowned upon. Our previous ideas of the bolshevists were as far from reality as possible. Most of the women were assigned to medical service, to the field kitchens, to the commanders or to the signal corps. The average Russian woman was a bit plumper than her German counterpart and they weren't at all nasty, but rather good-humored and friendly. I would later have encounters with the Soviet women during my stay in Russia, which would go to reinforce my initial impression of them.

We had now been on the road for several hours and dire thirst had set in again like a plague. Many of those among us were not at all accustomed to such physical demands and difficulties. Their tongues hung out of their mouths and they would yell for water. But the instructions still hadn't changed and when we passed by sources of water, we weren't allowed to break formation to replenish ourselves. It was understandable why the Russians didn't permit this. Were they to have let us descend on the water sources, absolute chaos would have broken out. The infantry men would have trampled each other to death in their greed and the watchmen would have lost complete control of the column.

Around midday, the march began to slow even further. We came upon a clearing in the pine forest, where a Russian supply unit had been set up. Upon reaching it, the front end of the marching column was reorganized and we were placed into two rows. The rows were led past large tanks from which water was given out. The whole affair had to be done quickly and the Russians would repeatedly yell, "Davay, davay!" The Ivans made a point of keep the line moving, so that everyone got an opportunity to get some water.

A field kitchen was in full operation about 100 meters away from the tanks. After getting some water, we were led on to some

soup cauldrons. Everyone marched up to a cauldron with his bowl, was given a ladle full of soup and then shoed along. The soup was dished out on the go and it wasn't possible to halt for even a moment due to the constant push from the mass of people behind. The Russians tried their best to maintain order and discipline at the soup cauldrons but had to resort to shouts, strikes from the butts of their guns and kicks. The once proud and feared German military had degenerated into a pitiful theater troupe. Most of the food-dispensing posts were filled by the Russian women from the medical service. For many of us, this was the first warm meal that we had had in days. Reinhold's and my last warm meal had been the pork goulash that we had been given in the hay rick, some 48 hours back. Each of us was equipped with a bowl and a spoon, which can most likely be attributed to survival instinct. Even the three dead soldiers that had fled had cookware hanging from their bodies.

The march then continued on uninterrupted. The five rows were formed again and with continuous gun firing and yelling, and the funeral procession made its way onward to the East. I started seeing pictures from my old schoolbooks in my mind — scenes from the Thirty Years' War or from Napoleon's march on Moscow. One particular quote also came to mind: "With steed and man and wagon, was the gentleman defeated." This quote reflected the mood among the captured men quite well. One had the feeling that we were partaking in a powerful historical change, whose portrait we ourselves were becoming parts of. Only a limited number of us were likely to have had such grandiose thoughts and considerations at the time. Moaning, scolding, stench, quarreling, self-pity, anger, hunger, thirst, fear, pain—these were the predominating outward expressions of our inner states. On the other hand, there was also the initial feeling of gratification at having made it through the last years alive.

Some of the men even developed a grim sense of humor.

Our next overnight camping spot was again in an open field somewhere between Fürstenwalde and Frankfurt on the Oder. The routine was the same as on the previous night, though I could tell that the number of prisoners had increased. There were other rows of captured men that we had encountered on the way and they had been merged into our row like streams into a river. Our destination was undoubtedly Frankfurt on the Oder. Within the marching columns, small numbers of men had come together to form subgroups groups whose goal it was to remain together. Some were collections of men from the same arm of the military who knew each other from before; others met one another on the march and had the feeling that they together could better endure the journey than alone. The groups formed according to the law of nature, forming as they would have in the wild. Each individual instinctually noticed which other people would increase his own chances of survival and where the most profit could be gained. The strongest of the men, of course, had it the easiest, because other as strong ones would naturally gravitate to them; the weak would also seek them out. A new hierarchy established itself, but this time quite different from the one within the military or the Nazi party. Another interesting observation was how quickly people became non-smokers - the very same people who had always believed that they would never be able to give smoking up. But it was quite simple: there wasn't anything left to smoke. The few cigarettes that remained were kept hidden by the few of us who had them, since they had become as valuable as gold. We slowly began to realize that there were a number of areas where we would have to adapt. And smoking was certainly one of the less dramatic of the sacrifices.

The night had set in not long after that. Screams and shots

could again be heard coming from the edges of the camp. It was another bitterly cold night with the most beautiful of clear, starry skies — excellent weather for this time of year with the sun having shone the whole day long. One could also sense the coming of spring. Rain would have been a catastrophe at this particular point and surly would have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of prisoners.

The next morning — it was the 30th of April, 1945 — things went on exactly as they had during the previous day: loud yelling, shots fired in the air, assistance from the butts of the guns, kicks in the ass. This time the commotion was even greater than before. Many belongings had been stolen during the night: clothes, backpacks, blankets, coats. Some had even attempted to steal shoes and often with success. There were men running around in a fury with only their socks on. The Ivans were gradually becoming agitated and nervous. It certainly was not an easy task to maintain order among such a large group of vastly differing men.

Slowly and arduously the front of the marching column again got under way. It took over an hour for the group Reinhold and I were in — about a third of the way into the entire column — to get moving. We again passed by fear-inducing scenes of horror and carnage from the war on the way. The Seelow Heights were just to the north of us now — an area of higher ground above the marshlands of the Oder River. It was on this bridgehead that the Russians had tried to make a direct advance on Berlin on April the 16th but were held back at the cost of many lives on both sides. In the wake of this, the Russians then promptly changed their strategy. They divided up their troops up into fronts, leaving one front behind in Frankfurt, sending a second front to the north and a third unit to the south. The two newly formed fronts then closed in from the north and the south, surrounding

the German troops and scores of refugees in the middle, trapping them between Berlin and Frankfurt on the Oder. As this campaign began, I found myself in the area of Podelzig/Schönfließ, serving as an FO (forward observer) at the very front line of the central thrust. I still consider it a miracle today that I somehow managed to get out of this trap — full of shell splinters and gun smoke — in one piece. If my memory still serves me correctly, marshals Zhukov, Chuikov and Konev were leading the advancing Russian armies. The three started a bet that needlessly ended up costing the lives of thousands — and primarily their own men. All three of them were after the glory that would be had if they were the first to march on Berlin—most importantly before the Americans — and thereby go down in history as the marshal that conquered the Reich's capital. This bet was absolutely unnecessary, especially considering the fact that the Germans had at that point already hopelessly lost the war. But history unfortunately has endless accounts of generals making just such inhumane bets.

The march started becoming ever more arduous and the numbers of those with foot ailments ever larger. Hunger and thirst were weighing down on our strength, especially among the old and the weak. More and more men began to fall back and no one knew where the march would end or how long the path before us was. In the extreme case, we would be marched all the way to Russia. Many of us had been there before, but under different circumstances.

A few rows in front of us, an infantry man with a backpack fell to the ground. One could tell that he hadn't been doing well, repeatedly seen swaying and falling back. After a short while he had fallen back to our row and we were able to talk to him. He told us that he was an engineer and came from Vienna. He asked us to help him as we marched, since he was no longer

able to go on alone.

We could tell that he was afraid; afraid of falling further and further behind in the column and afraid of eventually facing an uncertain fate. We eyed his backpack, excepting it to hold all sorts of goodies, which later would turn out to be the case. After about an hour he allowed us to reach into his backpack and pull out some things for him and for ourselves. The bag was full of food, emergency provisions and canned goods. It certainly turned our assistance into a delicious affair. We hauled him all the way up to end of the march — in a barracks in Frankfurt on the Oder, which we reached by dusk. The entire marching column was then divided into different quarters, in the order it arrived. The engineer from Vienna ended up in the same quarters as the two of us. By the next day, we had emptied the backpack of its treasures. Our encounter had turned into a win-win situation for all parties involved: the engineer from Vienna was able to reach the barracks and we got a share of his provisions. The next day, he reported his foot troubles and was sent to a medical station. We never saw him again.

We remained at this barracks until the 3rd of May, 1945. In the time that followed, we were able to recover a bit from the previous exertion and were given bread and watery soup daily. Those that were ill were sorted out and the entire troupe was reorganized and prepared for the relocation in cargo trucks. Our final destination was still anyone's guess.

Early in the morning on our last day at the barracks, the relocation in the cargo trucks began, much in the same manner as all relocations - with strife and brutality. Reinhold and I were luckily put together in the same cargo truck. We drove out through the destroyed neighborhoods of Frankfurt on the Oder and over a provisionary bridge built by the Russians over the Oder River and towards the east. The city had been almost com-

pletely destroyed. We slowly started to realize, as we passed over the river, that our chances of escape were becoming slimmer. We began passing by Polish military units wearing their funny hats. We also decided that it would be best not approach the Polish unless need be, for they looked even grimmer than the Russians.

The drive to Zielenzig in former Silesia was more unpleasant than enjoyable in that rickety cargo truck. Once we arrived in Zielenzig, we were put into an encampment that, at first sight, made quite a daunting impression. It was a barracks formerly belonging to the German military, now surrounded by barbed wire and turned into a transit station for prisoners of war. Upon our arrival, we were immediately separated into different sections of the encampment. The rooms were completely bare and we were forced to sleep cramped together on the floor — though this was an improvement over sleeping in an open field. A sort of group captain was assigned to each of the rooms, who was responsible for maintaining discipline and distributing bread. Our captain was supposedly a concentration camp escapee, who was such an appalling person that not even the Russians were willing to recognize him as 'political'. Nonetheless, he managed to adapt to the new situation and got himself promoted to a preferred position. The encampment was noticeably well-organized and one could tell that thousands of prisoners had passed through its walls in the past days and weeks.

All the members of the permanent crew were wearing German uniforms. A red-white-red cockade could be seen on their caps and they wore armbands of the same color. I myself couldn't make anything of the colors and later was told that they were Austrian anti-fascists that had been conscripted into the German military and had later landed in the hands of the Russians. They now stood for an independent Austria, free of Germany, free of

fascism and free of Hitler. I was quite astounded to discover this since I had for years served in the same unit with other Austrians but had never met an anti-fascist. That also meant that there were professionals among them who would soon begin the process of our ideological restructuring. Posters had already been hung up in the barracks, listing the dates and subjects of the reeducation training. But of course our thoughts were on our other, more important matters, such as food and care, rather than on our spiritual restructuring. It reminded me of a quote from Berthold Brecht, which was banned during the war, but which we would sometimes read under cover: "A hungry man has no conscience."

At the encampment, we were provided with food and drink on a regular basis, though not quite enough to satisfy the required amount of calories. Hunger was always a present state and was the primary concern of our existence. We were given bread once a day and some warm soup of varying consistencies around midday — mostly soup with cabbage or potatoes. It was the first time that I became acquainted with bread made of cornmeal. It was somewhat yellow in color and had a bitter taste. Our cell captain was in charge of giving us our bread. Two assistants were additionally assigned to his side to make sure that he wasn't cheating in the distribution. The passing out of the bread came to resemble a religious ceremony; the entire group of men would assemble in a circle, eyes staring critically, ready to voice opposition, should their piece of the prized bread seem but a half a millimeter too small.

Other than during the food distribution, which of course no one would miss for their lives, we would spend the rest of our time strolling about the encampment. I estimate that there were approximately 3,000 to 4,000 men put up in that barracks. Due to the good organization on the part of the Russians, the mood

among the prisoners was relatively open and optimistic. Reinhold and I once went to a meeting that was taking place in the open air. One of the men with the Austrian armbands was standing on a pedestal in the middle of the yard, giving a heated speech about socialism, which would soon to break out at home and also about those that we had fought against (whom he, ironically, had also fought against, since he was, after all, wearing a German uniform). In response to our questions regarding our fate, we were told: off to Russia for reeducation, some light manual labor, good food and most likely a quick return home. That didn't sound too bad. The mood of those listening immediately went from good to elated. But I had my doubts — such an easy escape from everything that we had seen and done didn't seem possible. The man seemed to me an opportunist, speaking of food and accommodation, yet not himself believing a word of it. When he was finished, a song was sung, „Brüder zur Sonne, zur Freiheit, Brüder zum Lichte empor". Almost everyone was familiar with the melody, but no one knew the socialist words and some began to sing along, shouting Nazi lyrics at the top of their lungs: „Brüder in Zechen und Gruben, Brüder wohl hinter dem Pflug" and so on. It was a complete embarrassment.

The urge to flee still hadn't subsided, even though the likelihood of doing so was becoming less and less possible. Our distance from home was growing with each passing day and the political conditions around us were becoming less favorable. We were now in the territory that was under Polish control. We started seeing more and more men wearing Polish uniforms through the fence of the encampment. But despite all that, we continued planning our escape and searching for weaknesses in the system that would make it possible. We discussed distances, the question of provisions, camouflage, and river crossings. But, in reality, it was just a bunch of fantasizing and dreaming; we

hadn't the slightest idea of what it was like beyond the barbed wire. We were also completely uninformed about the political situation and the current status of the war. Suddenly, on the morning of May the 8th, we received a decisive answer: "The war is over."

The mood of those around us turned euphoric. The watchmen had already begun drinking and were in the best of spirits. Some of them shot their pistols and machine guns into the air. The area outside of the encampment also came to life. From our vantage point, we could see that some Polish people had already settled into a few of the surrounding homes. Music was being playing from the houses and the people were shooting flare guns and rockets into the air. Some took to the streets, singing and dancing. The Russian forces, which had, up to that point, been scarce around the barracks, marched around the encampment and were visibly very proud of their accomplishments. They yelled out over and over:

"Vayna kapuuut (vayna means war), Berlin kapuuut – Gitler kapuuut (they couldn't pronounced the 'h' and replaced it with a 'g'), Gimmler kapuuut, alle Friiitzy kapuuut."

Those who didn't understand what they were yelling simply thought that everything was somehow kaput (broken). With 'kaput' the Russians actually meant 'done' or 'finished'. For lunch that day we were given a somewhat thicker soup – there were even some pieces of meat in it. Some claimed that they recognized it as being horse meat, but the rest of us didn't really care. And this time it was actually the last piece of meat that I was to have for the next three and a half years.

One evening, two or three days later, we were instructed to prepare to march out the next morning. We were woken up at the break of dawn and instructed to make our way to the barracks yard for counting and for placement into our rows of five. The

funeral procession got under way again and started off towards the south. None of us knew where we were heading and the most far-fetched rumors began to surface once again. I was able to establish which direction we were marching based on the position of the sun, but didn't recognize anything in the immediate surroundings. We marched through towns that had also suffered through some of the battles of the war, but weren't nearly as badly damaged as the locales around Berlin. We could see that there were still a number of German residents in the areas we passed through, but also mixed bag of other peoples that war had resettled. Many Polish immigrants had also moved into the houses previously inhabited by Germans, as we determined from the language they spoke to each other in.

Later that afternoon it was clear where we were: Sternberg/ Silesia, a small provincial city with a train station. Once we arrived, we were divided and put into various train cars, passenger cars with real seats. Of course not everyone was able to get a seat and that led to bitter fighting among the prisoners. Reinhold and I managed to grab spots on a bench. As anyone could have foreseen, the weak ones ended up sitting on the floor, in the aisles, on the platforms and on the toilets. Once again, we had no idea where we were heading. The one thing that we were able to determine was that we were going east.

I can't quite remember if the trip lasted one or two days. During the trip, we were able to establish, by way of the land features, that we were headed in the direction of Posen. We arrived at the Posen train station and disembarked. (I should mention that during the entire train ride, we weren't given one single bite to eat, just some water every now and then.) We were unloaded, put back into our rows of five and marched off to an encampment outside of the city. There was a clinic at the train station for those that were no longer able to march. There were

some that had to be carried away on stretchers. We assumed that there were also dead among us. Everyone was hoping for some food and drink upon arrival at the encampment but our hopes turned into bitter disappointments. By the time everyone had been counted and divided into groups, the day was over. Not everyone could be accommodated in the barracks and hundreds of us had to sleep on the ground between the barracks buildings. Reinhold and I also ended up in one of the groups that had to camp out in the open.

Food was finally given out for the first time on the next morning. We were marched to the mess area — a huge complex of buildings made of brick and wood. We made our way past counters where a pre-measured ladle full of soup and a piece of bread were given out. Most of the prisoners ate their soup on the way back to their seats and some had even finished their bread by the time that they had returned. The organization began to improve with time. We were given food at regular intervals, albeit much too little in quantity and in nutritional value for the maintenance of a healthy person, even one not required to do any work.

During the day there was nothing to do to pass the time other than wait for the next meal. We spent the hours getting acquainted with our new surroundings and, of course, further working out the plans for our escape. It was clear to us that the task had now gotten much more difficult on account of our increased distance from home. I presume that there were somewhere between 100,000 and 120,000 men in the encampment, and was told that it had at times seen as many as 180,000 men. Those working as watchmen, wards and kitchen personnel were people from Hungary, Romania, Austria and even defected Germans that had been captured early on.

After a few days we started noticing that some men were being singled out and taken away, most not coming back. They were

mostly men that had served in the SS or other Nazi organizations. They were easily recognizable on account of their uniforms and were also identified by snitches. Some of the men singled out, however, were also civilians. Towards the end of the war, many party officials had taken on civilian attire and gone into hiding. For this reason, there was a certain mistrust that formed towards all those in civilian attire. I also started gaining attention, making the situation increasingly risky for me. The fact that I had disposed of my soldbuch before my capture was now coming back to haunt me; I was no longer able to legitimate myself.

It was just my luck then that I came into discussion with a man while at the latrine who wanted to have my civilian clothing. Apparently he had a document, which stated that he was forced into the German uniform during the early stages of the war against his will, thus freeing him of guilt and perhaps even imprisonment. It didn't take me long to make up my mind—we exchanged clothing right then and there at the latrine. Luckily, none of the men around me noticed that I had changed: firstly because I still wore my camouflage jacket and secondly because everyone in our group already knew that Reinhold and I were actually soldiers in civilian attire. Now I was simply back in uniform and my buddy was still dressed as a civilian.

A few days later, I read a poster hung up in the encampment that called upon any who were willing and felt themselves strong enough to chop wood were to come to a given location at a certain time. I decided to go and was chosen to do the work among those that had shown up. We were to report to the wood area next to the kitchen at the break of dawn the next day. The wood chopping unit consisted of about 20 men; six of us were new and had come in to replace those that were discharged from the work. The captain was a prisoner who had been around for a long time

and he oversaw the work. We were given the choice between splitting wood and sawing. I chose to split wood, received an ax and was sent to a large chopping block. The wood would first be sawed from a fallen tree by the other brigade and sent over to my brigade. After about an hour, I started regretting my decision to sign up for this task. But it was too late by then and I couldn't even slow down without getting yelled at by the captain. The work went on until about midnight, at which point we finally received what we had all been waiting for: food. The captain gathered all of our cookware and came back with the pots full of a thick soup, at which point the feeding orgy began. This time, those that didn't get their fill were allowed to get seconds. The newbies among us were of course the ones with the largest appetites. In addition to food, we also were given black tea to drink. By this point my mood had changed right around and I was again glad about having been chosen for the task.

But this was only a break and after an hour we went back to work. It was now my turn to saw, which wasn't any easier than the splitting had been. We had trim saws at our disposal for the work, known as Saxony saws back at home. It was a two-person saw, so we were assigned a partner, whose abilities and strength we were then dependent on. This meant that when the work wasn't going that smoothly, the one man would blame the other and vice-versa and it wasn't easy finding a capable partner in the first place. But the promise of a filling meal later on helped motivate us to do the work efficiently. Now and then we got a break of ten minutes, during which we were able to drink tea or water. I can still remember how the sky in the east would slowly begin to change colors as the morning set it. It was the sign that our work would soon be over for the night.

The nights were short and the weather remained pleasant. May was coming to an end and June was before us. The whole work

night lasted about eight hours. In the morning, at about 6 o'clock, we were given the same meal that we had received at midnight and we all stuffed ourselves to the brink once again. Before we were released, we were even permitted to fill our cookware with a last portion of soup to take back with us, everything having been prepared in the kitchen. But we weren't given any bread. The wood that we had been chopped that night was enough to last for a day. Ten to twenty trees were brought in daily by other newbies on trucks.

A small barracks kitchen stood in a building directly next to the wood chopping area. One day I ran into a man from my home region who was named Stolz aus dem Bühlertal. He was one of those that had been here for a longer time and had been employed in the kitchen for a long while. He was kind enough to give me an extra piece of cookware that he filled with soup that I could bring back for Reinhold. The soup was always cold and had the consistency of jelly, but at the time we weren't picky and ate everything and anything that we could get our hands on. Reinhold and I were forced to eat our meals as covertly as possible, for once news was out that someone had food, they would immediately be surrounded by half-hungered men who would come begging, sometimes even turning violent.

I usually spent the day following a work shift sleeping and would even miss the food distribution, except when bread was also being given out. By the late afternoon, I was again able to participate in the normal encampment life.

And so went my repetitive daily existence. Now and then a group of us would meet and discuss our escape plans. We had heard rumors of other prisoners that managed to escape, but no one could say where or when or how. One day we came to realize that at the other end of the encampment, men were being gathered for relocation to Russia. This put further pressure on

those that wanted to flee, since a successful escape would only be possible here, within the former German territories, and would be out of the question once inside Russia. From within the encampment we watched as the dead were transported off each day. Most of the time, the bodies were piled on top of two large push carts that were driven along by other prisoners. The carts were usually piled high and sometimes bodies would be hanging off the sides of the carts, and limbs would dangle down through the gaps in the floor. It was a morbid haul providing a grim picture of reality, one which would be replayed in the news reports about the prisoner of war camps after the war.

By our estimates, somewhere between 40 and 60 dead would be hauled off each day, which wasn't surprising considering the unhygienic conditions of the camp and the low morale of the prisoners. In addition to the dead or dying, there were also many injured men among us.

One day, about two weeks into my new job as a wood chopper, I came down with a fever. I was sent to the clinic with a 38 degree temperature. Determining whether or not a prisoner was ill was a very straight forward process: the temperature would be taken and if it was above 38 then the prisoner was deemed ill and if it was below 38, he was deemed healthy, unless of course other injuries were clearly visible. I was diagnosed with 'angina' and sent to the sick bay, which was filled to the brim with other sick or wounded prisoners. There were two men to every bed, laying head to foot, horrid conditions for aiding in recovery. There were plenty of medics but not nearly enough medicine, no bandages, dirty bed sheets, little food, bugs, lice, and no hygienic facilities. The only thing that could be regarded as positive was the roof over our heads. Owing to the poor conditions, the prisoners weren't being treated very consistently; the patients were given warm soup and bread three times a

day and were able to rest, but that was all. A ward round was done regularly, consisting of a group of male and female doctors of varying nationalities that would go through the barracks and perform their checks. Patients that were deathly ill or about to die were taken away and those that weren't tough enough or were critically ill had few chances of survival.

I believe that about two weeks passed before I was released from the sick bay. Apparently I overcame my illness on my own without any real assistance. On account of my absence, I had lost my post in the wood chopping brigade and there wasn't going to be the possibility of joining again anytime soon. But I was probably too weak to resume the work at that point as it was. Upon leaving the sick bay I came into a different unit and the first thing I did was find Reinhold Pannek. During my leave, he had also found a way of trading in his civilian clothing for a soldier's uniform, albeit a pretty lousy one. Other than that, nothing had changed in the barracks. New prisoners had come and old prisoners had been transported off. Due to the sheer size of the entire complex, it wasn't possible to get an overview of what was going on and there was no recognizable semblance of a system. Reports and rumors persistently swirled around the encampment, but their credibility could not be verified. Everyone technically had the freedom to fantasize and pick out what 'facts' he liked most to tell others.

After surviving my episode in the sick bay and losing my spot in the wood chopping brigade, I decided to volunteer as a potato peeler. The amount of potatoes that were necessary to feed the huge amount of people passing through the transit station was enormous. This dilemma had been solved by the Russians in the following way: Not far from the kitchen complex they had built wooden bleachers with a roof like those at a football stadium. About 15 peelers could fit on each of the rows, totaling

150 men on the 10 rows. Channels, which were actually detached roof gutters, had been installed onto the front of each row, having a slight decline from left to right. The rows were filled with prisoners, each receiving a relatively sharp knife for peeling, and guarded by watchmen.

The potatoes were brought in from the kitchen by other helpers and dumped into the top of the channels. The peelers would reach a hand down and pick up a potato for peeling and push peeled potatoes along the channel to the next men and the peeled potatoes ended up in baskets at the bottom of the channels. When the working day was over, each of us got a ladle-full of soup, the rows were cleared, the knives were diligently collected and we were dismissed. Peeling only happened in the late evening, since the kitchen was in operation at night. Now and then someone would try to eat one of the raw potatoes, but even our advanced level of hunger made this rather impossible. Potatoes belong to the nightshade family (solanaceae) of plants and are only edible when cooked. There is a certain substance, called solanine, found within the plant that can lead to poisoning and is only broken down through cooking.

One morning at the beginning of August, our daily head count was particularly ceremonious and some Russian officers were even in attendance. The names of the prisoners were read off from a list and carefully checked. If nothing objectionable was on record, each man was called out and sorted into a column. Once a certain number of men had been sorted, one of the Russians shouted, “march out!” As usual, no one was sure where we were going. Rumors began surfacing right away, and our collective gut feeling was generally negative. The marching column was led around the encampment, through the main gate and — as assumed — directly to the Posen train station. I was still familiar with the way, having traveled it just three months

back. Due to the suddenness of the relocation, I wasn't able to exchange any words with Reinhold. His group wasn't sorted into this transport and he had to stay behind.

A freight train was waiting for us on a free tack some ways away from the train station when we arrived. We were taken to the train, separated into appropriate numbers at each car, and then told to board. We didn't have the opportunity to talk with other men and remain with those we knew this time. Rows were loaded on to the trains according to the order in which they had arrived and most groups of acquaintances got separated. This of course didn't all happen automatically and the group had to be forced along by the watchmen, guided with yelling, gun butt, kicks and punches. We were kept on a short leash and the watchmen appeared to be nervous. They were probably well aware, through previous experience, that some of the 'passengers' would attempt to make use of an emergency situation to escape, rather than face their uncertain fate in Russia.

The transport was carried out by those notorious livestock train cars, in which 50 to 60 men were packed. Along the inside walls of the cars, decks had been built in to accommodate about 12 men a piece. Once again, intense fighting broke out among the prisoners, everyone wanting to get the best spot. This was resolved by the rule of force. I was able to fight my way into a spot in one of the top bunks, which had two advantages: firstly, being that I was able to look outside through a small window in the wall; secondly, I was far away from the latrine on the other side of the car. The struggle for the best spots, especially the ones near the floor, lasted for hours. Those of us on the uppers bunks managed to settle the matter quickly between ourselves. We received a portion of soup around midday and then some dry bread in the late afternoon. We asked the Russians on duty where we were heading and they answered, quite amicably,

"Skoro-domoy – skoro domoy!" meaning "Soon home – soon home!"

After everyone had finally settled in, we were able to get a look at our fellow car occupants. The men were from all corners of Germany and from various arms of the military. Every age group was also represented and no one could figure out the reasoning for this particular assembly of prisoners. There were even men of retirement age — likely captured from the local militia — as well as school boys, who were probably part of the Hitler Youth or conscripted in the last months of the war to fill anti-aircraft posts. The physical conditions of the men were also about as varied as their origins. One older man on my deck said to me at one point, "If I were as healthy as you, I wouldn't have any worries on my mind; but I'm falling from the stock." I haven't forgotten those words to this day. What he said foreshadowed what would soon become reality. He made it the Volga River, and one night, about half way through the trip, somewhere in the middle of Russia, he passed away without further comment.

Thoughts of escaping never left the forefront of our minds, and when we confronted new comrades, we always had to feel them out to be sure of their intentions, which wasn't always easy since mistrust was ever present. In a relatively short course of time, our lives changed from the hands of a dictatorship under Hitler to a dictatorship under Stalin and the ground beneath our feet was unfamiliar and full of surprises.

At one point the train made a stop and the Russians set up a field kitchen along the embankment of the railway. Water had been given out over the course of the whole afternoon and the medical staff could be observed hard at work. There were certainly plenty of men who were trying to escape the transport by reporting their real or feigned illnesses. Based on the length of the trains, I estimate that between 3,000 and 4,000 men were being taken away.

Counts were carried out and lists cross checked into the evening, as some cars had to be re-emptied and the men counted anew. Once dusk had set in, soup was distributed and shortly thereafter the doors of the train cars were shut and the train set off again to the east. The date must have been somewhere around the 11th of August.

I never laid eyes on Reinhold Pannek again after that day. I later learned of his fate from his parents, whom I had gotten into contact with once I returned home; the letter I've attached below.

Since it was written in an older style of handwriting that could prove difficult for the younger reader to decipher, I've had it printed out with a modern font and taken out an extra page to display it.

Letter from the Pannek family, September 24, 1948

My dear Mr. Hauger!
You must certainly have been a good friend to our son Reinhold Pannek, since, even after four long years of misery in Russia, you still have him in your memories. Reinhold is no longer able to write you, my friend. We received the following message from three independent sources – one from Wurzburg, one from Vienna, and one from Silesia – all from former comrades, pertaining to Reinhold's fate: Reinhold attempted an escape from the encampment in Posen with one of his fellow prisoners. As Reinhold advanced away from the barracks, his counterpart got stuck behind and Reinhold returned to help. Upon returning, however, he was spotted by the guards and shot dead. This was the message from those three men. You can probably image how shocked we were to receive the news. And it is probably also understandable that we are always overjoyed to receive any words about Reinhold from his former comrades. So please do tell us all that you know about him. The misfortune in Posen took place on the 17th of August. Where did you see Reinhold for the last time and where did you two part ways? Although we know that there is little chance that your words can give us further hopes for seeing him again, we would still cherish every word about Reinhold you write. Our son, who we knew to be a happy and good-natured young man, always remains in our thoughts and through the accounts of his comrades we are told that we was also a good and dependable friend. We now live with the pain and mourning that has descended into our hearts. Please write us back soon. Thank you again for your card.

Sincere Regards,

W.A. Pannek and Frau
Göttingen, Rohnsweg 13

Sortiment

des Theater- und Musikverlages W. A. Pannek, Göttingen

Rohnsweg 13 · Fernsprech-Anschluß Nr. 4573
Postscheckkonto: Hannover Nr. 43680
Bankkonto: Städtische Sparkasse zu Göttingen
Registrierungsurkunde Nr. P/0025 S

(20b) Göttingen, 24. Sept. 194[illegible]

Mein lieber Herr Kauger!

Sie müssen meinen Sohne Reinhold Pannek ein guter Freund gewesen sein, denn nach 4 Jahre langem Elend in Rußland erinnern Sie sich seiner. Reinhold kann Ihnen nicht mehr schreiben, mein guter Freund. Von drei Kameraden, einer unabhängig von dem anderen – aus Würzburg, aus Wien, aus Schlesien – erhielten wir über Reinhold die gleichlautende Nachricht: Im Lager Posen versuchte Reinhold mit einem älteren Kameraden einen Fluchtversuch aus dem Lager. Während Reinhold schon gut raus war, blieb der andere Kamerad hängen. Daraufhin ging Reinhold noch einmal zurück, um dem Kameraden zu helfen – sind bei diesem Werk wurde er vom Posten erschossen. So lauten die Nachrichten. Sie können sich denken, guter Freund, wie erschüttert wir gewesen sind bei dieser Nachricht. Und es ist wohl

begreiflich, daß wir auch heute noch
jedes Wort über Reinhold aus seiner
Kameraden Munde als eine Wohltat
empfinden. Bitte schreiben Sie uns
wann Sie von Reinhold wissen. Das Unglück
in Posen (Lager) ereignete sich am 17. August.
Wann waren Sie mit Reinhold zuletzt zu-
sammen und wo sind Sie mit ihm
auseinandergekommen. Obwohl wir
kaum Hoffnung haben, daß uns durch
Ihre Nachricht ein Hoffnungsstrahl
kommen kann, ist jedes Wort für
uns von Wert. Immer und immer
denken wir an diesen guten und
fröhlichen Jobs - und wie alle Ka-
meraden schreiben, soll er auch jedem,
der ihn kannte, ein guter, treuer -
lässiger Freund gewesen sein. Es ist
ein großer Jammer in unser Herz
gekommen. Schreiben Sie uns doch
bitte bald. - Mit vielem Dank für
Ihre Karte grüßen wir sie herzlich.
Ihr A. Pannek und Frau
(20b) Göttingen, Rohnsweg 13.

The Journey to Russia – August/September 1945

The train had been rolling along for a mere ten minutes when the first stop took place. We could hear the watchmen and the engine crew yelling from inside. It seemed that one last inspection was being undertaken in preparation for the long trip before us. I tried to have a look to see what was going on through my thin window slit but was unable to get a good view. I tried to piece together what I could, based on the sounds I heard. Some of the men in the car had fallen sleep due to exhaustion, others were still fighting over their sleeping places and some weren't able to fall asleep and were talking quietly to one another about various things. There were even some men that had begun to eat their emergency provisions, mostly just dry bread. After about a half an hour the train began to move forward again. We still had no idea what the final destination was.

The train steamed on through Poland. I no longer know how long it took us to reach Brest-Litowsk and we were later told that the Russians would rush their transports through Poland as quickly as possible. There were still tensions raging at the end of the war between the Poles and the Russians and the main border areas between the two countries were still full of Polish guerrilla soldiers who were fighting for an independent Poland.

The train made a stop each time the sun would rise; sometimes at a train station and sometimes simply on the track. We completely lost all sense of time and accustomed ourselves to judging the time of day by the position of the sun. During the stops we were allowed to leave the car under watch of the guards and answer nature's call. Some did their business under the cars, some next to the cars and some along the railway embankment.

For a passer-by, the scene of mass bladder and bowel-emptying couldn't have been a pretty one, also considering the fact that little importance was placed on hygiene. I could tell that the area had been visited by other transports, as their remains were still to be seen on the ground, which slowly disappeared with sunlight, wind and rain.

The watchmen were on their guard and kept a close eye on us; it seemed that they still considered escape attempts a real threat. After relieving ourselves, we were given rations of soup, water and dry bread. Upon returning to the train we were once again counted. In cases of doubt, we all had to exit the car and be recounted anew. Being that the Ivans all had the tendency to count aloud, I was able to count to a hundred in Russian by the time we crossed the border out of Poland. Many times after we had been counted and reloaded we would have to wait around for hours until a track was free again and the train could move on. At one point, the medical staff came around to inspect our state of health. There were also women on the staff and some even held the title 'doctor'. Now and then some very basic medicine would be administered, such as charcoal tablets to help against diarrhea.

Once we arrived in Brest-Litowsk, the train had to be switched over to the standard Russian track gauge, which was wider than the European, after which we continued on in the direction of Russia. In 1939, Hitler and Stalin met and negotiated new borders in Eastern Europe. Brest-Litowsk was set as the western edge of Russia despite the fact that a third of the lands east of the new border had been former Polish territory and the population, in 1945, was made up primarily of Poles. The morning light show in the sky, which I described earlier on, played itself out every morning, though at different times, up until the end of our journey.

Another tedious matter was when the transport would stand around at a secondary train station or on a dead track for a full 24 hours. Waiting for such long periods was significantly less comfortable and tolling on our nerves than when the train was moving. After about 14 days, we reached the region of Kursk, which was recognized by some on board who were familiar with features in the Russian countryside. This further proved that the news channels between the train cars were functioning well despite the strict surveillance by the watchmen. When something noteworthy occurred or a report was heard, the entire train would be aware of it by the following stop.

At one point we were waiting around in a large train switch yard, when a train full of ill German prisoners stopped on the track next to us. We were able to communicate to each other through hand gestures and shouts, though the watchmen tried to stop us. The ill prisoners in the other train looked horrible: they were visibly emaciated and lay on their bunks with hollowed out eyes. Not one of them seemed able to walk and they were being treated by Russian and German medical staff. Someone got information that the transport was headed back to Germany. This encounter had the effect of instilling a great fear into the rest of us, as we figured it to be a sign of what was in store for us. On the other hand, seeing that those Germans were headed home also gave us hope. Up until that point we had assumed that the Russians would never actually let us go back. Or, at least not for a long time, since we figured that the rebuilding of Russia would take years, if not decades.

After travelling for about two weeks, we had finally reached the middle of Russia. Our route took us through Gomel, along the northern edge of the Ukraine—areas that a few years back had been under German occupation and had suffered heavily from the battles. There were red banners hanging from all the

train stations we passed, which slowly piqued my interested in the Cyrillic alphabet. One of the older men in our car was from Bessarabia, which belonged to Russia before the First World War. He was from a German emigrant family that lived there and thus was pretty good at Russian and served as the interpreter and captain for our car. He obliged me in my request to be taught the Cyrillic alphabet, which wasn't actually all that difficult. Along the next leg of our journey, I was able to read out various signs and words we came across and often even got a general understanding of what they said, partly due to the fact that the Russian language has a large number of words that originate from German and from Latin. I often also encountered many German loan words, whose pronunciation was imitated in Cyrillic.

There was one particular inscription that made a lasting impression on me (in order to make it easier to read, I reproduce it here using the Latin alphabet rather than the Cyrillic): "Smyert nemetzkim occupantam." Once the interpreter had informed me that 'smyert' translated as 'dead', the rest wasn't hard to figure out; "Death to the German Occupants." That didn't seem an invitation for a nice summer holiday.

We were able to make out the areas around Kursk with some certainty, but soon entered into unknown regions. We were making our way out of the areas that had experienced the war and into areas where no German soldier had previously set foot, visible by the fact that the towns and villages were intact and unscathed. This allowed us to somewhat orient ourselves; but our exact location and our heading still remained a mystery. Some believed, according to cardinal direction, that we were moving in the direction of Siberia. The watchmen didn't give us any information — they probably themselves didn't even know exactly where we were going.

After our third week in Russia, the first prisoners started to die. The old man, whom I had previously mentioned, was the first to go in our car. Here I should intervene and say that, given my age at the time, I considered people that were 40 or 45 old already. We also heard other rumors of deaths from the neighboring train cars during our water breaks. Exact numbers were unknown but, according to my estimates, one or two of the weaker men had died from each car in the train. Our mood was growing more and more miserable from day to day. A certain hopelessness and pessimism had started to spread.

So was the course of daily events during our trip towards the East. We began seeing small villages with houses made of wood, which looked completely strange to us. We also observed the locals working in the fields using, for us, very primitive tools. They were harvesting cucumbers and melons, as well as cabbage and carrots. It all seemed to have a somewhat Asian feel to it, though we hadn't even crossed the Volga yet.

Around the end of the fourth week, we reached the train station in Saratov, at the Volga. The train waited around for a whole day, during which news started to circulate that this was our end station. We could also tell from the way the Russians were acting that something important would occur here.

And our assumptions ended up being correct; the following morning, the usual round of yelling and commotion got under way. The Ivans were giving commands and running all over the place. Their orders, it seemed, hadn't been very clear. It also wasn't known who, if anyone, was in charge. We had experienced this situation many times before and were amazed by the flood of cursing and the general chaos that accompanied it. In the end, there was order to the chaos after all: Trucks started arriving after a while, and the prisoners from the front of the train were loaded on, during which surveillance was intensified.

The endless counting and recounting of the train occupants also got under way. Some men with lists, on which some of our names had already been entered, appeared. The Russian had the custom of addressing a person by his first, and his father's first name, which was foreign to us. In Russia, the father's name would be passed on to the son. Someone with the name 'Ivan Petrovich Ronanov' would have had a father named 'Petro'. We were in the middle of the train and were unloaded at around midday, and the actual imprisonment on Russian soil began.

The Stay in Saratov/Engels - September - October - November 1945

About 25 men were put on each of the transport trucks. We noticed right away that all of the trucks were of American origin. The drivers were men with daunting appearances who were referred to as 'shofyor' by the soldiers and who were shown a great deal of respect. They were considered 'specialists' and had a high position in the Russian hierarchy, a fact that they were themselves well aware of. Driving on the Russian roads could certainly be considered an artistic undertaking; they were far from anything that we would even begin calling roads back at home. The word 'shofyor' came from the French word 'chauffeur' and had been Russianized.

The truck drove a wide semicircle around the center of the town Saratov. The Volga River was on the eastern side of the town and we crossed over quickly. We were now on the western side of the Volga, which, as far as we were concerned, was the official beginning of Siberia. After crossing the bridge, we drove about 2 kilometers upriver and came to an imprisonment camp that had been built directly on the banks. Other than a single farm building, everything else at the camp was out in the open.

Once we had disembarked from the trucks, each man was allotted a certain spot on the field and the allotment followed roughly in the order with which we exited the trains. Everyone was then counted and checked off from the list. Our group captain was still the man from Bessarabia, who spoke the best Russian out of all of us. We then laid ourselves down on the field and waited around for food to be given out. The weather on that day was sunny and warm — but the approaching autumn could already be felt.

In the evening, everyone received 600 grams of bread and some

black tea (chay). The Russians would shout, "Shessot gramm chleba," at every given opportunity, as though an incantation. Six hundred grams was also the amount of bread that the Russian civilians were given.

We spent the night out on the field and, the next morning, word got out that there hadn't yet been any soup cauldrons installed in the kitchen, only cauldrons for making tea. Our mood hit rock bottom again. The encampment personnel dragged out the open tea cauldron at some point. Handymen were requested from among the prisoners and the cauldrons were walled in. We continued waiting for the warm soup that we supposed would be distributed. Instead, we were all taken down to the banks of the Volga in the late afternoon and were told we could bathe. It was the first time that water had touched my skin since I was captured in April. Soap, of course, was not provided.

The Russian bread we were given was dark, moist and heavy – not at all comparable to our bread back at home. From the outside it looked just like one of our own pan loaves: it was baked in a metal baking pan and also carried the name kochbrot. Another problem was that the Russian bread lacked the appropriate amount of flour, due to the fact that the agricultural sector had not yet gotten back into full swing since the end of the war. Our hunger steadily grew and all eyes were glued to the kitchen building—all conversation revolving around food. We complained about the Russians' lack of organization and about the slow pace with which everything was carried out. The Russians had a very different conception of time than we were used to. Our questions were always answered in the same way: "Skoro budyet" – "have patience, it'll come."

By the third day, we had still only been given bread and tea. I was lying around with some comrades—who I now no longer remember – near the encampment fence. Behind the barbed wire

ran a rampart, along which flowed a busy steam of pedestrian traffic—residents from the town who were either making their way to work or coming home.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of something dropping to the ground behind me. I crawled over to where the sound had come from and saw what it was: A piece of bread. This food drop would repeat itself every now and then — usually a piece of bread, but sometimes an apple or a piece of squash or melon. The others quickly rushed over and soon, fights began for the thrown scraps of food. We tried to keep it a secret, but it wasn't long before the other prisoners caught wind of it. The whole group pressed itself up against the fence and a tussle would ensue every time something was tossed over. I knew that it wouldn't be long before the Ivans also noticed what was going on and made their way over. And sure enough, on the next day the whole thing came to an end. The passers-by were kept at a distance, our freedom of movement was restricted, and a wide clearing between the prisoners and the fence was made and closely watched. Our supplementary source of nutrition disappeared as quickly as it had appeared for reasons of our own doing.

This, for me, was then another prime example of the goodnaturedness of the Russians, especially among the women. Those that had passed by were primarily women, for the men had either fallen in the war or were still at work in the fields. Such an act of charity aimed at defeated war prisoners would have been, in my opinion, unthinkable back at home in Germany, especially during the times of Hitler. It was incomprehensible to me considering all the destruction that the German military had caused in Russia and all the hate that came along with the war. But their charity was a reality and I began to come to terms with the idea.

We never found out whether or not the kitchen was completed. After the fifth or sixth day at the encampment, we received the

order to get ready to march out. The usual ceremony commenced: shouting, arranging, rearranging, yelling, cursing, recounting and calling out of names until the mass would eventually begin to move ahead. We were on the eastern side of the Volga, on the so-called field-bank. The area was completely flat, unlike the Volga heights just across the river. We marched on through the outlying regions of the city of Engels, which had been the capital of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Republic until 1941. Out in an open field, not far from the edge of the city, lay the next encampment. It was a refitted water treatment plant, which hadn't been completed. There was a square water basin covered with a roof and outfitted with stacked bunks for sleeping. A kitchen had been built above ground at one of the sides of the basin. It was obvious that the encampment had already been used before, probably by Germans from Volga waiting to be transported off to Siberia or to Poland, or maybe even by captured German soldiers from the first years of the war. Hours went by until we were finally assigned our spots and everyone found a bunk. The next morning, we were given the soup we had been waiting for all this time and, the following day, we were assigned work on.

I would like to mention that not everyone from the train transport was taken to Engels, but only about 300 men in total. The rest of the men were taken from the train station at Saratov to other encampments in the town or to ones in the surrounding regions, one of which I would later get to know myself: the ball bearing factory with the nickname 'ball encampment'.

We were under the authority of the NKVD, which was the successor of Stalin's infamous OGPU, a police unit that could, in a very general sense, be compared to the German SS or Gestapo. The officers wore caps with a blue band on them and also had blue insignias and were therefore named 'the blue' by the prisoners.

After the morning soup, we were divided into work brigades. The division was done with some regard to a given prisoner's former profession. Handymen were the most sought-after and were also considered specialists in Russia. There existed a large number of professions in Germany that the Russians wouldn't even begin to regard as professions such as teachers, businessmen, administrators and waiters. Some specialists, like cooks, barbers, and medical workers, were assigned to office tasks and the rest of us were given a tool and sent off to work.

Each work brigade consisted of about ten men and a brigadier whom we were able to select from among ourselves. The Russians would intervene only if a brigade wasn't performing its tasks. The commander of our brigade was a former major from the German military but was treated exactly the same as anyone else. The whole group was composed of about ten brigades.

We were placed into our rows of five and made our way off to the steppes. After about an hour's march, we came to a trench that had an unknown origin and distance and had the task of extending it into the city. Heavy work tools such as wheelbarrows and crow bars were given to us at the work site. We were surrounded by watchmen who themselves took no part in the work. There was a Russian civilian with the title 'natshalnik' that was responsible for our work.

We worked on the embankment of the trench, using the shovels and spades we were given, and had to dig at certain angle. Each brigade was assigned a specific objective for the day that had to be fulfilled in order for the members of the brigade to receive their 600 grams of bread. Soup was brought in around noon and the whole working day lasted 8 hours. It was now the end of September and the work was starting to become arduous for many of the men. The autumn had set in, bringing with it morning and evening temperatures that were rather cold. Our bunks didn't have any

sheets or padding on them, so we were forced to sleep on bare wood, with a single blanket to cover ourselves. The food we were given was of little nutritional value and, after a short time, some of the men were too physically worn out to continue working. The medic had to manage with what few supplies he was given and constantly had his hands full. The Russians watched him untrustingly, presuming that sabotage and misdoings were going on behind the scenes of his work.

Some of the prisoners were so weak that they were even unable to leave their bunks. The most common ailments were diarrhea and hydropsy, in which the knuckles and ankles and even the face would swell and the skin would become taught and shiny. In the worst cases, the skin would tear open and water would drip out. As far as medicine was concerned, only grated coal was available to act against diarrhea. The medic was able to make the coal treatment himself, but was helpless to fight against the other illnesses.

Once October rolled around, we had our first dead. My brigade was working on the trench when, all of the sudden, we saw a dead prisoner being carried along past us towards the cemetery in the next village. Our major allowed us to go to the edge of the trench and pay our last respects to the fallen prisoner. The major also stood at the edge of the trench, with a sad look on his face, his right hand on his greasy officer cap. We stood there, deep in thought and contemplation over the loss. The major suggested that we sing the German dirge 'The Good Comrade', but the idea was rejected in general protest.

A few days later, the next dead were brought to the cemetery, but this time, no one left the trench to watch and work proceeded as if nothing had happened. The major stood alone at the edge of the trench with his hand on his cap and watched the sad procession pass.

The hygienic conditions at the encampment got worse from day to day. There was practically no water to be had for washing and the lice were becoming a plague. We had to spend our free time picking them out and squashing them in order to avoid being eaten alive. By this point, only about half of the prisoners were in a condition to do heavy labor and the rest had to remain on their bunks, some being assigned light tasks in or near the encampment. Our most serious problem was the fact that the bread distribution wasn't happening at regular intervals. Our brigadier was a strong and large man from Mannheim who ran a bakery back at home. He had become ill and was physically breaking down from day to day.

Around the middle of the month of October, on a day we had off from work, Russian winter clothing was brought to the encampment. Up until that point, we had been wearing our military uniforms. They were, of course, beyond dirty by then, ripped and full of lice, the degree of wear and tear being dependent on their condition at the beginning of our capture. The Russians gave us disposed of Red Army clothing consisting of a uniform, undergarments and laced shoes. The undergarments were made of coarse cotton and could be fastened with straps at the ankles, wrists and hips. Part of the uniform was some sort of shirt/jacket combination that was neither really a shirt nor a jacket, but which could be pulled over our heads like a sweater and also came over the pants. The Russians had a name for this strange article of clothing: 'Gimnastyorka'. We also received a winter jacket to wear over the clothes. Caps with ear warmers and pointed tops were given to us to protect our heads. It was with these same caps that the Russians would mockingly be portrayed on German posters and given the name 'Bolsheviki'. History ended up turning these posters into an ironic joke for us and the caps we made fun of were now practical articles

of clothing that we were glad to have to survive the winter.

In retrospect, I can no longer fathom that I wore my military shirt for an entire six months. By the time I finally took it off it looked like a spider web and was covered in dirt and grease and practically fell to pieces in my hands. The time was ripe for new clothing.

The first frost of the winter occurred just after we received our new clothes. The ground froze, some light snow fell to the earth and the temperature reached about negative ten degrees. As a consequence, our work on the trench had to be called off. My work brigade was divided up and sent to smaller groups in various parts of the encampment for work. One day, I was assigned to a brigade that was employed in a soap factory. Our task was to unload bones from a freight train onto an assembly line, which would carry them into a processing facility and out came a simple, smelly soap. There was only one Russian watchman present and he was usually lingering around elsewhere. We were under the authority of civilians and could therefore move around with some freedom. The work was strenuous, but we slowed it down to a snail's pace in order to save our energy. The natshalnik in the factory would often try to spur the work along by yelling, cursing or threats, but usually in vain. A few times we were also assigned the task of unloading coal from delivery trucks that would later be used to run the factory. The facility itself was completely outdated and old. It seemed that the now bygone war had led to the abandonment of maintenance and repairs.

There was a man in my brigade that came from the town of Jockgrim in the Rhineland-Palatinate and was, in military-speak, a specker, or 'half-soldier'. Years later, when I returned home, I paid him regular visits. He stayed the same person that he had been at encampment upon returning to civilian life and was never able to gain a real foothold in life, dying a few years later of

hydropsy. I don't wish to give his name here and will simply refer to him as the Palatinate. He was the first among us who sold his newly acquired lace-up shoes to a Russian for some bread and fish, after which he had to wear Russian galoshes that he received in trade and thereafter had trouble walking. More interestingly, he confided to me that he would sometimes slip away from his workplace and go begging for bread in the town. I have already mentioned the benevolence of the Russians before, but what I heard from him struck me as absolutely preposterous.

It was now November and the weather had become bitterly cold, resulting in a sharp increase in deaths at the encampment and some of us were beginning to call the place 'the death camp'. There is one particular death that stands out in my memory, that of an older, red-haired man hailing from Ruhr Area, who had claimed to be a communist. He wasn't able to ever reconcile his pre-conceptions of the worker and farmer paradise, which he associated communism with, to the reality of the intolerable life and work conditions we were facing in the encampment. The fact that his being a communist did not interest the Russians in the least bit was also inexplicable for him. He had been lying on his bunk for days, not too far from me, and one day he began lamenting aloud: "I'm a communist and a worker from the Ruhr Area!" This continued on through the night but got quieter and quieter until, at some point, he was dead. In the morning, his bread ration was distributed as normal. His shoes and coats were taken off and traded for worse ones.

The permafrost set in around the end of November, when the temperatures remained between ten and fifteen degrees below freezing. The dead could no longer be buried and were deposited behind some buildings, freezing stiff after a short time. Fear that the Russians would let us croak here during the winter started to bear down on us and the pessimists gained the upper hand once

again, instilling mistrust in the Russians. The source of heat for the entire shelter was a single, walled-in oven, and only the areas immediately around the oven itself received any real warmth. Luckily, the shelter was below ground and no frost formed within it. It started becoming obvious from the behavior of the watchmen that they were beginning to lose control of the encampment.

One day at the beginning of December, we received news, completely out of nowhere, that we were to be relocated to the main encampment in the town of Saratov. We moved out first thing the next morning, and, since we didn't have anything to get ready or pack, the counting could commence and the whole encampment got moving towards the outskirts of Engels. Our destination was a barracks-like high rise building and we marched in and were divided into different rooms. This barracks had clearly accommodated prisoners in the past, whose identities were unknown to us. The rooms were cold and the latrine was outside of the building, in a courtyard. All in all, our situation had worsened, both in terms of the accommodations and in terms of meals, or the lack thereof.

Everyone had hoped for and expected an improvement and when the opposite turned out to be the case, our moods again sank to a low point. The number of prisoners suffering from diarrhea shot up again and there was a run on the stinky latrine through the entire night. Some didn't even leave the latrine and ended up not getting a wink of sleep. On top of it all, the water had frozen solid and a feeling of abandonment and doom settled on us.

I, myself, was completely healthy and still had my strength at this point. I signed up voluntarily for the task of fetching water for the kitchen, if for no other reason than to get a brief escape from the misery inside the barracks. The kitchen building was a bit separated and lay directly on the banks of the Volga. There was a staircase that led to a cellar area where the

ice could be found. I had to break a hole into it with a pickax for the water to come out. I would fill two pails and make my way to the kitchen.

Once, as I entered, I saw a bowl filled with sunflower oil resting on a counter and noticed from the corner of my eye that an armed soldier had dozed off and had his eyes closed. After the third run, I couldn't hold myself back any longer: I put the pails down, threw another glance at the Ivan and reached for a spoon. Just as I was about to fill the second spoonful, the soldier woke up and began yelling: "Zap-zarap! Masla zap-zarap!" That roughly translates to: "Thief! He's stealing oil!" The cook rushed in with some helpers and chased me down, belting out the usual string of curses and scolding. Beaten down, but with a satisfying taste of oil in my mouth, I made my way back to my comrades.

When I got back, I could see that suffering and desperation had taken the upper hand. Order had been lost and the rule of force had established itself again; the prisoners that still had some strength left had to force discipline upon those that had lost their sanity, since the Russian watchmen had themselves lost control and were now merely looking on.

On that same evening, a young man who was only 18 years old died. He had been conscripted in the very last weeks of the war and had no experience in the art of asserting himself. He had been in my work brigade and was given the nickname 'Bubi'. Before he died, he suddenly began calling for his grandmother and started to writhe around in his bunk, as though struck by a cramp, but by the time we made our way over to him, he was dead. It proved difficult to free him from the bunk, since he had locked his grip on the wood and wouldn't let go—I had never experienced anything like it before. He had often told us of the times that he would spend in Lower Lusatia with his grandparents as a child.

That same night, another prisoner in the bunk directly next to

mine died, though I hadn't known him at all. When I woke up the next morning, I noticed that he had not stirred yet, and so I went over to wake him up, quickly realizing that he had passed away. I then did the only thing that was left to do and took his bread sack, in which I found his portion from the evening before. I ate the bread immediately and then lay the sack back where I had found it. This incident stayed on my conscience for a long time after that, even though I rationally knew that a dead man had no use for bread. The number of prisoners had been depleted by 25 percent by this point and was soon to sink by another 25 percent if something drastic didn't happen. The north wind blew relentlessly and had brought the temperature down to negative 20.

We spent about three or four days at the encampment in Saratov, and the order to prepare to march out again came suddenly one evening. It was an unusual time to begin a march and we started wondering what the reason behind it was. The count and gathering of the ill turned into one large debacle and we started to realize that the winter clothing we were outfitted with was much too thin. The frost was penetrating down to our bones and many of the men had to be beaten out of the barracks by the watchmen. The darkness was already upon us as the ghost procession slowly got under way and started heading through the outskirts of the city into the center. Many of them men were not able to move forward on account of their weakness, not made any easier by the cold and the storm that was blowing. Some fell to the side of the road and remained there until a watchman would notice and start beating the fallen man until he moved. Over half a meter of snow had accumulated and it was taking a huge effort to trudge through it. After about an hour or two, we reached the Engels train station and were boarded on a passenger train that was waiting for us.

The train remained at the station and we waited around for hours in its unheated cars. The wait was caused by the ill prisoners and

the ones that had fallen in the snow storm who had to be loaded onto transport trucks and hauled over to the train station. The train got under way just before sunrise and after an hour we reached the main station in Saratov. Those that weren't able to walk by their own accord were carried off of the train and the prisoners that had died were held by their feet and dragged along.

The train station was a large, imposing building, outfitted with many facilities. It was the first time that I had set foot in a civilian Russian building and was deeply impressed by what I saw. We were taken to a side wing of the main hall and, upon entering, were greeted by a warm room for the first time in a long while.

The whole procession took place in front of the gazing eyes of the civilians in the train station. Again we were confronted with good souls of the Russian population. They could see the horror and fright in our faces and some of the woman crossed themselves and others even came close and threw us bread. The watchmen, however, tried to prevent this as best they could in order to avoid a run on the thrown scraps. But the bread continued being thrown or handed over even though the inhabitants were themselves doing their best to survive on the rations they were allotted. Some of the women gave as much as half of their loaves. Through their charity, they were able to quell the hunger of the men that were alert and ready, at least for a short period of time.

Hours passed before the transport trucks that were sent to pick us up finally arrived. It must have been around midday that the prisoner column was finally marched out of the side wing of the building, through the main entry, over the large stairwell and on to the plaza at the front of the station. The same tragedy from the morning played itself out again: the ill prisoners were carried out and the dead soldiers were dragged by their feet. On the other hand, the wave of sympathy and help, especially from the older onlookers was moving. Most didn't dare come too close on ac-

count of the watchmen, but still threw bread over. Some daring women came right up to the prisoners and placed a piece of bread directly in the hand of a lucky recipient, quickly disappearing back into the safety of the mass. The helpfulness of the inhabitants was not smiled upon by the soldiers, especially the younger ones who were still under the spell of the war and the propaganda.

We were then taken away in small groups, the destination being a larger encampment on top of a low hill just outside of Saratov. The road, on which the encampment lay, ironically had the name 'Bolshaya Gornaya Uliza', which roughly translates to 'Great Mountain Street'.

Today, it seems odd to think that the Russian civilians were constantly carrying bread around with them. But at the time, bread was their main source of nourishment and one that was not available in large quantities. They were allotted ration coupons and would collect their bread from wherever they were able to find some. The Russians we were in contact with didn't understand how we could still complain after receiving 600 whole grams of bread, considering it was the same amount that the normal civilians would also be given. But the difference lay in the fact that the civilians were given their bread every day, whereas we received ours irregularly and sometimes even not at all. Furthermore, there was nobody we could complain to, other than to those that were handing us our bread. The bread we were given was also not the bread we were used to eating and was, for some of us, difficult to digest. For the Russians, bread was a standard component of every meal and they ate it with soup, as did the French. Germans, on the other hand, ate bread for breakfast or for supper. One also had the suspicion that some of the bread meant for the prisoners ended up finding its way onto the black market, being that it was a valuable trading commodity. Crooks and goods pushers were, of course, also to be found in the ranks of the Red

Army. An old Russian adage speaks to this very fact: "Russia is large and the Czar far away!"

The main encampment in Saratov was an underground bunker formerly used in the war that lay on a hill above the city. This type of accommodation was given the name 'zemlyanka' by the Russians, stemming from the word 'zemlya' which meant 'earth'. The bunker was about 80 meters in length and 25 meters in width. There was nothing to be seen from the outside other than a slight rise in the ground, being that the bunker was completely below the surface. About 500 people could be housed in the zemlyanka, which was equipped with three-tiered bunks. There were entrances at either end of the bunker and a Russian oven stood at the head of the bunks. The kitchen and service buildings were next to the main building and were sunken deeper below the surface. The lower elevation provided for improved insulation through the ground heat, reducing the amount of firewood needed to keep the areas warm. The Russians were able to survive their cold winters quartered in just such bunkers; in this area, the Russian military was far more advanced, by way of experience, than the German. There was a strong and bitter wind that originated in steppes of Siberia that blew over the Volga Heights throughout the winter. In respect to this, we felt quite snug in our bunker on the hill.

Our new quarters in Saratov were a vast improvement compared to the encampment we had just visited in Engels. The encampment was also home to a well-functioning Russian administrative team that was supported by some long-serving German prisoners. The kitchen was also fully functioning, assuring regular meals of warm food and bread. A medic was on duty and had a small sickbay at his disposal — accommodating three or four men — for those that required care. Our brigadier from Mannheim died in the sickbay on our first day at the encampment. (I would visit

his parents in Mannheim-Seckenheim shortly after my return home). It didn't take long for the Russians to put us to work. There were already various groups at construction sites and farms in the area that were mostly assigned to clean-up tasks. We would make our way to the city in our customary rows of fives, surrounded on all sides by watchmen. Our pace was slow and dragging, despite attempts from the watchmen to hurry us along.

That weekend, we were marched to a sauna where a delousing was to take place. The Russians named these establishments 'banya', likely derived from the word the German word for bath, 'bad'. The term 'sauna' was also common, but wasn't the type of sauna we think of today, neither in its facilities nor in its size. The bathing establishment was also visited by Russian civilians; one day was reserved for the men and one day for the women.

We were taken to the changing rooms in groups of 20, where we took our clothes off and tied them together in bundles. These bundles were then taken to a delousing chamber by an assistant and transferred onto poles inside of the chamber with an iron hook. The chamber door was then closed and we were then allowed to enter the bathing area itself. Upon entering we found tubs with warm and cold water, along with soap and large brushes we could use to scrub ourselves down. The room was warm and steamy, and there were also faucets from which warm and cold water came. We weren't able to dry ourselves once finished since there were no hand towels provided. After about half an hour we were instructed back into the changing room. The bundles were brought back from the delousing chamber and thrown onto a pile. We now had the task of trying to fish out our own bundle from the heap. Most of the men crowded around the pile, leading to shoving and fist fights and one easily burned himself on the still hot iron hooks.

The delousing chamber wasn't without its faults: The lice on

the outside of the clothing were killed off by the heat, but the ones on the inside of the clothing survived. The eggs, otherwise known as 'nits', emerged from the chamber completely unharmed. The lice plague would only be held at bay with a weekly visit to the banya. When orders from the higher ranks instructed otherwise, or when the banyas were out of service, the irritating pests would have the time to multiply and make our already difficult lives even harder.

It was now the middle of December 1945. Specker, the Palatinate that I had met in Engels was in our zemlyanka, in another work brigade, not far from where I was stationed. He had some leftovers from his daily bread left in his sack after returning from work. The surveillance wasn't very strict in his brigade, and he was able to go begging at the houses around his work site. He named this practice after the old military custom: 'organizing'. His tips were becoming invaluable through his growing experience. Aside from me, he had not told anyone of his endeavors, even though his repeated absence was beginning to be noticed. Rumors, assumptions and supposed knowledge of his doings were going around, but no one had the courage to attempt to try what he had already succeeded in—the risks were too great. On the days when he managed to gather a surplus, Specker would give the other men some of his winnings and was therefore accepted by the brigade.

The cold and the wind were bearing down on us harder and harder every day — everything around us was frozen solid. Hunger, however, was still our main problem, despite the regular meals of bread and a thin soup. The soup we were given varied in consistency and contents; it would at times contain barley, potatoes, buckwheat, millet, cucumbers, green tomatoes, carrots, or cabbage, and, on some Sundays, even fish. But the primary ingredient was always water.

On one lucky day, felt boots were distributed from the clothing chamber. They were a Russian specialty and were a great help. The boots were made of a felt material that had been pressed into forms that fit over our feet and went up to the knees. They kept our feet nice and warm as long as they stayed dry. Over time, we were able to trade in our bad coats for better and thicker ones, albeit worn, and some of which were even made of wool. The felt boots were referred to as 'valinki' by the Russians.

My brigade, along with several others, was assigned to the task of cleaning work at a farm. After we were given over to the supervision of the civilian natshalnik, the watchmen would leave to find warm dwellings. The work wasn't all that difficult and we tried as best we could to huddle around the fire to stay warm. We were in a suburb of Saratov, where the houses were built in a typical Russian style, made of wood and mostly single-leveled with small front yards. The majority of the houses had small front porches in front leading to the door, to shelter the inhabitants from the wind as they came home.

My hunger was overwhelming and I realized that a good opportunity was at hand. I thought over the Palatinate's methods and decided to give them a try — I slipped out into the yard through a partition in the barn and set off. After rounding two corners, I found myself standing in front of a house. In those first moments, I had to choose between my hunger and my fear and finally, I decided in favor of the hunger. I still had no idea what to expect. I made my way onto the porch and knocked on the door. My heart started to race and, after a few moments, the door opened a crack and an old lady peered out. I managed to utter the word 'chleb', which means 'bread' and the woman closed the door without saying a word. After another few moments she returned, opened the door and handed me a piece of bread. I said, "spasibo!" which means 'thank you', and disappeared around the

corner. The whole process turned out to be amazingly quick and easy, which gave me the courage to make my way to the next house right away and I was met there with the same success. I packed the bread into my sack and headed back to the construction site, going the same way back. No one seemed to have noticed that I had left. I could very well have been trying to escape.

The feeling that came over me upon returning was indescribable. There wasn't a single hint of bad conscience, of shame or of a hurt pride, just satisfaction for having found a way around death. For reasons of self-preservation and egoism, I didn't tell a soul about my adventure, other than the palatinate. Almost instinctively, I was overcome with a feeling of calm: I had found a way to survive this dangerous and life-threatening situation that was sure to only get more difficult.

In the days that followed, I was again successful in gathering food. I then began to develop my techniques, taking it upon myself to expand my Russian vocabulary for the purpose of improved acquisition. I learned new words from our interpreter: Please, thanks, thanks a lot, hungry, food, hello, goodbye, prisoner of war, mister, miss, comrade — and many more.

No sooner had the first glimmer of hope come into view, when the next calamity unfolded. On the evening of the 20th of December, we were suddenly told to prepare for relocation. Names were read off of about half of the prisoners and they were to be put in a new subcamp. Unfortunately, my name was also on the list.

Everything happened very quickly the next morning: vacating the barracks, getting into position, being counted, and marching off to the train station. A transport train with freight cars was waiting for us when we arrived and about 40 or 50 of us were packed into the car, given food and then sent off to an unknown destination.

What we called meals the Russians called 'pradukty', and we

had to get used to it. Dry bread, barley, millet or some other sorts of mixed dry concentrate were assembled in a small mass and each day, a pre-measured portion was given out, which came in a small linen sack or towel that we had to place in water and cook. This was standard fare for the Russian soldiers but was completely foreign to us. The portion we were given was likely to be all we would receive for the duration of the trip and we reckoned with a travel time of four to five days. The reason behind the relocation and the destination were still just wild guesses. Farfetched rumors were going around and speculation abounded. Unlike the previous train trips, we departed relatively quickly. We again used the position of the sun to determine that we were headed north.

A steel oven with a ventilation pipe going up through the roof stood in the middle of the train car. The sliding door on the right side of the train was locked shut. There was a wooden gutter at the side of the car, leading to the outside, which served as a toilet. We were given some wood and a bucket full of coal and then we set off. The cars were so jam packed with men that we had to alternate sitting in front of the ovens. Shortly after we departed, some men started busying themselves with the oven, trying to get it to run, with the goal of heating soup. A large pitcher of drinking water was also provided. It was bitterly cold in the train car and the small oven wasn't sufficient to heat the whole space. It required great effort to run and had to be constantly manned. There were also several ill prisoners among us and I drew the conclusion that the encampment leaders at Saratov were using this opportunity to eliminate the weak workers. Of all the acute illnesses that were going around, the dysentery-like diarrhea was the greatest scourge to the prisoners. The area around the toilet gutter was soon a mess and stank horribly. The passengers that were weaker and ill were slowly pushed out towards the toilet area.

Getting to and from the toilet area required us to step over men lying on the floor.

Someone decided to do some math and calculated that it was the 24th of December — Christmas Eve. The rest of us had generally lost all sense of date and time. In Russia, the Christmas holidays were not celebrated the way we were used to; the day wasn't even a national holiday. Our mood that day was simply horrid, not made any better by the sight of a man lying on the floor next to the toilet gutter, breathing his last breaths of life. I only remember that the man was from Berlin; he wasn't otherwise part of my close group of friends.

The train stopped at a small town around midday and the snow was already piled up a meter high. We were allowed to exit in order to wash up and stretch our legs. The watchmen were busy with other things and weren't particularly on alert. I caught a glimpse of some wooden houses that weren't too far off from the tracks and decided to climb up the embankment and make my way over to beg for bread. As I went up the embankment through the snow, I quickly realized that my strength was failing me. I had gotten up too quickly after having sat around for hours in the train and was struck by a spell of weakness. The reality of my degenerated state hit me hard: my reserves were at their end, having been used up by the long journey and the hunger. I eventually, through great effort, managed to get up the embankment and go over to the houses, helped along by my sense of panic. Getting bread from the Russians again proved to be easy. I had to move quickly though; I didn't know when the train would leave again. My weakness was a heavy burden and slowed down the whole endeavor. For the first time, I contemplated the idea that maybe I wouldn't make it through imprisonment alive, and the idea brought with it an acute dispiritedness and sense of abandonment, and this despite the fact I was soon to be given food,

which should have awakened my optimism. But fear of an imminent death was on my mind, and I thought of the man from Berlin who passed away on the evening of December 24th and whose body was taken away at the next train station. It was a miserable, inhumane, merciless and remorseless death that the rest of the men had hardly taken notice of.

From then on, I began to watch my bodily functions more closely and use my strength more carefully. I took the spell of weakness to be the first serious warning and saw it as a sign that my strength reserves were not unlimited.

I made my rounds and reached the train before it got underway. When I boarded, I unpacked my bread and ate in secrecy. There was a man sitting next to me in the train car and he noticed that I was eating and proceeded to ask me for a part of my winnings; I, of course, wasn't willing to give up even a crumb. He was a sergeant from the military and the idea that he would one day be begging a comrade for a piece of bread had, with certainty, never crossed his mind.

That evening, after it had gotten dark and light from the oven was illuminating the inside of the train car, a few men were hit by a wave of sentimentality and began singing Christmas songs, trying their best to get others to join in. But their efforts were in vain—most of the men continued to lie apathetically in their bunks, while others went about cooking their soups in the piddling fire.

We arrived at a small train station in the middle of a forest just before New Year's Day. Typical farmhouses made of wood surrounded the station and some of them were adorned with carvings, which I didn't expect to see in the middle of Russia.

We were greeted by a whole delegation of soldiers, officers and civilians and were handed over to them by our train chaperones. Immediately upon being unloaded, we were taken to a zemlyan-

ka that wasn't far from the station. Everyone scurried around and got into line outside of the train car, after which we were called off by name and counted, all in the open air. One of the officers gave an address with the following information: "You are now in my wood chopping regiment. The zemlyanka is here to provide you with food and recovery. You will be treated well and given food, as long as you fulfill the work standards and adhere to the strict code of discipline." On the first day, he gave us the order to wash ourselves as well as we could and told us to use the open water source or the snow. Surveillance was thin and we were allowed to move about freely since we knew as well as the Russians that any attempt to escape in this area would be impossible and surely result in our death.

I took advantage of the disorder during the unloading and went around to some of the houses to collect food. I managed to gather a piece of bread, six potatoes and a piece of pierogi, something which I had never eaten before. A pierogi is a piece of bread dough, baked and filled with a potato mash. They are a Russian specialty, which, in times of plenty, are filled with meat. I immediately ate up the bread and the pierogi; the potatoes I stored in my sack. Later that evening, as the rest of the men were resting or sleeping, I made my way over to the oven at the entrance of the barracks and roasted the potatoes I had collected.

We met some Polish Jews at the subcamp, who had apparently been working in the forest prior to our arrival and had been released from their duties. They were sent here during the war to fulfill a mandatory military service and had a half-free, half-prisoner status. They came from the eastern parts of Poland and were shipped out to Russia when the Russians took over in September of 1939. We were able to communicate with them reasonably well since they spoke Yiddish. I can still remember the prophecy of one of the men: "Those who arrive in this forest in your condition

do not come out alive." This prediction did not sit well with us.

There were also men in the zemlyanka that had been brought in from other encampments. I searched around for other men from my heimat and happened to come across an old acquaintance from Baden-Baden. He was the eldest son of our former superintendent in the Weststadt School, named Eduard Reuter, who also had the nickname 'Waggele' or 'Reuter-Waggele'. He used to play on a football team and was known for being a good player. He moved to the town of Bruchsal after getting married where his wife gave birth to triplets. This was quite unusual and brought the couple a certain level of fame. His younger brother, Kurt Reuter, was in my class at school.

Eduard was ill and holding on to his last bits of strength when I ran into him. Due to his condition, he was unable to leave the barracks. He had the bad habit of trading in his bread rations for cigarettes and had thin, yellow fingers as a result of his smoking. We talked about old times and put ourselves in a good mood. He asked me to greet everyone back at home and pass on his story, should I make it back; he himself no longer entertained the idea of a return home. A few weeks later, after we had been put to work in the forest, I received news of his death, which happened just a few days after I had met him.

The officer that had held the address upon our arrival was the commander of the wood chopping regiment. He played the role of a rough military man, probably in order to leave a hard impression on the other prisoners, but one could sense that he was actually a good-natured person at heart. He appeared the next morning at the count and personally checked if we had all followed instructions and maintained the level of hygiene and cleanliness that he ordered. When he got to me, he stopped and asked, by way of his interpreter, why I hadn't washed (on the previous evening I had my head in the oven and my hands in the ash, try-

ing to roast my potatoes). When I answered that I had in fact washed myself, he got angry and asked what profession I had as a civilian. I told the interpreter that I was a business man, which corresponded to the Russian word 'kupyetz' and meant 'trader at the market'. He didn't know what to make of my response, stopped for a few moments to consider, and then said, "Oh, I'll make a real trader out of you here in my regiment." The other Russian comrades smirked. It turns out that the situation was actually quite paradoxical and there was some hidden humor in his words, which I didn't understand. Even later, I never figured out what he meant by "a real business man" or what it had to do with chopping wood in a forest.

The next morning, we were divided up into groups of varying sizes. A civilian natshalnik was assigned to each group, and depending on the size of the group, a military watchman was also assigned. My group consisted of about 40 men and two watchmen. Our natshalnik (leader or supervisor) was one of the Polish Jews named 'Pinchuk'. We were given a ration of bread before we left and were then marched off through the forest to our work station. Pure, white, powdered snow was all around us. The air was cold and clear and everything glistened in the shining sunlight; the colors were as clear and rich as those on a freshly painted picture. Were it not for the hunger in our stomachs and the uncertainty on our minds, we would certainly have enjoyed the scene of natural beauty. I found the sight of birch trees and their white branches spotted with gray particularly impressive.

After about a four hour's march, we finally arrived at our work station. It was a large, wooden Russian house, a quarter of which was occupied by a forester and his family. The other three quarters made up a barracks that was built out to accommodate the wood choppers, and it was essentially just a large room with rows of wooden bunks for sleeping. A walled-in oven was at the center

of the large room, a feature found in most Russian farm houses on account of its practicality and economy in the given climate. A pantry with an open counter connected the main room to a kitchen. Upon arrival, bunks were quickly sought out and claimed. There was no luggage to store and the oven was promptly turned on. There was a man assigned to be in charge of internal affairs; he was a medical assistant and also assumed the roles of cook and barber. When necessary, a prisoner from our ranks, usually an ill man who was unfit to work, was assigned to be his assistant. The natshalnik was quartered in a small log cabin, about 100 meters away from our barracks. The two watchmen were put up with the forester, just adjacent to the barracks. We were finally given a few days to rest and recover after all the chaos and exertion. We chopped fire wood and got our tools in order, which were assigned to us for our work in the forest.

In the Forest near Penza – January to May 1946

By now, some of my comrades in the brigade had become my friends. They were the men in my forest brigade and included Egon D., a professional gardener from Bad Neuenahr. He had been in the Armed SS and hated all Russians with great passion even during his imprisonment. After my return home, I once went to visit him as he was working in the city garden center. Like many, he was unhappy with the state of affairs in Germany after the war and he told me that he wanted to emigrate and we ended up losing touch after some time. The second man was Gerhard Hecker, a student from Munich who was already married and constantly worried about his wife. During a break in, he was shot dead by the watchmen in the potato storage room the same year that I met him. Another young prisoner also remains in my memories: His family name was Weber and I unfortunately cannot remember his first name. His contagious optimism and his physical abilities were quite remarkable considering his young age and the living conditions that we had to endure. I'll come back to him later on. I can no longer remember the names of the other men I made friends with; only the three I have listed remain alive in my memories.

Once the days to rest were over, we started out for the forest with Pinchuk for the first time. We traveled single file along a trail through the snow. Pinchuk knew the way well, being that he had worked on the Polish wood chopping team for years and had now been promoted to team leader, voluntarily committing to work for extra time. Everyone was carrying a tool, either an axe or a saw. Shovels for the snow, wedges and other small tools were also on hand. Everyone had been given

200 grams of bread as their ration for a third of the work day. We arrived at a pine forest, our working area, after about an hour. Everyone was now supposed to search for a work partner, who was of about the same strength and stature. I paired up with Egon D., since we already knew each other and fit together well. Pinchuk then informed us of the workload that we were expected to fulfill and showed us some chopping techniques. Every pair of men was expected to process four grown trees and cut the trunks into four-meter-long pieces, as well as trim and stack the branches. He assigned each pair to a specific group of trees and said, "Tchitiry shtukki – i domoy," meaning, "Those who are finished with their four trees can go home." He then went over to the watchmen and they made a fire to roast potatoes on.

The pine trees grew on a dry and elevated section of the forest. One could tell that Russians undertook a relatively simple form of forestry, at least compared to the Germans. This was likely due to the fact that they had such a huge amount of trees. The lower areas of the forest were damp and swampy and therefore only accessible when the ground was frozen. There were different species of trees in that virgin forest below and we had to completely clear a certain swath of them (poplars, ash trees, willows and alders). We were told to arrange the wood in piles of about 1.5 meters in width and 4 meters in length. Our work performance was measured by the amount of piles that we completed, which was set for each work brigade. The whole area was covered with endless piles of chopped wood. At the end of each working day, Pinchuk would count the number of piles that we had made and enter the tally into a record book. Sometimes we were able to trick him into thinking we had made more piles by repositioning an existing pile to the front. Of course, it wasn't fair, considering that he was a nice man and

the only natshalnik that made an effort to get us extra food when he was able to — usually dry food concentrate from the military stock. The wood that came from the pine trees was mainly turned into support columns for the coal mines and the wood from the lower areas was mainly used as firewood.

The work was extremely difficult and the January temperatures were usually between 15 and 20 degrees below freezing on nights with clear skies. With the temperatures as cold as they were, it was impossible not to keep moving and we were thus indirectly forced to keep working. Before we began chopping, we would have to clear the snow from around the trunks of the trees so that we could saw as close to the ground as possible. After sawing into the tree, the rest was hacked down with an axe, so that it would fall in a desired direction. If the tree got stuck or fell in the wrong direction, it took much effort and strength to move it around to its assigned place.

After a week we had our first ill men, who were no longer able to work due to lack of strength. A huge pine tree fell on a pair of workers around the end of January. One of the men died immediately and the other was injured and unable to walk, forcing us to create a make-shift stretcher for him out of tree branches and, with great effort, carry him back to the encampment. That same evening, as I was warming myself by the fire, two fingers on my right hand began to throb in pain and in the days following, they started to turn black. There had been a hole in my glove and my fingertips had frozen as I was carrying the injured man back to the encampment. The medic wrapped them with a primitive band and rubbed some cream on them. I unfortunately wasn't excused from work on account of the injury. My fingers didn't heal until the following May and I can still see the scars today.

I slowly began to take notice of the fact that my strength was

slipping from with each day. This ended up causing many problems between Egon D. and me; he was in better shape than I, and he was worried about fulfilling the work requirements since I was becoming weaker. My body finally gave in and I was no longer able to perform any more labor around the middle of February. I reported to the natshalnik and he sent me back to the encampment. I drudgingly made by way back, along the snow-covered trail and upon arriving, collapsed at the entrance to the barracks. I set myself down at the door frame and thought to myself: "This is it!"

Egon D. then tried to convince me to trade my glasses in for two buckets ('vetro' in Russian) of potatoes from the forester. He would likely have taken them to one of the nearby kolkhozes and traded them for something more useful. Glasses were, at the time, a very seldom sight among the masses in the towns of the Soviet Union and were seen more as a status symbol than as an item for vision correction. Perhaps the forester would have kept them and put them on at festive occasions or family gatherings to show how well-off he was, despite not being near-sighted at all. I'll come back to this topic in a different context later on in the 'Kuybyshev' section.

Egon D. had an innate ability to predict who would die in the next 14 days. We could somehow tell, from the fading gleam in their eyes, which men had given up their will to live. This was likely not a supernatural ability, rather a skill acquired in the course of the war. He would soon tell me that he could also see it in my eyes when I was in the early stages of my degeneration, which had the effect of instilling a motivating fear in me.

The natshalnik commissioned me for some light work in the following weeks. I did some bookkeeping work for him – making lists of the piles of chopped wood and then transferring

the information into the record books; I got the impression that he himself had difficulties with the calculations. He had also been given a list of requirements that he was meant to fulfill, even in his elevated position: He had to gather a certain amount of wood in a given amount of time with his brigade. I got a personal glimpse into the norm system and the Russian state-run economy with all of its weaknesses and problems during my work for the natshalnik. Since the lower wooded area was now cleared, I no longer had to worry about troubles from the illegal repositioning of wood piles.

Pinchuk was a good-natured man and deep down in his heart felt pity for the rest of us. The wood chopping would have to be called off when the winds were too strong or when there was a storm coming since the saws would get stuck in the trunks when the trees swayed too much. When this was the case, Pinchuk would yell out during our morning count: "Everyone burn branches!" This expression was translated from Yiddish and meant: "The whole brigade is to go into the forest and collect the sawed-off branches for burning." Due to the fact that the towns were so far away, the branches and tips of the trees were useless. They were therefore burned where they had been sawed off so that the forest could be clear for the spring and annual re-growth would be unhindered. Burning the wood wasn't nearly as difficult as sawing and chopping and we were happy to be able to carry out this task. We would get excited at night when we heard the sound of wind, since we knew it meant that we would perhaps be able to hear the order 'branch burning' the next morning. When burned, the treetops and thick branches sent flames as high as the tops of some of the neighboring trees, but the large amount of snow prevented the fire from spreading. We would gather around the fire and the warmth emanating from it was always ple-

asant. Our working pace had slowed down significantly, but it didn't matter since performance norms could not be set on those days. The only uncomfortable part was the lice, which would become active with heat.

It was now around the end of February and the temperature was between 20 and 25 below. The wind was blowing, and though relatively light, it was strong enough to prevent sawing for that day, so we again had the task of burning branches. The brigade was at work dragging the treetops to the fire area and the watchmen and the natshalnik were sitting next to the fire. Suddenly, a horrible wailing noise was heard and a gray column of smoke heaved itself out of the fire, causing ash and embers to fly in all directions, and the gray cloud started writhing around and moving away from the fire. I was about 30 meters off, busy with a pine branch, and could see the event unfolding. I watched as, in fright, the watchmen, Pinchuk and some others dashed off with cat-like reflexes and threw themselves in the snow behind some trees; some other comrades and I did the same. The column continued wailing and started throwing up snow in spiral motions between the trees and then moved off. We were all looking on fearfully at this spectacle of nature, hoping not to fall victim to its wrath. The wailing began to subside and the speed of the spinning slowed down and after about five minutes the whole ordeal was over — the phantom had passed. The men all slowly and hesitantly emerged from their hiding places and made their way over to where the huge fire had been. All that was left was a black area on the forest floor where the branches had burned. We quickly made a small fire to warm ourselves and assured the natshalnik that we hadn't attempted a rebellion; and he believed us. The phantom was actually a small tornado that had formed on account of the heat of the fire coming into contact with the ice-cold air, creating

an upward vacuum that sucked in fresh air.

Our provisions were supposed to be delivered once a week. For various reasons, the deliveries usually ended up being late, leading to occasions in which we didn't have food for two or three whole days. Our cook made a point of putting aside extra food for just these instances and we were also able to trade in our potatoes for a portion of fish from the forester. The days between deliveries were bridged by these means. When the delivery did finally arrive, we would celebrate with a large festival and an entire day's worth of bread and all the sugar reserves would usually be gobbled up. Each one of us could feel the energy make its way back into our hungered bodies and a short-lived sense of euphoria, hope and optimism would ensue. Some men would also begin singing, which sometimes had the effect of rekindling our long-lost sense of camaraderie.

I soon started to spend time with an older comrade of mine who was very religious and he had the nickname 'the Division Pastor'. He would tell me stories from the Bible and discuss his religious-philosophical views on life when we sat around the fire in the forest. On account of my bodily weakness and the feeling that death was approaching, I listened to his rants with a renewed interest. I was no longer getting along with Egon D.; he was still strong and able to fulfill his work requirements and turned into a wild animal when he was hungry. I would now often pass the time sitting by the fire with the Division Pastor when the natshalnik and the watchmen weren't around.

This is how I got through the month of March. Once April rolled around, the forest began to thaw. Morel mushrooms began to cropping up on the patches of ground that were free of snow and other plants also began bearing their sprouts. The

stinging nettle season had now started and the men would be at work in pairs, one collecting and the other cooking them, resulting in a sort of spinach; it was amazing just how much stringing nettle was needed in order to fill one cooking pot with spinach. We didn't have anything to season them with other than salt and the occasional morel mushroom. Sometimes, we would make incisions into the birch trees and put our cooking pots underneath to collect the sap drippings. It didn't take long for our pots to be full of sap, which had a slightly sweet taste and to which we attributed wonderful healing powers. We would also sometimes find lingonberries in the thawed snow that had been frozen at the beginning of the winter and survived into spring.

That spring, I was also able to establish where we were actually located: we were in a large forest area that was at the threshold of the Volga River, between Syzran, Penza and Saransk. It was a hilly region about 250 km southwest of Kazan and about 450 km southeast of Moscow.

By the beginning of May, the snow had almost completely melted away and the forest was starting to turn a dark green. Our work had to be reorganized since the high sap content in the trees was making sawing impossible. A commission ordered us to stay in the barracks for the time being. The natshalnik, the forester and the two watchmen were starting to become nervous. Everything was to be cleaned and brought into order. Suddenly, for reasons unknown, the quality of the food improved. No one knew what the source of all the change was. Soon we found out that a medical committee had been sent out due to all the dead prisoners that had been recorded at the forest stations. We only had one death and one injury to report at our station and they were the result of the tree falling accident; we did however have countless men that were

ill and unfit to work. Our worst case was one older man whose entire torso was covered with open abscesses; he was unable to put on a shirt and could barely lie down. The best that our medic could do was clean the wounds and rub them down with a questionable ointment.

There were many previous reports of control commissions on their way around the forest stations, but not a single instance where one of them actually showed up, which made us skeptical when hearing of this new one. But this time, a commission actually did show up and it was composed of a female doctor with a staff of non-qualified assistants. The prisoners were examined and about ten were sorted out and deemed unfit for labor. Thank God that I was among the ten men that was sorted out, otherwise the Polish Jew's prophecy of my death in the forest may have come true. The time was exactly five minutes to noon. Unfortunately, Egon D. and Hecker — who, as I already mentioned would later get shot — had to stay behind. We stayed at the encampment for another couple of days without having to work and were then brought to the train station and taken off to another district capital not far from Penza.

There is another memorable story from my time at the wood chopping brigade that I should probably mention. It's such an unbelievable story, that I couldn't possibly leave it out.

Despite the large number of prisoners that were stationed at the subcamp, we had neither an outhouse, nor a latrine nor a simple hole in the ground. We had to conduct all of our business about 50 meters away from the barracks in the open air. The prisoners had this 'private' area while the forester, his family and the watchmen did their business in the vegetable garden next to the building. Since the whole winter was dominated by harsh frosts, the mass of excrement that accumulated at our toilet site froze together into a large glacier. After some time,

we were able to stand at the top of it without even getting our shoes dirty. Due to the bitter winds and the extreme temperatures, a single visit never lasted very long and those of us that had diarrhea and had to repeatedly go out at night had it the worst. Once spring came around and the temperature increased, the glacier slowly began to thaw. Nitrogen-loving plants such as stinging nettle and sorrel plants began to sprout all around the mass, which rotted away quickly and, surprisingly, didn't emanate too foul of a stench. The forester took his own mass and strewed it around the garden as fertilizer—which explained his ability to grow the largest potatoes in the autumn. During the warmer parts of the year, we did our business in various places around the forest to divide up the deposits. Egon D., who would never ever warm up to the Russians, often would say: "Russkie – nix kultura."

Another noteworthy memory from the forest brigade now also comes to mind in retrospect: There was a sauna near the log cabin at our disposal for our hygiene needs. Water wasn't available for washing until the middle of April due to the frigid temperatures. The cook got his water from a frozen-over hole in the ground that he had to hack open with a pick every day. The sauna was made of a wood and constructed much like a Finnish one. It would be pre-heated; then water would be brought over from the water hole; large, round stones would then be warmed up and the water would be poured over them with a large ladle to fill the room with thick steam. Unfortunately, a delousing was not possible in these conditions and the result was an exponential increase in lice. Even the forester and the natshalnik were plagued by the tiny insects. The watchmen were luckier and weren't affected that much, since they were treated from time to time. The first time that I was in the sauna, I could barely make it back to the barracks, being so worn out

by the heat and the steam. After that, I tried my best to avoid having to make a visit; I came to regard the sauna as a torture chamber. But we were instructed to stay clean, so Plan B was to rub my face down with snow every now and then.

Understandably, no one was allowed to possess their own razor for shaving. The task of shaving was therefore carried out by the cook every weekend with the communal shaving tools. Speaking of the cook, our cooking pots, which hung on nails near the door to the outside, were never once washed.

I was later convinced — and this was also confirmed by several other comrades following our return home — that the complete lack of hygiene at the encampment did not cause any illness. Any illnesses that did arise — even the extreme case of the abscesses — were the result of the constant malnutrition and the difficult physical labor. Had the meals been adequate, the wood chopping brigade would have been in the best of form and the work may even have been carried out with a bit of fun. But as a result of the predominating conditions in Russia after the war, there was a lack of supplies across the board, and, due to the poorly organized transport system, the Russians were overwhelmed and unable to fulfill the needs of all the prisoner encampments in the country.

The adverse conditions led many to contemplate escape, impossible as the chance for success may have been. But we continued meeting together and thinking up plans of all sorts. One of our plans was to put a part of our daily bread ration to the side every day until the spring and then escape to the banks of the Volga, where we would steal a wooden raft and travel downriver to Persia or Turkey. Despite the absurdity of our plans, they did help us get through times of destitution and always gave us a glimmer of hope that we would one day be able to make our way home, which, given the conditions in the forest,

still seemed like a far-off and unlikely possibility. Unfortunately, this particular plan had to be tossed out due to the fact that our hunger was ever present and we were never actually able to put aside a portion of our bread ration. It would have been just as impossible to command a dog to save a piece of the sausage he was given by his master for 'later'.

That reminds me of an unusually funny story: One day, just before our transfer to Saratov, I came across a hedgehog while in the forest. He was a rather chubby guy, despite it being early in the spring, and I decided to take him back to the encampment to show the other guys. I had had a special connection to hedgehogs since childhood and coming across this one was like stumbling upon a living piece of my heimat. When I brought the hedgehog back, one of the men from Berlin also took an instant liking to our new little friend. (I should mention that in every single brigade that I had been in during the war, there had always been at least one man from Berlin present. The Berliners must have been evenly spread across the whole of Europe at the time.) Just like the rest of the men from Berlin, he was automatically given the name 'Icke' (the word for 'I', which the Berliners have their own special way of pronouncing). This Icke asked me if he could have the hedgehog, since he claimed to know a special recipe for preparing them, which he had acquired from the gypsies. He said that all one had to do was cover the creature with clay or adobe and then place it on some embers to roast. After a given time, the baked clay could to be broken off with a hammer, taking the needles with it, and the meat could then be enjoyed. After lots of back and forth, and owing to a bad conscience on my part, I finally consented and gave him the hedgehog. One of the Russian watchmen must have taken notice of our negotiation and become suspicious; once I had given Icke my hedgehog, the watchman

went up to him and asked what he planned to do with the thing. Stupidly the Icke answered, "Eat it," and made the corresponding motions with his hand. Hell then rained down on the Icke, as the watchman instantly became furious and proceeded to yell at beat the Icke with the butt of his gun, letting the hedgehog drop to the ground. Following the incident, the Icke lost his appetite for hedgehog and limped back into the barracks; lucky for the hedgehog — not so lucky for the Icke.

Later, in the autumn of 1947, I would again come across some of my old comrades that stayed behind at the forest brigade, as we were on a steam boat on the Volga, on our way to Stalingrad. They told me a surprising and unbelievable story of some events that happened at the forest subcamp after my departure. One of them involved our medic, who had apparently been hiding with a friend of his from the beginning of his service. He was a tall and strong man who didn't show a sign of fatigue from the work. Rumor has it that the both of them fled from the forest encampment along with a large part of the provision stock in the summer of 1946, never to be seen again. It remains a mystery to me just why they would have taken this step, being that both of them were well relatively well off at the encampment. There is no known case of any prisoner successfully fleeing from inside of Russia and I still hold it to be an impossibility. I've unfortunately forgotten both of their names

Back in the city, we hung around for two days in a public park near the train station. The watchmen spent most of this time strolling around the city and chasing after girls and since they were preoccupied, I was soon able to slip off and quell my hunger with a couple visits to the neighboring houses. I always had to be careful not to be too obvious about my endeavors and not to influence another one of the prisoners to try the same thing since the fun would otherwise have been over. The fact

that we were now out of the forest and being transferred to Saratov reignited my general optimism. In the course of the two days in the park, the rest of the ill men from the other forest encampments had been collected for transport. We were all taken to the train station where a passenger train was waiting for us and we ended up having a comfortable ride, at least by Russian standards, through Syzran and along the banks of the Volga to Saratov.

About twenty years after my return home — at which point I was operating a small business, selling my own construction products — I was invited to a negotiation round by the supplies department of a construction company with the name 'Trefz Construction Materials, Tubingen'. The boss of the department was Helmut Weber, a name, which at first didn't ring a bell. Upon entering the room, I couldn't believe my eyes: it was the same Helmut Weber, though now no longer as young, from the forest brigade in Penza — a coincidental, joyful and unexpected reunion. He promptly took me to a Swabian restaurant and ordered the 'calf head en tortue' for us, which he said was his favorite dish. We sat at the restaurant with full plates in front of us and reminisced over old memories of life at the forest subcamp. Rather than the sap of a birch tree, we were now drinking Swabian wine and rejoiced over the miracle of our return home. We wished that our old natshalnik, Pinchuk, could have been there to celebrate along with us. After the meeting, I was, of course, contracted as the primary supplier for the company — the competition no longer had a chance. The old wood chopper bond was not to be broken. We kept our newly made connection for some years after that, up until Weber moved on to another state to better his career.

Saratov/Volga, May to November 1946

The trip to Saratov only took a day. We were directly taken to the main encampment upon arrival—to the zemlyanka (underground bunker) on Bolshaya Gornaya Uliza, which I still had a good memory of from my stay there in December of 1945. I again came across some of my former comrades that had not been transferred to the forest brigade and had spent the entire time here in Saratov. They all looked quite good and were much healthier than the returning prisoners; their work in the city and their regular meals had kept them in a much more stable condition. Most of the men had a fixed work brigade and were likely able to acquire extra food through exchange or theft. Stealing was common practice in Russia and the Russians stole just like the prisoners. But one should probably find a word less harsh than 'stealing'. It would be better to use a word like 'to swipe' or the army expression 'to organize'. No personal belongings were actually stolen — that would have been below us —, rather state owned possessions or goods that had no individual owner. We would mostly steal wood or other materials from the various construction sites. The Russians called it 'zap-zarap', which means 'to swipe' or 'to sneak', like the motion of a cat. The materials that we snuck would then be used as goods for trading; a lucrative black market was in place. When one of us was caught, the punishment wasn't even very harsh, granted that the stolen item wasn't of high value. The whole affair was the result of the state-run economy, which made many items unavailable for the private citizen.

Shortly following our arrival, we were assigned to brigades and sent off to work, relatively light work compared to what we were doing back in the forest. We were perhaps being shown mercy as a result of the report by the medical commission. My brigade was assigned the task of renovating a wing of the barracks. Our job was to scrape off the decayed putty from around the windows and then re-spackle them. The windows would later be repainted by a different brigade. Once in a while some soldiers would come around to check on us and taunt us with the nickname for the Germans: 'Friiitzy, Friiitzy!' Once they also told us that there were legal hearings going on in Nuremburg to try Nazi war criminals and also told us some of the names. We were completely clueless and for over a year now had no concept of what was going on back at home in Germany.

There were officer cadets from Albania on site at the barracks that were providing trainings. One of them would always tell us in German, "Buy Albanian tobacco," when he walked past. He later told us that his father owned a large tobacco plantation back at home and that the tobacco was for a fact mostly sold in Germany. The hardest part of the working day was the way to the work site, even though we would move along at the same slow pace as during a procession. We worked according to the old army saying: „Like the food, so the movement." The barracks was a good place to escape from work and recover but there was unfortunately nothing there to 'organize'. I once attempted an advance on the kitchen, but was quickly driven off by the personnel.

At the end of May, my brigade was reassigned to a construction site right in the center of the Saratov. Four apartment buildings were being constructed for military officers.

I was easily able to remember the street it was on: 'Uliza Rosa Luxemburg' — 'Uliza' meaning 'street'. Some of the fondest memories of my imprisonment I had while at this work brigade. The construction site was surrounded by a wooden fence to ward off theft and we were accompanied by just one watchman and were under the supervision of a Russian natshalnik. There were other Russians also at work at this construction site — both men and women. This common workplace provided the advantage of improved goods trading and the opportunity to better our Russian slang.

Since there were five of six brigades in the city, a German commander was also put in charge to deal with our internal affairs. The German commander would be called upon anytime the Russians had changes to make to our discipline regimen or anytime there were arguments or fights among the prisoners. The commander did not, however, have very much authority since the Russians didn't grant him the power to issue punishments. Anytime a problem arose, he was supposed to report it to the Russians, and thus constantly ran into moral dilemma of being seen as a traitor to his own countrymen. He had to take into account possible revenge that would be carried out on him from the others and even the possibility of being tried back at home in Germany as a traitor.

Our brigade leader was the same major from the German military that I had mentioned back during the canal project. The Russians let him continue wearing his German uniform, though it was, by that point, quiet soiled and torn. He wasn't fundamentally a nasty person and was glad that he didn't have to work and also glad to receive better meals than the regular prisoners. At the beginning, we had trouble wrapping our minds around the idea that the officers, for reasons of

their intelligence, and considering everything that happened in the name of Hitler, were still being rewarded with better food and freedom from hard labor; and this in a 'communist' country. The political and ideological failure of the majority of the officer corps, especially the upper rungs, is still to this day inexplicable, which is why the people of Germany, after the fourth generation, are still atoning for the misdeeds of those officers.

Most of my comrades, from varying levels of schooling, were familiar with the history of 'Napoleon, Moscow, Berezina, Waterloo' and also the course of the First World War following the entry of the Americans in the spring to the autumn of 1918. The attack on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and Hitler's illogical declaration of war on the superpower America in the autumn of the same year, must have, for any halfway right-minded person, been seen as a foolish endeavor. But this topic had to be brought up with great care and only in small circles of comrades.

The officers that lived with us at the zemlyanka were also allowed to wear their rank badges and medals. I remember back to December of 1945, when a young officer, who had been assigned to the position of troop leader in a work brigade by the Russians, got into an argument with a brawny soldier that ended in a fist fight. The fight took place in the zemlyanka after the working day was over and all the prisoners stood in a circle around the men and watched on as they fought. I don't remember the exact reason for the altercation, but it likely had something to do with either working conditions, the fact that the officer had been made a supervisor or a potential behavior report to the Russians. The soldier was filled with rage and fought with all his might until the officer was beaten into surrender. The Rus-

sian watchmen remained neutral — such occurrences were the internal affairs of the Germans, in which they did not find it necessary to interfere. Acclaim, of course, went to the winner of the fight, given the general unhappiness of the men in face of the preferred treatment of the officers within the encampment.

Many of our comrades were familiar with the various 'Geneva Conventions' as well as the unsatisfactory laws of the 'Hague Conventions' dealing with the treatment of prisoners of war. The parts of the conventions that had been inadequate, with regards to prisoner of war treatment, were modified in 1929 and signed by all member states except for Japan and the Soviet Union. It was also general knowledge that officers had the 'right' to preferred treatment under the conventions compared to the normal soldiers and no one had appealed this ruling. The cause for anger was the fact that we were in the Soviet Union and the officers were given preferential treatment, even though this 'socialist worker and farmer state' claimed to promote equality for all. They weren't obligated to the conventions but followed their guidelines nonetheless. What's more, the soldiers knew who was morally responsible for the war of extermination carried out against the Soviet Union—the officers. Later on, all officers were amassed together in a special encampment created for them, which ended up solving the problem once and for all. The amassing of the officers was not, however, carried out for humanitarian reasons, but rather as part of the Soviet plan to create a cadre of anti-fascists who could be sent back across the border and serve as propaganda weapons against the Germans. A more distant goal was to also recruit individuals that could be sent to the Soviet-occupied areas after the

war and place them within the government and administration. This led to the establishment of the 'National Committee for a Free Germany'.

Back at the encampment in Saratov, we were given clothing for the summer. The clothes were, for the most part, articles from the Red Army that had been disposed of, some of which were still in good condition. With a little luck and the use of some personal connections, it was even possible to acquire clothing that made one look like a normal citizen. We were also allowed to let our hair grow out, and, unlike the prisoners in the other encampments, no longer had to wear uniforms with badges that read 'Voye-no-Plenny', shortened: 'BII'. Translated, the badges read 'prisoner of war' and were shortened with initials from the Cyrillic alphabet. The 'B' was the Russian 'V' and the 'II' was the Russian 'P'. Why we weren't required to wear the badges, I was never quite able to figure out—it was simply one of the many oddities of the Russian administration that we would often scratch our heads about.

There is another account that I've skipped over, which should be mentioned in this chapter: At our stay at the Zielenzig encampment, we all had to have our hair cut and were all shaved bald without exception. The whole affair was a bit reminiscent of a sheep farm and was carried out from start to finish in a matter of ten minutes, with ten barbers in action. There was no avoiding it for anyone and it was performed for reasons of hygiene, which was, for many, understandable. But the psychological effect of this 'torture' was often catastrophic: we were able to physically feel the demeaning situation and felt devoid of all rights. Some approached the situation with a dark humor, while others were confronted with the shock of realizing that they

were now humiliated prisoners being ‘shorn’. For this reason, being allowed to let our hair grow out to a certain length in Saratov was all the more satisfying.

The building progress at our construction site was unfolding in a manner similar to that of the pyramids or some other place in the Far East. A large number of men were working with just their hands, executing the primary, preparatory and transport work. Other than an ancient cement mixing machine, there were no other mechanized tools at our disposal. The shoveling, sawing, hauling, hammering and cutting were done by hand. The prisoners were all employed for this manual labor, with the exception of those that had registered themselves as masons, most of whom had never used a brick trowel in their lives. A skilled construction worker in Russia learned everything that was deemed necessary relatively hastily. A professional training, in the sense that we were used to back at home, didn’t exist. I myself felt relatively comfortable among the other workers and I had opportunities to take breaks from the work or to disappear for a while.

My primary duty was to carry building stones across the scaffolding and up a makeshift ramp, using a carrying device that I would carry on my back. Another task was to roll or carry mortar to various floors along with another worker. I would sometimes also have to transport wood, water, roofing paper or iron. One day, as I was pushing a wheel barrow down one of the scaffolding ramps, the wheel got caught on one of the bends and the wheel barrow flipped over completely, bringing itself and me crashing down to the level below. Luckily nothing serious happened, other than a few scrapes and bruises.

After a few weeks I figured out what areas of the city

yielded the most food. The fact that there were no modern city buildings around the construction site also made the task easier. The buildings and houses were all from the czar times—typical Russian one or two storied wooden homes that, at home, would have been considered rustic, just like our old workshops. The residents of the homes were for the most part older, being that the young people were still in diaspora as a result of the war. My Russian vocabulary had expanded to a usable level and I had, through my experience, acquired a talent for begging and was like a fox seeking out its prey. I even had some 'introductory' sentences that I would say at each house: "I'm a prisoner of war, give me bread," or, "I'm hungry," or, "Give me something to eat." I would also say, "Good day" and when I received some food, "Thank you" or, "Thank you very much." I'll keep things simple and not translate these expressions back into Russian, partly due to the fact that many of the expressions I once knew in Russian have since slipped my mind with the passing of time. Two expressions did however remain stick me, mostly likely because I found the way they sounded so nice: 'spasiba' for 'thanks' and the melodic 'dosvidaniya' for 'see you again.' Rare was the case when I didn't receive anything. I would almost always return to the construction site, satiated from the food that I had been given and was even able to give some of the other men at the construction site some of the extra food — specifically the ones that had taken over my work.

Wood was in short supply in the regions around Saratov and was therefore a commodity that fetched good money. We often saw the local workers taking home a bundle of wood, with or without the approval of the natshalnik. Most of it they had collected over the course of the day from the

waste materials. We learned that some of them would sell their bundles of wood and receive anywhere between 20 and 30 rubles for one depending on its quality. Though I've tried hard to remember, I'm not quite sure how I myself began with the whole business of collecting and selling wood bundles. But, as is often the case life, as soon as my basic hunger had been tamed, there arose in me a desire for even more, which could only be acquired with real money. It's possible that men from a different brigade started collecting wood and I, at some point, started to imitate them. This endeavor was considerably more dangerous than begging — now I was dealing with state property. But I shrugged my shoulders at the dangers and proceeded with the collection and trade. I let two other comrades in on the deal and they assumed the tasks of sawing and bundling. As soon as I was given a fresh bundle of wood, I would slip out through a gap in the fence and run around the corner to the nearest street and begin knocking on doors. When a door opened I would ask, "Drava nada?" which roughly meant, "Is wood needed here?" The person being asked usually responded with, "Skolko?" meaning, "How much?" The average price was 25 ruble per bundle. Most people would try to negotiate and would make an initial offer of 15, to which I responded 20 and a deal would be made. I took the money and slipped off back to the construction site.

Once I had some rubles at my disposal, the Russians at the construction site were willing to make deals and they would purchase tobacco or other hard to come by items at the bazaar. Rubles could even be used back at the encampment, where black markets would form in times of distress. Some of the brigades at the smaller working posts were even allowed by the watchmen to take their money and go

to the market to purchase items for themselves and the other men. I should again emphasize what a risky business it was stealing and selling wood from the construction site. Not everyone had the gall to attempt it and would, in turn, not have any money. I met men from other brigades that had managed to earn hundreds of rubles and had built themselves into a class of capitalists. Uncertainly began circulating as about a new currency system would soon be introduced. One of my Franconian comrades once told me that pocket thieves at the bazaar once stole his entire stash of 500 to 600 rubles.

The head technical manager, who was also the boss of our natshalnik and would be addressed as director, would pay the women working at the construction site every Friday. Sometimes the money hadn't yet arrived and we would watch on in disbelief as the director had to calm the yelling and crying women, assuring them that they would get paid at the beginning of the following week. They addressed him by his first name, 'Petro Petrovitch', repeating the name loudly in the course of the argument, which is why I remember the name today. I was surprised by this seeming informality, since it wasn't common for one to address his or her superior by their first name back at home. The women would complain, saying that they had no money (dyengi) to buy bread for their children (malinkiye), to which the director would respond with 'budyet' or 'skoro budyet' — insisting that the matter would be resolved very soon — and clearly finding the situation uncomfortable. We prisoners would often even lend some of the Russian women our own rubles, so they could get through the weekend. They would always repay us in the correct amount, without having to be prompted, right after receiving their wages. I find it unbelievable

that this scene still plays itself out in Russia today, long after Communism's demise. One consolation is that pressure can now be legally applied by means of workers strikes, which would have been a life-threatening undertaking in the times of Stalin.

A tool shed and an adjoining latrine were at the construction site, within the wooden fence. The front yards of the neighboring houses went off in a straight line directly behind the tool shed and latrine. Nearly every day, I observed a women doing garden work in one of the yards. There was just enough room to slip between the sheds and the fence and, one day, I squeezed myself in this space so that I was no longer visible from the construction site and called over to the woman. She came over, inconspicuously, and threw over a small packet with bread and an onion. It seemed as though she had been waiting for exactly this moment for some time. Immediately after making the drop, she went back to her garden work. I was surprised and overjoyed to have come upon such luck and at the fact that I had found a new source of nourishment. But I had to make sure that I remained discrete in front of the others. The woman must have been waiting for this moment; otherwise she wouldn't have carried around a supply packet the whole time. I knew I had come across something special and did my best keep it as under wraps as best I could.

The woman showed up again in her garden two days later. I searched out the right moment to make my way over and again squeezed myself between the shed and the fence. She came over on her own accord this time and again slipped me a little packet with food. She then began to speak and, to my surprise, she spoke perfect German with a slight accent of those that came from the eastern enclaves. She

asked me my name and where I came from and introduced herself as 'Elisabeth Meinhard' and said that she was a Volga German. She said that she was married to a Russian officer and was therefore protected from deportation to Siberia; her husband had not yet returned from the war.

Our conversation was short and at the end she said, "It makes me sad to see Deutsche (Germans) being forced to work here in Russia." She pronounced the word 'deutsche' in a funny way, at least to my ears. I was now in business and had to be sure to not let anyone see me going to her or eating her food, since they would then surely have also used her as a source. It was difficult for me to make out the woman's age; she wore a head scarf and a long skirt, like the other Russian women, which made even young girls look much older. She was probably somewhere between 30 and 40 years old, but possibly much younger. Women, their age, and their physical attractiveness were, given the conditions, not in the forefront of any of our thoughts. Though priority number one for most soldiers, women and their sexuality had, for the prisoners, lost their meaning and draw. The only thing that mattered, in regard to any woman, was what food she had to offer. Everything went smoothly with Elisabeth Meinhard until one day, about four or six weeks later, my best bud, Günther Böhrs, found his way to my special spot and became my competition.

Günther was a high-school graduate from Cottbus. He was a smart, young guy and his Russian was excellent. Being that he was part of a family from Lower Lusatia, his grandparents spoke Sorbian, making Russian easy for him to learn and I actually acquired most of my Russian thanks to him. Since he was so good at the language and also wasn't averse to taking risks, there was always the danger

of getting into trouble with him on one of his escapades. Back at the construction site, he was constantly making risky black market deals with the other Russians and when they would have fled the scene, he would have ended up in a penal camp.

Günther was many times quicker than I was and one time, as I was getting food from Elisabeth, she told me that I should share some of the bread with him. I secretly had the suspicion that he had even ventured onto the street and been invited into her living room, which would have been risky for both of them. But he never mentioned anything about it — the topic being taboo for both of us. Perhaps he knew that his actions would have equated to a breach in confidence in relation to me. When I think back, I realize that he may actually have had a romantic affair with Elisabeth, which we in the military refer to as 'fried potato relationship'; he was, after all, the strongest in our brigade. Inevitably, the others soon picked up on our relationship with Elisabeth and she was eventually forced to break off contact for reasons of her own safety.

The summer months on Uliza Rosa Luxemburg rolled on and the building rose slowly but steadily. We became better and better acquainted with the peculiarities of life in the Soviet Union and started to understand the language better, some of us even picking up the skill of cursing in Russian like the old folks. The Russians had an imaginative and rich supply of curse words on hand; some were even so crude and obscene that I would be embarrassed to translate them back into German here. But of course these were the very ones that were picked up the fastest by the prisoners.

My wanderings around the neighborhood were reaping

increasingly varied foods: tomatoes, onions, the occasional melon and sometimes even an egg were all part of my winnings. The residents had lots of things growing in their gardens and the markets were also full of goods. Some days, I would be sent to other work brigades; I once registered as a painter when a request went out and was sent to a barracks to scrub down rusty gas pipes and repaint them with an oil paint. Black market deals were also conducted during my ventures to other work sites. In this case, the soldiers bought some of the oil paint from us and diluted it with gas from their lighters. This also had the advantage of accelerating the painting work, since the thinner paint could be applied quicker.

One of my painting comrades was a stout man named Karl Barth from Saxony or Thuringia and had a good constitution and a highly-developed sense of dark humor. He once told me (speaking with the peculiar accent from his region): "Garl, if we make it back home in one piece, you have to come and visit me. I've got a restaurant near Schleitz, Zeitz, Kreizt, and I'll make you a fat piece of budderbämme" (a hearty portion of bread with butter and a choice of other toppings). When food would be given out he would say, in his funny accent, "The important thing is that we got it, our army ration." Sadly, about a year later, I was told by some of my comrades from Saratov that he had died from a rare prisoner illness. In the end, nothing came of the promised budderbämme.

Fear went around the Saratov encampment at the end of the following September. Rumor had it that a new working brigade was being put together for work in the forest for the coming winter. A shudder went down my spine upon hearing the news and knew that this could be a matter of

life or death for me: I wouldn't survive a second winter in the forest near Penza. The size and composition of the group began to slowly be known and, a few days later, the encampment commander published the names of those who were to be sent off. Mine was now also on the list.

A time that would be extremely testing on my nerves had now begun. I hastily searched for any possibility to avoid the relocation and started going through every possible and impossible plan. The only real solution would have been an illness — but I had mixed feelings about getting sick. On the morning of the deportation, I was feeling so lousy that I checked myself into the medical station. The medic did a check-up, using the only instrument that the Russians had for such occasions — a thermometer. I had a fever of 39 degrees and was told to return to my bed immediately. I crawled back onto my bunk and listened to the noises of my comrades around me. They were yelling, cursing and saying farewell to those that were staying behind. The noise subsided around midday as the relocation group had been sent off and the others were at their work stations. I remained in bed, amazed by the fact that I had managed to avoid the relocation. I had to report back to the medic in the evening and he took my temperature again, which, by then, had returned to normal. I was saved! I returned to work at the construction site the next day with the rest of my brigade, which had been reordered a bit during my absence.

I considered the whole ordeal to have been a miracle. My body must have produced the fever itself, stemming from the fear of the relocation and the knowledge of the upcoming loss of my sources of nourishment in Saratov.

I had set up fort on one of the middle bunks in the three-leveled bunks at the zemlyanka upon my arrival. Sometime

later, as a result of a prisoner regrouping, I had to move to the two-level bunks along the inner wall of the barracks. The inner wall was made of wooden planks that were stable but had gaps in them. A family of rats had set up their home between one of these gaps in the planks, about a meter above where I rest my head. To get in and out of their nest, they would scurry over my neighbor in the upper bunk and nearly across my face. I found it odd that these rats had set up their home in the barracks, where there was hardly anything for them to eat or gnaw on. We would sleep in our bunks fully clothed and, depending on the time of year, would use our coats as cushioning or as blankets and sleep either with our caps on or use them as pillows. Sometimes I could feel the rats crawling over my face in my sleep and sensed that they had cold little feet. The rats certainly were bold little creatures: I once attempted to stuff the gap in the plank with old rags one evening but by the next morning they had chewed through it and were back in action. I was finally able to block off their entrance with another plank, but soon realized it would be futile, since the wall had countless other gaps. At night, when everyone was in bed, I could hear the rats scurrying around on the floor, most likely headed to the kitchen area to gather food. I was never aware of any case of a rat bite, even on a sick prisoner, and never knew anyone to catch a disease from one of the rats; not in Saratov and not in any of the other encampments I was in.

As I already mentioned, I slept in a middle bunk at the end of one of the large rows. It was by no means a spot for the poor; you could even compare it to the bel étage of an apartment building or to the loge or gallery of an opera house. The oven was just across from the base of my bunk

and I could keep an eye on the western entrance of the barracks from my sleeping position.

To my great bewilderment, the Russians provided the medic with a supply of musical instruments for him to lend to the prisoners, including guitars, balalaikas and mandolins. I taught myself to play the mandolin when I was younger (money for private lessons was lacking) and decided to check one out from the medic. I would sit back in my loge seat, my legs hanging over the side bunk near the oven, and practice playing. A small Austrian, who sang quite well, would also hang around the oven on most evenings and we soon came together and formed a duo: he would sing and I would play my mandolin. His favorite song was 'Heut kommen d'Engel auf Urlaub nach Wean' (Vienna), which was a song suited for all times and places, even our prisoner encampment in Russia. We managed to gather an audience at times and even received modest applause when we were finished playing, which went to show that people's natural need for culture is always present, even among groups of diverse people living in adverse conditions.

One unfortunate day during my wanderings through the neighborhood next to our construction site, I was captured by as a Russian officer. I was about to make my way back to the site when he caught sight of me and yelled out, "Stoi - ldy syuda!" which means, "Stop – come here!" He grabbed me by the shoulders and started yelling at me and asking what I was doing away from my work site. I was completely terrified and dumbfounded, as this had never happened before. I conjured up all the Russian I had learned and clumsily tried to formulate an excuse. He led me off and we made our way further in the opposite direction of

my brigade into an area of the town I was unfamiliar with. He started yelling at me again, saying that I was a dirty fascist and that he was going to lock me up in a prison cell. I started imagining my future inside a prison cell and I again summoned my limited language skills to convince him to let me go. I probably sounded like a newly-arrived Turk speaking broken German, saying something to the extent of, "I no want, what you do." Suddenly he stopped in his tracks, gave me a stern look and shouted, "Get of here!" I managed to utter 'Spasiba!' two times as I turned and ran off, disappearing around the corner of a house. It took me a few moments to get my bearings again and once I had, I briskly walked the rest of the way to the construction site, letting out a huge sigh of relief on the way. I didn't want to imagine what would have become of me, had the officer locked me up. This again went to prove that the Russians had the good-natured souls of farmers. Back at the construction site, some of the men had started to worry about me, since I had never before been gone for that long and it was nearly the end of the working day. On the way back to the barracks, I told some of my friends what I had gone through and they were glad that I got away unharmed.

There is another experience, quite different from the one I've just narrated, that I would also like to tell. A quote from Goethe's work 'Faust' is a good introduction to the story:

Once more ye waver dreamily before me,
Forms that so early cheered my troubled eyes!
To hold you fast doth still my heart implore me?
Still bid me clutch the charm that lures and flies?
Ye crowd around! come, then, hold empire o'er me,

As from the mist and haze of thought ye rise.

Two such forms appeared before me once, when I found myself in an old wooden house that was in particularly good condition and had a garden. As I was walking by one day, I immediately noticed the figure of an old man with gray hair at the front door of the house. He had caught my attention because he didn't look anything like the worker and farmer types that were given preference by the Soviets. I was about to pass by the house without stopping when he suddenly motioned me over with a friendly wave, as though he was expecting visitors. We greeted each other and before I could introduce myself, he knew who I was and where I came from. We went into the garden through a gate and he started to talk about Russia in the times of the czar (tsarskoye vremya oychin kharasho), which he said was much better than the Russia of current times. He told me that he also knew some Germans, but didn't see any during the war, only the German war planes (nemetzki samelot) that flew overhead — but no bombs had fallen. (Bombs were most likely in short supply by the time they flew over Saratov). His wife came out of the house and greeted me as well, presenting me with bread and other small items. The time passed quickly and I soon had to excuse myself and hurry back to the construction site. I didn't get around to any other homes that day owing to my long chat with the couple, but the visit left a lasting impression on me.

What I possess, as if far off I'm seeing,
And what has vanished, now comes into being.

Goethe

Saratov was on the western side of the Volga River, situated among hills that descended down into the river. The city was built in a style from the czar times and the center

of the town was filled with stone administrative buildings as well as some schools and a barracks. Almost all of the houses surrounding the center were constructed out of wood, with bases of stone. The streets on the flat parts of the city were exactly parallel and perpendicular — as though measured and laid with a protractor. The wooded houses, adorned with gardens and engravings, had a certain beauty and coziness to them. Deeply dug ravines made their way down from the higher elevations and into the Volga, with houses built on either side of them. An ancient streetcar, which was usually packed full of passengers, operated in the city center and in some of the outlying areas. I never once saw a motor vehicle in the city, other than the cargo trucks that delivered essential goods. There were also very few paved streets, most of them being made of packed clay that became hard when the weather was hot. When rain fell, which happened quite often, the streets became impossible for the pedestrians to even walk on. Puddles would form everywhere and the sidewalks became as slippery as ice. The Russians approached these facts of life with patience and resignation, not grumbling over the unavoidable.

I experienced another mishap later in October. Our working brigade of about 60 men had been stationed at a barracks, which was about half an hour away from the main encampment, for a few days. Every morning before the marching columns set off, the routine counting of the prisoners took place. The working brigades were arranged in columns behind the main gates and would be counted a second time by the watchmen as they exited, every man's name being written down in the order they had exited, after which the column would be handed over to the next group watchmen. The same process was repeated in rever-

se upon our return. Each watchman was required to bring back the same number of men that he had left with. The lists were closely reviewed and each prisoner checked off. If everything was in order, then the watchmen could be relieved from service for the day.

We were assigned with basic tidying and cleaning tasks at the barracks. I noticed that there were large apartment blocks inhabited by officers adjacent to the military buildings. After several days of careful consideration, I finally came to the decision that I would go begging at the officer apartments. I knew that I would be taking a great risk, considering the current state of events, but, as usual, the hunger in my stomach won out in the end. After talking my plan over with the other men in my brigade, I set off. My surprise at the success of my venture was as large as the amount of food that I managed to collect. I was mostly given gourmet products from the wives of the officers, which otherwise would have been impossible to come by. I got white bread, apples, melons, carrots, tomatoes and sometimes an egg. I stuffed my face full of the food I was given and then packed my bag, putting the larger items into the bread sack. When I got back, I divided up the rest of the winnings among my work mates.

One afternoon as I was making my way out of an officer apartment block — with exceptionally few collection items in my bag — I again had the misfortune of running into a Russian officer. He gave me an angry look and demanded to know what I was doing here. After a moment or two of shock, I began with my normal excuse: “I was just asking if anyone needed wood sawed.” He gave me a blank look, rolled his eyes, raised his right finger in warning and continued up the stairs. It seemed that this encounter had

caught the officer so off guard that he didn't even have the energy or patience left to think of an appropriate way to respond. I rushed off and ran all the way back to the work site, again realizing that I had been extremely lucky — there was no wood to be found in these apartment blocks whatsoever; another fact that probably confused the officer and caused him to shrug off the encounter.

The excuse about sawing wood did, however, have a legitimate basis: We were sometimes allowed to saw or split wood for residents in the houses around our work site that received wood deliveries. I would often volunteer for the service when I wasn't too hungry and had the extra time on my hands. I would not only receive food for my efforts but also money.

When I got back to the work site, going directly to the worker gathering point, my heart nearly leaped out of my chest when I realized that the gathering point was deserted; the men had gone back to the encampment. I had lost track of time and delayed myself by half an hour, distracted by my greed and the begging. I had no other choice than to go back alone and report to one of the watchman. When I got back, I was immediately thrown in a detention cell, despite my attempts to justify myself. As soon as the door to the cell slammed shut behind me, I crouched down in a corner and consumed what was in my bread sack, afraid that its contents would be taken away if they were found. When I was done, I began studying the inscriptions on the walls that had been drawn or scraped in by the previous inhabitants. I lost interest about an hour later and started hitting the door of the cell and calling out to the guards. To my surprise, one of them came over and opened the door, permitting me go with him into the guardroom with the others.

The guards were all young officer cadets who hadn't experienced much, if any, of the war.

I can still clearly remember the detention cell and the way it looked, as though I had been in it just yesterday, probably since it was the first time in my life that I sat in a jail cell. The young soldiers were all excited by the fact that they had a living and breathing German prisoner among them. They asked me all sorts of questions in order to test my intelligence. They all knew a bit of German and had all attended a more advanced school where German was the primary foreign language. I showed them my photos, which had amazingly made it through countless searches and always impressed the Russians. The word kultura was mentioned again and again, which didn't mean 'culture' in this case but referred to the ideas of 'clothes', 'housing' and 'hygiene'. The Russians would say 'nix kultura' when someone was walking around unshaven, for example. At one point they asked me if I knew who Stalin was, which turned into a perfect opportunity for me to show off my knowledge. I promptly responded, "Stalin is the great leader of the victorious Soviet Union, who was born in the year 1879 in Georgia with the name Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili." They all sat there astounded by the idea that a lousy Friiitzy and Fascist could know so much about their Stalin. I immediately took the opportunity to ask for something to eat, saying that I was terribly hungry. I was disappointed to learn that there wasn't a crumb of bread to be had in the whole station. I am sure that the soldiers would have given me something, had there been something there.

The whole mess was wrapped up about an hour later. Two watchmen from my encampment, the both of them quite amicable, came to pick me up from the cell. We went back

on foot and reached the encampment about half an hour later. All sorts of thoughts were rushing through my mind during the walk back; I had no idea how the encampment administration would react to my absence and what sort of scheming they would accuse me of. My other comrades had given them no clues as to my whereabouts — they were worried about risking the future of the food provisions that I provided them. I felt bad for the two Russian watchmen that were responsible for us at the construction site, since they were the ones that had to report me as a missing prisoner. There had surely been a long period of uncertainty before my reappearance was reported. The three of us approached the guard building, with me in the middle. The closer we got, the more nauseous I started to feel.

I was expected when we arrived at the guard station and taken into a side room, where two sergeants were waiting for me. When I entered, they proceeded to beat me with their fists, feet and gun butts. They yelled at me and shouted every curse word and threat that they had in their repertoire, demanding to know where I had been and why I hadn't been present at the march-off. I made up a story of having been stuck at the latrine with diarrhea, unable to leave due to the intensity and thus missed the march-off. They were having none if it and continued the relentless pounding.

I soon fell to the floor and curled myself up like a hedgehog, trying to minimize the surface area that could be beaten and better protecting my head from the strikes. It was the middle of October at the time and we had received our winter clothing already, which was lucky for me since they provided excellent padding, dampening the blows from the two sergeants. Once they were done with the beating, they began

going through my bread sack and searching my clothes. When their search turned up nothing, they began to regain their composure and act more humane. Eventually, all that remained of their fury was a gruffness in their voice and a disparaging look in their eyes. I collected my clothing once they were done with the search. They were unsure about how they should proceed and stood idly in contemplation for a while longer. Finally, one of them looked at me and yelled, "Chiiitryj!" which would translate into 'wise guy' or 'swindler', and then the other one yelled, "Get lost you blyad fascist!" ('blyad' meaning something like 'son of a bitch'). I turned around and bolted out. When I got back to the barracks, I was sad to learn that soup and bread had already been distributed for the evening. That fact ended up being more painful than the beating I had just received. My other comrades casually greeted me with a 'hello' when they saw me. I walked away almost completely unscathed except for a few bruises on my back and on my legs. I went to work as usual with my brigade the next day.

It was now the end of November and the temperature was starting to dip below freezing and the first snow had also already fallen. Our winter clothing again consisted of old uniforms from the Red Army, though this year, the quality was noticeably better than it had been last winter; the upgrade was to our great advantage. There were some nice pieces among those we were given and some lucky men even looked like normal Russians when they were fully clothed. We were given felt boots to protect against the frost and lined caps to wear on our heads that were called shappka by the Russians and had flaps that came down to cover our ears. We were taken to the banya in the city every two weeks for a delousing. Although our nutritional sta-

tes weren't optimal, they could be considered satisfactory, considering our status as prisoners of war. As long as we weren't ill, we could generally be satisfied with the state of affairs in Saratov.

Relocation to Kuybyshev

I would now like to shed light on a few of the immensely tedious processes that all prisoners of war in Russia, regardless of encampment, had to endure to the point of insanity.

The first of these were the body searches that happened on an ad hoc and very regular basis, usually catching most of us by surprise. The first of these searches was done immediately after capture and nearly everyone's watches, money, weddings rings, other rings, jewelry, weapons and guns were taken away. This was considered the tribute that we had to pay to the victorious soldiers. The further we went into Russia, the less that was found during the searches. Despite that, it was still amazing how many goods the prisoners were able to smuggle through. The procedure was always the same: our bodies were patted down, our bags were turned out, our bread sacks were searched, and we were sometimes even ordered to take off our shoes. Goods could also be found hidden under some people's caps.

Body searches would later be carried out at the encampments in irregular intervals and also prior to each relocation and every transport. It was quite easy to pilfer things from the various work sites and at all encampments I was ever in, every other prisoner possessed a knife that had been put together from pieces of saw blades – either from a work site or from an encampment. A booming trade was the result of these smuggled products. Cans, combs, and even rings made of coins were crafted by the men. Following each search, the total stock of goods that the prisoners possessed was usually reduced by half.

I myself had photos with me that I had since before the war – they were pictures of me with friends and family. Somehow,

the photos managed to escape confiscation up until the very last search, which took place before the trip home from the Polish border at Brest-Litovsk. We were strictly forbidden to take items home that had print or writing on them. I destroyed the photos just before the last search in order to avoid any possible repercussions, since I had heard stories of men suddenly getting caught and sent back into Russia. We learned that, on account of the Russian security police, we couldn't consider ourselves finally home until we had crossed the border into West Germany; even East Germany was under the influence of the Soviets.

Another ritual, similar to that of the body search, was the health inspection. They would be carried out about every four to six weeks at the main encampments, where the living conditions were fair. That schedule could not be kept at the subcamps outside of the cities – where I spent much of my time in Russia — which resulted in much higher mortality rates. An appropriate room would be sought out and a commission comprising three or four Russian doctors would set up shop. They were always in uniform and were mainly women. A long row of completely naked prisoners would form behind the door and each prisoner would have to come forward for inspection when his name and the name of his father were called out (as mentioned before, it is common in Russia to be addressed by one's own name along with the name of one's father — or one's mother in the case of women). We would step forward, turn in a circle once and would be visually analyzed by the doctors. The assessments were just as basic as the Russian health system itself: A piece of skin would be pinched together and if the wrinkles remained together for a long time, the prisoner would be considered malnourished; if the skin quickly flattened again, the prisoner would be considered well-nourished. After

this simple test, each prisoner was given a work classification: The healthy went into work group 1, meaning they were capable of doing all tasks; the unhealthy went into work group 2, meaning they were only suitable for less strenuous tasks; the third classification was dystrophy 1, which meant the prisoner was unfit to work at all.

If the latter was the case, an 'OK' would be marked down, which stood for 'otdyhayushaya komanda' or 'rest order'. The prisoners would switch the initials around and refer to the order as 'KO', in reference to boxing. The health inspections were referred to as 'meat inspections' by the prisoners.

Those classified with dystrophy would live up to their 'KO' classification. (The word 'dystrophy', by the way, means 'malnourished' in medical terminology.) Those that received the classification 'dystrophy II' were sent directly to the sick bay. The men with a regular dystrophy classification were, depending on the encampment facilities, sent to a separate barracks for four weeks, during which time they would be exempt from work and were given extra food — this would last up until the next medical inspection. There was always speculation among the prisoners regarding the actual qualification of the Russian medical staff. We concluded that most of the medics didn't have the sort of academic education that was required of medics in Germany. The status of the Russian medics could probably be compared to that of a German medical sergeant. Though we did also assume that among the higher ranked medics, there were also many with an academic education.

Another one of the Russian's overly basic assessment methods was determining if a prisoner was sick or not sick. This was based solely on the reading of a thermometer. Less than 38 degrees Celsius meant healthy and more than 38 degrees Celsius meant sick. The only exception was – figuratively spea-

king – those that already had their heads under their arms.

Bread took on a mystic role at the encampments. Most thoughts would constantly be revolving around bread and it became the symbol of life and death. It was the subject of conversations, hopes, dreams, and cravings and, at the same time, the cause of violent confrontations. I never witnessed anyone calling for sausage or potatoes in times of desperation; the cry was always 'BREAD'. One would often think of German prisons, where bread and water was plentiful, and relate it to perfection.

Before the war, Russian bread had been completely foreign to me, being that I had never been to Russia. Stalin's orders were that every prisoner should receive 600 grams of bread per day — the same amount as the normal Russian citizens, provided that the prisoner and the citizen fulfilled their assigned work tasks. Here I have to stress the word 'should'. During transports, the bread would be pre-sliced and would, as a result, immediately dry out. It became so hard that it could only be eaten when soften with some sort of liquid. We would then receive a smaller amount of our allotted bread since the liquid would add to the total weight.

The significance of bread as a food first became clear to me during my imprisonment. I had never had a lack of it prior to that. Now that I am no longer a prisoner of war and bread is readily available, I must shamefully admit that my respect for bread has diminished.

This reminds me of an experience that I had in 1943 when I was in southern France. At the time, I was in a unit that was stationed at an airfield on the Mediterranean Sea. We had the task of protecting the field from air attacks. There was a prisoner of war encampment not too far from the base that was at the time filled with Vietnamese POWs who had fought with

the French army. No one had been put in charge of their food distribution and they were beginning to starve. The administration took notice of this and assigned a group of men to collect provisions for their comrades from the surrounding areas. One of these groups, consisting of three or four men, came over to our post one day and asked us for bread. They couldn't speak a word of German and were also unable to pronounce the 'r' in the German word for bread, brot. We made fun of them and called them 'the little brown girls with the slanty eyes' since they seemed extremely short to us. We were, however, impressed by their discipline and by the good condition they kept their uniforms and puttees in, considering the circumstances. We took some photos with the men for fun and for our own exotic amusement, which I still posses to this day. They came to us regularly and we gave them bread and anything else that we had in overabundance, except for red wine, which, to our surprise, they didn't drink. At the time, I couldn't have begun to fathom the idea that I would end up in a similar situation as those Vietnamese men.

„And misfortune moves quickly"

From „The Bell" by Friedrich Schiller

Another staple food in Russia, besides soup and bread, was kasha, which is a sort of mash. A Russian once told me that real kasha is made with millet, but it can also be made with potatoes, semolina, buckwheat or squash. I was shocked to see that millet was used as a food for human consumption, since my only experience of it was my grandfather feeding the young chickens on the farm with it. Kasha is the primary meal of the common folk in Russia. It is piled on a plate, an indent is made on top, and sunflower oil is poured into the indentation. I unfortunately only had the chance to eat kasha a handful of times during my imprisonment.

A somewhat thicker soup would be served to us on some Sundays and on national holidays. After we had finished eating, discussions would sometimes ensue as to whether what he had just eaten was kasha, a kasha-like soup or a soup-like kasha. In times when we were hungrier than normal, our conversations would revolve around food and recipes from back home. I myself had decided to eat millet kasha on every anniversary of my return home as a sort of thanksgiving meal. Unfortunately, many years have already passed and this plan still has not been carried out.

Once things finally settled into place at the encampment and everyone had gotten used to the organization, we were given small amounts of tobacco along with our meals, which I found quite surprising. The brand of tobacco was new to us: 'Machorka'. It was only known by a few men who had spent a longer time in Russia; I had never even heard the name before. The tobacco leaves were very large, like large wood shavings, the size being a result of the fact that the whole plant — leaves, stems, stock and all — was harvested. The Machorka tasted a bit sweet and could only be rolled with newspaper. The best paper to use was from the famous newspaper 'PRAVDA', translated

'truth'. The words 'kuritelnaya bumaga' were printed on one of the sides of the Pravda, and read 'smokable paper'. The pages could be folded into the shape of a harmonica and then separated, creating small sheets that were just the right size for a Machorka cigarette. Rolling the newspaper was then the hard part and took some practice to get right. After rolling, both ends of the cigarette would be pressed together so that the tobacco didn't fall out. Some of the Russians rolled the paper into a conical shape, bending the open end up, stuffing it with tobacco and smoking it like a pipe.

The tobacco came in brown paper packets about the size of a bar of soap and it became a valuable good for trading. The non-smokers among us could easily trade it for bread and also make deals with the Russians at the worksites. I wasn't a particularly heavy smoker and would never have thought to trade my bread for tobacco. The tobacco, however, turned out to be an effective substance for suppressing hunger. Of all the Russians that I met at the worksite, not one of them was a non-smoker.

It was now the end of November and I was still in Saratov. By this time, we had all been officially registered by the Russians and had our own personal files or dossiers. We were at one point required to write a curriculum vitae, covering the span of our military career, including accounts of our exact locations during the war, as well as our ranks and the units that we served in. The most important part, of course, was our service time in the Soviet Union. Special inspections were done, during which we were checked for the blood group tattoo from the SS that could be found on underside of the arm. I hadn't realized that this existed and had to undergo this check several times during my imprisonment. The prisoners that had scars on any part of the underside of their arms or on their armpits would usually end up having trouble with the Russians, since they were suspected of having removed their SS tattoo. The prisoners lacked evidence and the Russians were therefore suspicious. Some of the men that were found to have served in the SS were sorted out while others remained. This was one of the great puzzles of the Russian organization that I never figured out. The blood group tattoo was referred to as 'the bird under the arm' in military jargon.

Around this time, a rumor started circulating about a possible relocation or deployment into an external subcamp. Fear

immediately set in among the prisoners upon hearing this news. Winter was wood chopping season in Russia because the trees didn't have sap and were therefore easier to fell, especially during frosts. The atmosphere turned tense; everyone knew that there was usually some truth behind these leaked messages.

We soon found out that the rumor was true and, one evening, the names of about 80 men were called out for relocation, mine included. We were ordered to prepare to march off the next morning. Our next task was to try and figure out where we were headed. Some assumed we were off to a forest encampment, the more optimistic among us had the hope that we were going home. I knew that the miraculous fever I came down with last time would not manifest itself for a second time. I desperately searched for a way out but found none.

Around midday, we were marched off to the Saratov train station, loaded into two livestock wagons and waited to move out. No one knew where we were going, not even the Russian watchmen. We spent the whole night on the track, without any noise or movement. Most of the men had already eaten up the dried-out bread we had been given for the march.

During the night, I chatted with Günther Böhrs. I didn't want to have to leave Saratov, and knew that the forest would be my end. Günther told me a secret that still sends shivers down my spine today. He told me about his experience the night before, when he managed to break out of the encampment and walk the three kilometers down Uliza Rosa Luxemburg to Elisabeth Meinhard's house, in order to eat one last full meal and get some provisions for the relocation. Our encampment was situated on one of the main streets that led to the city center with the name Bolshaya Gornaya Uliza. The encampment was only surrounded by a thin barbed wire and was not well monitored.

The endeavor was risky, nonetheless. Being that Günther was Sorbian (a Slavic minority group in the Spreewald and Lower Lusatia), he knew some colloquial Russian and, as mentioned before, the clothing we had been given made us blend in with the locals. Upon hearing of his adventure, an idea came to my mind. When I told Günther, he didn't find it to be a good idea and tried to discourage me from going through with it, but I was determined to follow it through.

A few additional cars were attached to our train the night before, likely going on the same route. The doors to our car were opened at around six in the morning so that we could stretch out a bit. I went with the others to the railway embankment and started to observe the watchmen, waiting for the right moment to sneak away. When it came, I snuck behind our train car and made my way to the end of the train. When I reached it, I looked around and rolled under a train car to the other side of the embankment. I remained on the ground for a few minutes and then maneuvered myself around some obstacles, being sure to duck down, and went to a spot that was out of visual range of the guards. I surveyed the area again and as soon I was completely sure that I was safe from being discovered, a feeling of freedom and ease came over me. It felt as though I had just been healed of a fatal illness. All my feelings of fear and tension from the imprisonment were suddenly gone, turned into an indescribable feeling of joy and ecstasy, like that of drug addict who had just taken a hit. Reality soon asserted itself again and after a short break I started to make my way back in the direction of Saratov.

I was able to navigate my way through the city fairly easily on account of the various work brigades and that time I had fled after my capture. I decided to make my way in the direction of Uliza Rose Luxemburg, since I knew that area the best.

It was early in the morning and I didn't rush. I started the day with a round of begging, beginning to knock on doors at around 9 o'clock and continued on until I was full and had an adequate supply of extra food. I then went over to the public banya and warmed up in the lobby, where there was no one who would take notice of me. The banya was full of people but everyone kept to themselves and I blended right in with the clothes I had on. It was nice and warm inside and I soon began eating some of the food in my collection bag. Around midday, I made my way over to one of the prison camps that I knew how to get to. The encampment was nicknamed 'the ball encampment' since it had been built on the side of a ball bearing factory, and the prisoners were mainly sent to work in the adjacent factory. I reported to the guards at the entrance and said, "Ya vayennaplennyj," which meant, "I'm a war prisoner." They looked at me blankly and called over the encampment manager.

The commander didn't know what he should do with me and had a confused and calm expression on his face. He had probably never been confronted with a prisoner who voluntarily reported to a prison camp. As the situation developed, however, he became less amused. He started interrogating me at first and I told him a story I had made up of how I had left the train at the station to stretch for a short while and when I returned, the train had departed without me, which the watchmen probably first realized after the train had been underway for a while. After hearing this, the officer sent me to the barracks and I was assigned a bunk. When the other prisoners saw me, they came over and asked where I was from and how I had gotten here. I said that I was from Baden-Baden and, as soon as I did so, a figure came forward from the background and started speaking to me with a familiar accent. It turned

out to be an old gymnastics buddy of mine from the area of Weststadt, who was named Willi Wiederrecht. We spent the rest of the evening chatting and recounting stories from our hometown.

The ball encampment was musty, dim, sooty, and reeked of motor oil. It was just like a normal prison, with no contact to the outside world. The prisoners, in fact, didn't cross paths with any of the locals, which meant that there was also nothing to steal. My fellow plennyjs were pale, poorly fed, and the work was monotonous. I soon began to realize that I had miscalculated and put myself into a bad situation. My only consolation was that I had found Willi Wiederrecht from my hometown.

I was assigned to work the next day, following Lenin's motto: "Those who don't work also don't eat." We liked to turn the phrase around to anger the Russians, and would say: "In Germany, those who don't work at least eat well." Our work consisted of simple cleaning tasks and didn't have any performance norms, which meant that we would usually work at a snail's pace when the natshalnik wasn't around.

It must have been on the third day at around 9 o'clock that I heard the order: "Hauger! Report to the guard station!" I had the feeling that nothing good was awaiting me. Two Soviet soldiers with machine guns around their necks and grimaces on their faces greeted me when I arrived. One of them shouted, "Gauger davay. Davay payehali!" which meant, "Hauger, let's go. March on." The Russians were unable to pronounce the 'h' at the beginning of my name. Luckily, I had my bread sack with me and everything else that I needed in Russia, such as my spoon and cookware. The two soldiers walked on either side of me and we set off to the nearest street car station. Saratov had a modest public transport system comprised of ri-

ckety old street cars that operated along the main streets. We stood on the platform and were immediately asked by the locals what was going on. I was only able to make out the word 'dizertirovat', which was repeated several times. The two Soviet soldiers, who were clearly proud of their assignment, told the passengers that they had captured a German deserter. The other passengers looked at me as though I was a rare sight.

After about an hour, we arrived at the encampment on Bolshaya Gornaya Uliza. The encampment was perched on a hill above the city and, on clear days, the Volga River was visible from the top. I was delivered to the commander of the encampment, who was waiting for me upon arrival. I was ready for anything. Again, a Russian miracle happened: He said that everything I had told the officers at the ball encampment was a lie. The train left the train station later that evening and the whole area had been searched for me beforehand. He had received news of my appearance at the ball encampment the following day. The commander took a few moments to collect his thoughts and then asked me if I had a lover in Saratov. I still remember the word he used: lyublya or lyubovniza. As he saw the confused expression on my face he shouted, "Get out of here and report back to the encampment!" I quickly turned around and dashed out. I couldn't believe that nothing bad had resulted from my escape from the relocation. Perhaps the officer believed that I was being protected by Saint Ivan of Novgorod.

I received a warm greeting from my other comrades at the zemlyanka when I got back. It took some time to retell the whole story in detail to the other men and they listened the whole time in disbelief. But everything I said was true and the proof was my presence before them. I had been drawn back to Saratov like the Jews drawn back to the Promised Land from

Egypt. I later discovered that the transport I was meant to be on was headed to Kuybyshev, a town north of Saratov, near a large bend in the Volga. The town had been called Samara in the time of the czar and has that name again today. The next day, I was assigned to a new work brigade, but, unfortunately, not to the one on Uliza Rosa Luxemburg. My former food gathering grounds were now lying around unused.

I should mention that I didn't have the time to bid Willi Wiederrecht farewell, due to my sudden departure and the fact that he was working at the time. I would see him again late in 1949, about a year after being released from my imprisonment. We ended up living on the same street and were neighbors for nearly a decade after our return and saw each other often. He was released from his imprisonment with hardly a scratch on his body and lived to the ripe old age of eighty.

There was one particular daily routine at the encampment that we all think back on with dread: the prisoner counts. They began upon our arrival at the first encampment in Fürstenwalde and were carried out right up to the end of our imprisonment when we left Russia at the Brest-Litovsk border. We were counted every time we changed locations, at every departure from the encampment, at every return to the encampment, at every fulfilling of an order and at every assignment; each time, the entire mass of prisoners had to line up and wait for further instruction. The count was in most cases wrong the first time and would have to be repeated all over again from the beginning. We would be put into new groups and the guards would discuss among themselves while the rest of us would complain and start cursing. The whole ordeal was particularly miserable in winter and when there was bad weather. We would freeze and get cold feet, particularly frustrating when we had just returned from work. Body searches were

also often paired with the counts, since smuggled and stolen goods were always to be found. The Russians were unwavering as far as the count was concerned and sometimes, when the number was off or goods were confiscated, the process lasted for more than an hour.

About a week after my return to the encampment, I was again greeting with the words, "Hauger, report to the guards!" This time, I assumed it would be serious and that punishment would finally be given; my fear of having to leave Saratov set in again. Two armed Red Army soldiers were waiting for me and I was ordered to collect my belongings. We then left the encampment and made our way to the street car station and then went on to the train station. I tried to press the two for information as to my destination, but they remained silent. The two of them were noticeably older than the young kids that had picked me up from the ball encampment and were obviously more experienced. The train station was bustling with life: masses of people in civilian and military clothing were walking in every direction and I found the sight of them quite impressive. Many of the civilians were carrying huge suitcases, sacks and boxes. It was evident that life had returned to normal since the end of the war.

We had a long wait at the station before the train I was meant to be on finally arrived. One of the guards remained by my side, while the other went to the train station hall, preoccupying himself with all the things that could be looked at and bought. After about an hour, the other guard also left and instructed me to go into a corner and wait until he returned. It seemed to be poor judgment, since I could easily have run off, but the question was: Where to? I tried to get some bread from the people passing by, but gave up after a while when I remained unsuccessful. Eventually, the two soldiers came back, both

in good spirits, and continued waiting with me on the platform. I managed to build some camaraderie between myself and the soldiers and I finally got them to tell me where I was going. They said I was being sent to Kuybyshev and also told me where the others prisoners were.

The train finally set off in the early evening. We ended up traveling the entire night, even though the distance to Kuybyshev was only 330 kilometers. The train car that we were in was completely packed and the start of the trip was marred by chaos. Everyone was looking for a place where they could settle down in an attempt to somewhat comfortably pass the long night. My two watchmen used their military clout and had an easy time securing us seats, at least compared to the farmer women, who had come to the market to sell their excess goods. Everything settled down about an hour into the trip. The Russian civilians were not all too demanding and were used to dealing with austerity and shortages.

As we were sitting, the other passengers quickly started up conversation with the two soldiers, asking what sort of odd prisoner transport was being done. Their interest was piqued upon learning that I was a German prisoner of war. Most of them had never seen a German soldier, as the area around the Volga had been spared of the war and its ravages. One could tell that these civilians carried themselves differently than those from the war-torn regions; there was not a trace of hostility in them. When it was time to eat, I received the same amount of food as my two guards. It was the perfect opportunity to stuff myself with bread and I secretly hoped that the trip would take a very long time. I tried to make conversation with those around me, but I was limited to the few phrases I knew in Russian: “Berlin kapuut,” “Vayna,” (war), and I was apparently told that I was no fascist, but a good person and would

"skoro domoy" (go home) soon. The extended 'kapuut' was an expression that meant 'finished', 'completed', 'done' and also 'dead', and held more meaning than our short, German 'kaputt'.

My good-natured guards eventually delivered me to my new encampment at Kuybyshev. When I arrived, my name was entered into the records, I was assigned a bunk and a work brigade, and encampment life went on as usual. I was waiting to receive my real punishment the whole time, but, to my relief, nothing ever happened, though I could never quite figure out why. The Russians probably just couldn't make sense of the fact that a prisoner bound for Kuybyshev would voluntarily journey back to Saratov and left the matter alone.

I met all of my former friends from the previous zemlyanka in Kuybyshev, and I even found Günther Böhrs again. There was much to tell them. I went to work the next day and my brigade was assigned to a new building development in the town. Quickly-built apartment buildings were being constructed, the ones we refer to today as plattenbauten. Our assignment was to spray caulk from large metal containers onto surfaces with hoses. The poisonous caulk foamed and sprayed easily and we had to avoid coming into too much contact with it but, by the end of the day, we still managed to come out as white as stucco-workers. The encampment was within the city limits and it was the first encampment that had a clear sense of organization. I had never experienced anything like it during my time Russia. We had a mess hall (stolovaya) and though the portions weren't large enough for the hard work we were doing, the meals were at least served regularly.

I got to meet men that belonged to the organization 'ANTIFA' for the first time. I also came across the prisoner magazine, 'Neues Deutschland' (New Germany), also known as

'Freies Deutschland' (Free Germany), for the first time, which was published by the National Committee of Antifascists. The committee consisted of mostly long-term prisoners that had come to an agreement with the Soviets to work with them and help spread political ideology among the prisoners. Their acceptance was debated, however, as most plennyjs suspected that there were no actual political convictions in the writings of the ANTIFA, and that the men were collaborating in order to better their living conditions, which was pure optimism. Members of the ANTIFA generally weren't embraced by the other prisoners and were usually judged with envy and suspicion. The Russians never actually spoke of National Socialism or Nazism, but always of fascism, which wasn't wholly accurate. Even the name ANTIFA was an abbreviation for Anti-fascism.

Most of the prisoners were completely disinterested in politics. They were more preoccupied with their daily bread rations, the lacking nutrition, the hard work, and their uncertain futures. For this reason, a thorough political reeducation was not feasible. Most of the former soldiers had already gotten National Socialism out of their systems anyway.

It was hard for us to relate to the 'Neues Deutschland' newspaper since it was very clearly influenced by Soviet propaganda and went to great lengths to laud the Soviet Union and its ability to rebuild the 'Eastern Zone'. Praise of Marxism and Leninism could be found in every single article, while the West was constantly demonized for being capitalistic, extortive and aggressive. All of this made it impossible to get a clear conception of the outside world or of our heimat.

A few days after my arrival in Kuybyshev, one of the infamous health checks took place. On account of the fact that I had been well-fed in Saratov and kept myself in good condi-

tion, I was given the designation 'Group 1' and was thus fit for all types of work.

It was now the middle of winter and a new rumor started getting around: There was a new external subcamp being set-up. I had a feeling that I would soon be laying eyes on this new subcamp, and my prediction ended up being accurate.

About sixty men were chosen for reassignment. We were then grouped into separate brigades and sent to work at the construction site one last time before being sent off. The guessing game began anew and we watched as the guards went back and forth, preparing for our departure, but we remained clueless as to what or where or when. Christmas came and went in the time that we were waiting, and this was my second Christmas as a Russian prisoner. A small group of artists and musicians had been assembled, with support from the Russians, and would from time to time give comedic or cultural performances for the other prisoners. When a program was in the works, the group was freed from its work duties and could use the time to organize and rehearse. When the program pleased the Russians, they would say, "Kultura yest," which was supposed to mean, "These men are cultured." I tried to get myself into the Christmas spirit around this time, but it was difficult. As I mentioned before, the Russians didn't celebrate Christmas as a holiday.

We finally moved out on the morning of New Year's Day, 1947. We were loaded onto supply trucks, which had all come from the Americans during the war to help the Russians in the fight against the Germans. We drove about 15 to 20 kilometers north along the banks of the Volga and our destination was a small town directly on the river. When we reached it, we were unloaded and counted. It was a beautifully clear Sunday and the temperature was around 20 degrees below freezing. We

were taken on foot by a guide who was familiar with the landscape to the other side of the river. We started on the eastern side of the river, where the fields gently slopped into the water and started to make our way over to the western side, which was covered with hills that rolled into the water. The river was frozen over, but not into a flat, clear surface as one might imagine, but rather into a craggy array of ice sheets that looked like something from another planet. At some points along the crossing we even lost sight of the opposite shore among the labyrinth of the ice sheets.

We marched on in a single-file line with the guide at the front and the watchmen bringing up the rear. We passed by areas where the river was exposed and the water gurgled and sprayed through the openings, the floor giving way a bit as we passed over it. There was a feeling of timidity among the prisoners and even the watchmen seemed worried. We were completely in the hands of the pathfinder, but the man knew the way well — it wasn't the first time that he had guided a marching column across the icy river. I can't quite say how long it took us to cross, since I lost my sense of time, but, at some point, we found ourselves safely on the other side.

The civilian continued on with us and we journeyed another two or three kilometers to a small settlement on a slope along the river. There was a large building constructed for housing the prisoners there and we took up our quarters. I won't go into details about the interior of the building and will only say that it looked just like the barracks in the forest near Penza. The building didn't have the appearance of a prisoner encampment — it was missing the barbed-wire fence — but chances for a successful escape were still zero.

Other prisoners had clearly already paid a visit to this encampment, likely normal prisoners that were doing forced

labor service in the times before the war. There was an old limestone quarry in the area with a horizontal tunnel dug into the side of one of the slopes, and the entrance to the tunnel was about 150 meters above the river. The limestone that was quarried there must have been of a special quality, considering the impractical placing of the mine entrance. Nature lovers would have found the view over the river landscape one-of-a-kind. We didn't have the chance to take it in since we were worried about the unknown labor that was awaiting us. We were on a slope that went up about 400 meters and were directly at the large bend of the Samara-Volga Loop. There was a small mountain range at the bend called the Zhiguli Mountains. The area is now depicted on maps as a nature reserve along with the Kuybyshev Reservoir, which has likely flooded parts of the former quarry. A small hamlet with wooden houses, which were built for the Russian mine workers, was also near the entrance to the quarry. The workers were settled there with their families and the women were also commissioned to do some of the work. The residents were actually Tartars who had, for some reason, been forcibly resettled by the Soviets.

The next morning, we got up and made our way to the quarry for an introduction to the work. There was a director present and also two natshalniks — one responsible for the workers in the mine and another for the work at the outside facility. I was assigned to the group that had to work on the transports out in the open, which turned out to be the better placement of the two, as I was to soon discover. The transport of the mined stones was performed with iron trolleys that were pulled with steel cables using manpower and also with horses inside the mine. I was assigned to work with another Russian, and our job was to direct the incoming trolleys onto a turntable and then push them forward until they could be emptied

through an opening on top. The contents of the trolleys were emptied with an iron hook and then sent down the cliff along a ravine to the banks of the Volga. The steel cable would often come loose and the turntable would often come off its bearings. When this happened, we would use the opportunity to take a much-needed break. Every time there was a malfunction, we would call over the specialist — a title the Russians liked to apply to anyone who had even just a little more knowledge of something than those around him.

When the turntable came off of its bearings, we had to remove the whole thing with a crowbar and re-oil the ball bearings. One day, I was quite surprised to read the inscription 'Krupp Essen 1928' on the bottom of the turntable. It just went to show how old and in ruin the whole facility actually was.

The Russians didn't like when there were malfunctions, and would yell and curse heavily when one happened. The reason was that their performance norm would have to be decreased due to the delay, which then in turn decreased the wage they would receive at the end of the day.

The weather was well below freezing and snow had been falling for weeks now. It was apparently comfortably warm inside the quarry, but according to my other comrades, the work was intolerably difficult, and I was glad to be on the outside. I shuddered at the thought of working under the ground all day like a mole. Weeks later, on account of an irregularity, I got a taste of the work inside the quarry and all of my negative preconceptions were proven true.

Our food portions were — as at all external subcamps — less than satisfactory and, after only four weeks, the first men started to die. The first victim was named Kitzinger and was from Stuttgart. He and I became somewhat close since he was the only man in the group that came from my area. The cause of

death was clear: general exhaustion and hunger edema. He spent his dying days lying almost motionlessly in his bunk while we were busy at the quarry. The watchman assigned to the barracks called to me one morning at around ten and said, "Kitzinger kapuuut!" It would prove extremely difficult to bury him in the stony and frozen ground. I ended up visiting his parents after my return home, but spared them the details of his last days

Inevitably, the state of health of the whole group sank from day to day, as did our output. Every week, the number men that were ill and unable to work would increase. A report of the state of affairs in the encampment eventually made its way back to Saratov, and a medical commission was sent to check things out. Some of the ill were sent back to the main encampment and our food supply was increased for a few days, but, after a short time, the normal Soviet conditions returned. New men were sent in to replace the ones that had been sent back. The local civilians didn't have good access to food at the time either, and goods were exchanged during the transports and relocations.

The days passed slowly and agonizingly with the same daily grind — we dragged ourselves to the mine every morning and dragged ourselves back to the encampment every evening. There was no variation to our work as there had been back at the main encampment. We would eat our bread and soup in the evening and then immediately doze off in our bunks. I started to notice that my own state of health, which I had worked so hard on back in Saratov, was also beginning to deteriorate. I spent the days and the nights trying to find a way out of the misery and I knew that the only salvation would be a return to the main encampment. Ever since Kitzinger died, I had no one left to discuss my plans with as I used to do with

Böhrs or with others. Seeing that the ill were taken away made me yearn for an illness of my own or for a high fever. But neither of these manifested themselves, and I soon considered fabricating an accident, but had no idea how to go about this.

As we emptied the trolleys with the iron hooks, the heavy trolley lid would be lifted open and fastened. When the unloading was finished, it would be released and slam loudly back into place. This process required large amounts of strength. After some hesitation, I came to the decision that I would let the trolley lid smash some of the fingertips on my left hand. I had to make sure that the accident didn't seem construed. I picked the left hand because I would need the right one for my work, should I ever again return to life as a civilian. Those who have never found themselves in a similarly life-threatening situation can probably not comprehend just how difficult a decision this was to make; I had to choose between my finger tips and my life. I avoided my fate for a few days and finally, one morning, on a lousy day where the mood was depressive, I placed my fingers on the inside of the trolley and let the lid slam on them. My Russian working partner didn't realize what was going on until he heard me screaming and saw me holding my bleeding hand up in the air.

He immediately called the natshalnik, who eventually came rushing over with the watchman. Neither of them showed any signs of compassion or sympathy when they caught sight of my injury. A spate of yelling and curses came out of their mouths instead: "Simulant, fashist, blyad, sabakka, durak, zhiganskiy narod, chiiitry!" This series of words roughly translates to: "Slacker, fascist, tramp, bitch, idiot, gypsy, scoundrel!" They ordered me back to the encampment and brought me to the medic—who also served as the cook at the time—and

he bandaged me up. I felt almost no pain as a result of the shock and the freezing weather. I also realized that the injury wasn't at all that serious. Owing to an indentation on the edge of the trolley, only my ring finger and my middle finger were injured, resulting in a bruise and some damage to the outer bone. I was actually quite disappointed at first, since I would surely not be sent back to Kuybyshev on account of such minor injuries. Realizing this, I picked up a stone from the ground and hit the wounds a couple times over.

The medical cook had practically no medication to administer given the conditions, just some primitive bandages and iodine acquired from the armed forces. He bandaged me up as well as he could and I retreated to my bunk in order to recover from the shock and to await whatever was coming next. I was bombarded with questions from my fellow prisoners when they returned from work; news of my accident had spread quickly around the quarry and everyone wanted to know what had happened. I, of course, didn't tell them the truth, but rather the story I had also related to the Russians. I was told that the Russians continued discussing and cursing about my accident long after my departure. It wasn't clear to them what had happened and they reckoned it was done intentionally, but could not prove it, and knew that such an accident also could have happened on its own.

One of the guards came to pick us up the next morning. He yelled, "Gauger (Hauger) davay rabotty!" I had to report to work — as I figured would be the case once I got bandaged up. It was a Solomonic decision on the natshalnik's part: He didn't have any real evidence to punish me with but he also wasn't going to let me get off that easily. My Russian working partner also grumbled along with me but admitted after a while that he was glad to have me back, since he had gotten used to

working with me. The bandages made the work more difficult than usual but it was a minor obstacle considering my ability to withstand suffering at the time. Surprisingly, the whole affair didn't dampen my mood any further, but in fact had the opposite effect of giving me renewed energy and a desire to live. I was happy to still have my fingers and knew that my wounds would soon heal. In the end, I only went home with a scar, which can still be seen today. Later, in the late 70s, a large tumor developed under one of my nails, which I had to get removed by a surgeon in Rastatt named Dr. Borchardt. My professional life didn't end up being affected by the accident either. Shortly after this experience at the quarry, a new group of men were rounded up and sent back to the main encampment in Kuybyshev. Our subcamp had by this point lost almost 30% of its original man power.

We now move on to late March of the same year. The first signs of spring were beginning to make themselves visible and we noticed that our food portions were starting to get more plentiful and heartier. A directive must have come from the main encampment once they noticed that things were not going all too well at the quarry. The sergeant of our guards was also switched. Our mood improved, even though hunger was still prevalent. The snow was also starting to melt on the south sides of the slopes.

The bread that we ate at the subcamp had to be picked up from a Russian settlement about 10 kilometers away once a week. The path that lead to the settlement went north along the cliff of the Volga and could only be traversed on foot or on the small panye-horses that would carry the loads. Two prisoners were always taken along for the trip and everyone was eager to volunteer to go since it was a nice escape from the work at the quarry. I, unfortunately, never got the chance

to go on one of these trips since I wasn't particularly liked by the natshalnik.

I made a point to get on good terms with the new sergeant that had been assigned to the encampment. Every morning before the march to work and every evening after the march back from work, I had to fall in for the count on the sad, wasted gathering point. We would have to place our hands on our worn caps when we had been counted, which would be entered into the log book, and then continue on. He was proud of his military reports and also treated us very humanely.

Let's get back to the bread expeditions: It was rare for there to ever be enough bread brought back on the caravan to feed all the men. Sometimes there hadn't been enough flour and other times the oven didn't work back at the settlement. Those sent for the pick up sometimes had to wait a whole two days before they were given the order. The prisoners used the down time to beg for food at the houses in the settlement and to hunt for cats, which they would secretly smuggle back. When a cat — and sometimes even two — did make it back, they would be grilled at the encampment on that evening and the others would look on in anticipation. I can still remember the tender, white cat meat that fell off the bones when eaten. A certain hierarchy and clique formed among the prisoners, and those that didn't belong to it would be left out of a share in the riches.

The encampment building was made of limestone. One of those classic Russian ovens made of stone and clay stood at the middle of the room and was meant to warm the whole building. The oven was an ingenious invention that made surviving those brutal winters in Russia possible. It had an opening that we called the pipe and it was an ideal place in which to cook things or to keep food warm, which we seldom had

the opportunity to do, other than the cats, whose intestines would even been eaten as though they were some delicious delicacy.

On Good Friday of that year, I got to witness a special display of nature: the iced-over Volga River at one point began to crack with a deafening sound and the ice sheets started to pile themselves up on the banks of the river. Whoever was standing near the river at that point would have had to head for higher ground, so as to not get crushed. The ice sheets also made the path that the bread caravan used impassable for several days. The once mighty ice sheets got smaller and smaller with each passing day and soon one could see the water again. After about 14 days, small pieces of ice came floating down the river, with an occasional larger straggler. Not long after that, the shipping lanes were reopened and the impressive looking ships could once again be seen making their way up the river to the north. Seeing this great display of nature had the effect of lifting my spirits—the end of the winter was now clearly upon us. Stinging nettles began to crop up in protected areas and we were soon eating stinging nettle spinach again as we had a year ago in the forest near Syzran-Penza. My wound had also healed by this time and I could again work without the bandages.

Once the Volga was open for shipping, the accumulated limestone could be transported from the quarry. The stones would be sent thundering down the slope of the hill, down a ravine all the way to the loading point at the banks of the river. A barge appeared one day and anchored itself directly on top of the limestone deposit. Pieces of timber and planks were then placed from the barge into the water, forming ramps, which gave the crew access to the deposited stones. The ramps were each large enough to allow one man and his wheelbarrow to cross them at a time and the loading happened in shifts, one

day shift and one night shift, of eight hours each. The night shift began in the evening, once dusk had set in and the loading ramp would be brightly lit with flood lights. The ramps were so tightly stacked along the barge that about 25 to 30 men were able to work during each shift. All available men were called to assist in the loading, the Russians as well as the prisoners, so that the barge could sail off as soon as possible. At the beginning of the each shift, the men would stand on the banks of the river with their wheelbarrows ready and wait for the sign to begin. The natshalnik responsible for loading had a whistle and as soon as he blew it, all the workers sprang into action: they would load their wheelbarrows, push them up to the hull of the barge, unload the contents, turn around and wait for the next whistle blow to make their way back down the ramps and start the process again. We would receive a break every 50 minutes, during which time we could relax, smoke and drink some water. Water would be fetched directly from the river with buckets attached to ropes. At the top of the hour, the whistle would again sound and the next round would begin. The work itself was brutal and the natshalnik would have to allow for longer breaks when he saw that the workers' strength was giving way.

The nights were already warm and the moonlight could be seen glimmering on the surface of the river as the water would splash against the hull of the barge. Sometimes the melancholy melody of the 'Volga Sailors' Song' would come to mind and put me in a mood I imagined was similar to the mood of the exiles and indentured servants from the czar times that we read about and saw depictions of in our school books. Solzhenisyn wrote about them in his work 'The Gulag Archipelago'.

All this toil resulted in a weekly deterioration in the state of health at the encampment. The food we were given wasn't

enough to compensate for the energy that we were expending through the work. The men in the quarry were also lacking daylight and fresh air. I once was sent inside of the mine with an order to fetch something. The figures of the men in the mine looked like ghosts in the bowels of hell to me and I knew that I myself would not have survived long down there.

Some of the men that were working in the mine were able to acquire additional food once the spring came around, as payment for assisting the Russians in their gardens after work, which helped the men pull through. Attaining this extra work was only possible for those that established a good rapport with their Russian (Tartaric) working partners. The Russians had large families and were more concerned with feeding everyone in it than they were with repaying a garden helper with their own food.

On the 1st of May, 1947, three holidays fell together on that same day — a rare constellation. I believe that the Russian word for holiday was prazdnik, or something like that. On this day of three-holidays-in-one we finally were given our first real day off. The guards went off to celebrate somewhere in the village and chase after girls and vodka and our Russian coworkers were either at their homes or in their gardens. No one, who was in their right mind, would have tried to use this opportunity to escape. The weather at the time was unusually pleasant and warm and most of the prisoners busied themselves with collecting stinging nettles and cooking them up. Other wild herbs were also collected, such as saltbush (otherwise known as ‘French spinach), coltsfoot, and English plantain.

Out of nowhere, we heard news of a dead horse floating in the river. Everyone ran to banks to have a look and it was true — there was a dead pit pony that had apparently tried to swim away and had gotten its line stuck on a large boulder. He was

an emaciated looking little creature, with an exploded belly and bowels that were visible and had a poisonous looking blue-red color to them. The race was on: The first man there could cut himself off as large of a piece of the meager flesh as he could. Naturally, we had been in possession of primitive knives made of saw blades or of sharpened sheets of metal for a while now. I managed to cut myself off a piece of meat from one of the legs. The ones that got to the horse late were now hacking at the bowels, primarily the liver. One could tell by the stench that there was something off with the innards of the horse.

The spirited cooking of the horse bits now got under way. The spinach was tossed aside and the meat took center stage; everyone had been waiting to sink their teeth into meat since the beginning of their imprisonment. Despite cooking my meat for a long time, I couldn't get it tender. I cut it up into smaller pieces and attempted to cook it further, but to no avail. I ended up trading what I had for some spinach from one of my comrades who hadn't gotten a piece of the horse at all. The innards ended up cooking quicker than the meat. During my imprisonment, I would often be forced to eat things I could now never imagine eating; even back then I would have imagined having to eat them. I had a bad feeling about the rancid looking intestines and my caution won out over my hunger in this case.

The disaster of the intestines unfolded the following night. Some of the men began getting stomachaches and fevers. By the next day, those that got sick were only able to get out of bed to use the latrine, which they had to do very frequently. They were so thirsty that they drank water directly out of the bucket. The medic had his hands tied: there was no medicine to give the men and help couldn't be summoned from anywhere on account of the holiday. Three men died over the course of the next three days. One of the men had the family name

‘Kapusta’, which in Slavic languages meant ‘cabbage’ (this being the reason why I remember his name at all). The second man was an ‘Icke’ from Berlin. (It wasn’t, however, the same Icke that had gotten a bad reputation with the hedgehog). I wasn’t acquainted with the third man and don’t know what his name was.

When the Russians caught wind of the misery unfolding at the encampment, they began looking for a person to blame, which wasn’t easy in this case since the perpetrators were themselves already dead. Some of the other men were still ill and unable to work, causing a drop in the output at the quarry and making it so that the performance norms could no longer be fulfilled — the manpower having been depleted by almost half. The horse that was the cause of all the distress was, by the way, not one of our own. It must have come from another quarry somewhere upriver, which indicated to me that there were other limestone quarries where the same operation was taking place with other war prisoners.

News of the situation made its way back to the encampment management in Kuybyshev and they reacted fairly quickly by Russian standards. We soon received the order to get ready to march out, and, once again, I was saved from dire straits — I wouldn’t have survived the quarry much longer. I was greatly relieved upon receiving the news and again got a renewed dose of high spirits.

The next morning, we had to fall in and the usual ritual began again: counting, reporting, and a rudimentary body search. We slowly marched out, headed south along the Volga, passed the crew of the barge. The paths to the south were more level and easier to traverse than the bread path to the north. After covering about five kilometers, we came to a wood station with a small hut where wood was processed for the surrounding

villages and kolkhozes and smaller steam ships would stop here on an irregular schedule. A group of civilians, mostly farmer women, were standing outside and waiting when we arrived, planning to go and sell their goods at the bazaar in Kuybyshev. We stopped at the wood station and the men started to nibble on their marching provisions. A ship docked at the station at around 11 o'clock. It was much larger than I would have expected, but the Volga was deep at this point and the steam ships were able to dock right at the banks. Our sergeant boarded the ship to register us for the trip but came back with the announcement that we wouldn't be able to board since our papers weren't all in order. We would now have to wait for the next ship that was set to come later in the afternoon. The guards went off to the adjacent village and we stayed behind, scouring the area in hopes of coming across something edible. The next ship pulled in later, but this time the sergeant was prevented from coming aboard by the captain directly on the gangway.

An intense and entertaining argument broke out between the two men, which resulted in our sergeant eventually taking out his machine gun and yelling, as far as we were able to gather, "I'm a Red Army soldier and demand access to the ship for me and my men and will use my weapon if I have to!" The captain laughed and answered, "If you don't get off the gangway immediately, I'll mobilize my sailors and have you and your men thrown into the river." The sergeant then let out his normal string of curses and oaths and hastily made his way back to shore. Now the situation was becoming serious for us; we would have to spend the night at the wood station. The nights were no longer that cold and we were accustomed to such tribulations, but the hunger would be the real problem and most of the men had already eaten up their marching pro-

visions. Some civilians had already arrived, planning to catch the ship on the following morning.

During the night, someone cut open a bag belonging to one of the farmer women and stole a loaf of bread, which resulted in a huge fuss the next morning and the all-too-familiar cry: "Zap-zarap, zap-zarap sabraliy!" — "Theft, theft!" The plennyjs were of course suspected first. But nothing could be proven in this case and no traces of bread could be found. The thief had most likely consumed the bread right away, though 'gobbled up' would probably be a more accurate depiction. I later found out that it was indeed one of our men and the perpetrator told me about it sometime later. He said that he could see the shape of the loaf under the sack and it looked so appealing that he couldn't resist. He was a huge man from the Ruhr Area, trained as a butcher, but now withered down to a skeleton like the rest of us. I no longer remember what his name was. One time, he and I together had tried to capture our natshalnik's dog, which, for better or worse, wasn't a success. The dog somehow had an intuition of what his fate would be in our hands. I can still recall the terrified look in that dog's eyes and the way he slyly evaded our attacks.

The next passenger ship arrived at 9 o'clock in the morning and again we weren't allowed to board. We had the feeling that all the Volga captains had sworn us off, but the reality was that our papers had not been filled out correctly. The Russian bureaucracy was even more complicated than the German one, and in our case there were no compromises being made. We continued to lie around the wood station and wait for the next ship. The rest was good for our strength and it would have been perfect were it not for the persisting hunger. The watchmen were also moody and irritated — they didn't have a directive for what to do in such a situation and this predicament

would make any soldier uncomfortable. We were finally saved around midday: a motor boat filled with soldiers passed by traveling up the Volga. Our watchmen recognized some comrades on board and started yelling out and waving to them. The motor boat turned around and docked at the wood station. As it turned out, the boat was sent from Kuybyshev on orders to pick us up. Two trips had to be made since we didn't all fit on the boat at the same time. It was mid-May by this point, four-and-a-half months after our arrival at the quarry, and we were all that remained of the original brigade, now worn, full of lice, ill and still wearing our winter clothing.

I again got to meet my old comrades upon our return to the main encampment and I had much to tell them. We were immediately checked by the medics when we arrived and I, along with some of the other men, was given an 'OK', as I had predicted. That meant 'dystrophy' and we were assigned to at least four weeks of rest and larger meals. The OK-station was in the same encampment, which meant we wouldn't have to be relocated. During my rest order, I wrote several poems — one of them about the Volga — in an effort to stay mentally fit. We had paper at our disposal, which had been cut out of old cement sacks and flattened. One of the poems was about the daily schedule at the encampment; it was later framed and hung up in the stolovaya (mess hall) in a spot that all the men would pass on their way to the bread distribution. This was considered 'cultural work' by the Russians and they would say to me, "Kultura yest", and I even received an extra portion of soup a few times, since I was now considered one of the intelligentia.

Around the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1947, postcards were distributed to the prisoners and we were allowed to write to our friends and family, informing them of our where-

abouts. The postcards were not distributed to everyone at the same time, so as to not overwhelm the mail processing system. I believe that the first cards arrived in Saratov at the end of 1946, but I didn't get my hands on one until later on. After I wrote my first postcard, I assumed that the whole thing was a propaganda scam in order to avoid dispiriting the prisoners, but, to my surprise, it turned out to be true and the first response letters started rolling in. The postcards had a Red Cross in the upper right-hand corner and a red Crescent Moon in the upper left-hand corner; it was an international campaign that we had unjustly doubted Stalin of joining in on. We were only allowed to write 20 to 25 words on the cards, just enough to show a sign a life. We were greatly appreciative nonetheless.

It must have been in June of 1947 when I sent my parents in Baden-Baden the first postcard and about four weeks later I also received a response. It is hard to imagine what it must have been like for them: a sign of life from their son after one and a half years of silence and doubt. By this point, they had even come to terms with the idea that I was fallen, missing or forgotten. Our correspondences followed in regular intervals after that, but always limited to the pre-assigned amount of words.

After my rest order, I again underwent a health check and was assigned to the group b — capable of doing limited work. We were sent off to the construction sites, usually to the high-rise apartment blocks, every morning. There was a lack of housing in Russia — as was also the case in most countries in post-war Europe — and apartment block construction was a priority. I was assigned to tidying-up and some handyman tasks. I moved as slowly as possible and took every opportunity I could to avoid having to do any actual work. The encampment itself was well-organized and also well-guarded, so

I had absolutely no possibility of slipping off and begging for bread in the surrounding neighborhoods as I had in Saratov, which was an utter disappointment. I was later sent to work at the Volga port for several weeks; logs had to be unloaded from wide-bodied barges and we had to work in pairs to be able to unload even the smallest pieces of wood. July and August brought with them a mosquito plague, which was so bad that we could hardly keep our eyes open. The mosquitoes came out of the river and the surrounding bodies of water in unimaginable masses, dependent on the weather. They were tiny, black insects that would only lightly prick, which wasn't bad until it happened in large amounts. The mosquito attacks were so intense at times that the work had to be put on hold.

The banya that was assigned to us for delousing was about 2 to 3 kilometers away in the direction of the city. Visits took place after work and we would happily march over in loose rows of five with our watchmen. There was no automobile traffic to speak of, as cars were not available for private citizens at the time. Kuybyshev (Samara) was considered a larger city by the Russians and had a dense, intact street car network.

On our way back from the banya, our mood was always greatly improved — we had been freshly bathed in warm water and were once again wearing relatively clean clothing. One particular evening on our way back from the banya, the head of the watchmen asked us if we were able to sing and if we would want to. We all knew that the Russians sang a lot and were born with a passion for singing. We decided to think of some pastoral songs that were neutral and didn't have anything to do with marches or the military. We ended up choosing songs such as 'Little Flowers are Blooming on the Field' and 'Oh, the Beautiful Wester Forest'. Once we had come to a consensus and chosen a song, the Russian gave us a sign and

we began singing. The civilians on the sidewalks were surprised to hear us and stood there in awe, listening on. It was the first time in a long while that we all sang together. The guard was enjoying himself and I even had the feeling that he was proud of this little display he had initiated.

We sang again after our next visit to the banya, but this time had to abruptly stop — an objection had apparently been raised by someone. It most likely came from a Russian military person, who was reminded by the singing of the Germans in the war and had not yet come to terms with his past experiences. The result was a complete ban on singing. The argument was made that it was intolerable for Germans to sing while marching through Russian streets a mere two years after the war that was so horrible and had cost so many lives. Our Russian commander felt hurt by the ban and thought that he was misunderstood in his attempt to illicit a bit of culture. He was ahead of his time, as history would go on to prove.

On our trips to the banya, we were always accompanied by flocks of little children, who found it fun to tease us with the familiar chant, "Friiitzy, Friiitzy, Friiitzy," or with the melodic:
„Nemetz - pemetz - Kolbassa,
sharena Kapusta!"
This roughly translated to: "German, pepper, sausage, fried cabbage!" It was a play on words that was carried over from the Russians to the Germans and was mainly only funny for the children. The rhyme likely came from the times when German immigrants introduced sausage-making methods to the Russians.

We were again experiencing one of the milder summer evenings on the Volga and found ourselves on another leisurely march from the banya back to the encampment, which had since become a routine activity. Suddenly, and completely out

of the blue, one of the prisoners sprang away from the marching column and over to the street car track, about six meters away. He placed his left arm on the rail and his hand was cleanly sliced from his arm, as though cut by scissors, by the passing street car. The yelling then ensued. Some of the watchmen rushed over to the accident site while others did what they could to calm the rest of the men, and after a few minutes we were back underway without anyone really knowing what had happened. The victim was a young man of about 19 or 20 and I knew little about him other than that he came from Dinkslaken in the Rhineland. We discussed the possible motives for what he had done for a long while after that: Was it planned self-mutilation or had he simply lost his marbles for a brief moment? We were never able to come to any decisive conclusion. The watchmen remained silent, though it was likely that they didn't know what had happened either. Nothing was mentioned about the incident for a while after that. A few weeks later, I came across the young man as he was working in the kitchen. His wounds had healed by then and he only had a stump at the end of his left arm, which he had to use in combination with his right hand to carry out his kitchen duties. He was probably trying to achieve his release through his desperate act; however, he remained at the encampment as long as I did. He wasn't punished for his deed, which could well have happened.

The encampment at Kuybyshev was not at all like the zemlyanka (below ground bunker) in Saratov. The Kuybyshev encampment was a collection of large sleeping barracks that each had their own kitchen area and stolovaya (mess hall), which itself had tables, chairs and a bar on which bread and food were distributed. Back at Saratov, we would have to eat our soup sitting on the lower bunks. The Kuybyshev encampment housed

about 1200 men, and there was a German encampment commander with limited authority, an ANTIFA group, and a small cultural group that put on the occasional event.

We were disappointed to realize that the classless society — preached by Marx and Lenin, and proclaimed by the Soviets — was not a reality in the Soviet Union and we were forced to alter our thinking quickly. Large social differences were even present in the prisoner encampments. The upper class, which had it the best (and I only speak of the prisoners, not the Russians), were given preferred positions in the hierarchy, such as kitchen assistants, barbers, artists and ANITFA members. The next class consisted of skilled workers, mostly handymen, who were considered specialists in the Soviet Union. The strong men who were able to fulfill their working norms also belonged to this group. They were referred to as 'zdorovy tchelovek' or 'khoroshy rabotnik' (strong people – good workers) by the Russians. Next was the huge mass of average prisoners that made up the majority of the labor force and filled the construction sites, at least until they slid down to the lowest class consisting of the ill and those with dystrophy. This was the proletariat of the encampment, the damned of the earth, which Russia didn't know what to do with. Many of the men were intellectuals, businessmen, administrators and students — men that weren't used to physical labor. The traditional hierarchy had been turned upside down.

The bunks in the barracks were set up in rows of two, in such a way that the prisoners slept head to toe. There was a wooden board at the head of each bunk, which would be used as a storage area. I would place my glasses on top of this wooden board every night before I went to sleep. One morning, as I reached for them, I found that they were missing and began a desperate search for them, but without success. My comrades

sleeping on the bunks around me would have had the easiest access to them, but I knew everyone personally and they all admitted to not knowing anything. But one thing was clear: I no longer had any glasses. At the time, I had a diopter of negative 2.5, which made daily life possible but was a great hindrance nonetheless, especially in a prison camp where we were extra dependent on our five senses. People wearing glasses were a rare sight in Russia, since glasses were so expensive, and, as mentioned, they were more of a status symbol than anything. My glasses would very easily have served as a valuable product for exchange. A lucrative black market had come into being between the prisoners and the civilians in Kuybyshev after the war, and all sorts of useful products were exchanged on it. Exchanges of goods also took place within the encampment itself, mostly bread for tobacco. The kitchen assistants, who weren't normally going hungry, could, for example, satisfying their smoking habit by exchanging their bread rations for the tobacco rations from a hungry prisoner.

News of my stolen glasses got out quickly; all sorts of possessions were constantly being stolen, but glasses were something special, and the other men that wore them were now particularly on alert. A few days later, one of my comrades came to me and offered to trade some glasses he had acquired and didn't need. They were Russian glasses of a special sort and he wouldn't say where he had gotten them. They were flat as a pane of glass on the outside and concave on the inside, meaning that one could only see clearly when focusing on the middle. As soon as the eyes were turned just a bit to the side, the whole field of vision became blurry. I had never seen this sort of model in Germany — they were the result of Russian improvisation. But beggars can't be choosers and I went into negotiations with my comrade. I only had my tobacco and my

bread ration to offer up in exchange. We came to the agreement that I would give him half of my bread ration for the next four weeks, since he wasn't interested in tobacco. I would now have to quit smoking for the next four weeks, which wouldn't prove to be a problem, since I now had the task of trading my tobacco in for something to eat, so that I could maintain my state of health. The glasses that I acquired would remain with me, despite all dangers, until the end of my imprisonment. I would later have to repair them in desperation and by the time I returned home, both of the sides were being held together by matches that were tied with string and fastened with glue.

Off to Stalingrad

By the end of August the rumor game was back in play: the encampment was to be closed; a large part of the occupants were to be relocated; there could be a possible release. The rumor swirled from one prisoner to the other for days on end and suddenly, at the beginning of September, the puzzle was solved almost overnight. On that day, after work, we were all instructed to fall in for a counting; 200 to 300 names and fathers' names were called off, the summoned were reordered into groups, the groups were recounted and then the command was made: "Prepare to march out at the start of the working day." Of course I was one of the men that was sorted out, yet again, and, much to my dismay, Günther Böhrs was not. Our destination was now the new puzzle to be solved and the optimists, who believed we were going home, were in the majority this time. Their reasoning was that there were few skilled workers or handymen being relocated, which must have meant that the Russians were reducing the number of prisoners and getting rid of the non-skilled first. This was in fact the case, but our destination was unfortunately not home.

I should mention that despite all the research I conducted in the BDR after my return home and despite having recently inquired after Günther Böhrs at the registration office in Cottbus, I was not successful in finding his whereabouts or coming to information about his fate. It seems to be the case that he never made it out of Russia. I was certain, however, that his cause of death was not the normal prisoner illness or malnutrition, but that something else must have ended up happening to him.

As always, we hardly had anything to pack up before the relocations. The funeral procession drudgingly made its way out of the barracks and towards the port on the Volga the next mor-

ning. We had travelled the same route a countless number of times on the way to work. There was a large Volga steam ship waiting for us at the harbor and we boarded. There were other prisoners already aboard the ship that had been loaded on at locations further north. They also didn't have a clue as to where we were headed. Optimism about a return home again resurfaced, this time on account of the reassuring calls from the Russians saying, "Skoro domoy, skoro domoy," which we welcomed with anticipation and joy. The ship got underway before noon, making its way to the south. I caught a glimpse of the city Kuybyshev for one last time before we moved on.

We continued downriver, passing by Syzran and arrived in Saratov — the city with which so many dramatic memories are bound up — the next day. Another group of prisoners was waiting to board the ship and continue on for the ride when we reached the port. I unexpectedly ran into some of my former comrades from our old encampment on Boshaya Gornaya Uliza, which had apparently also been closed down and most its prisoners boarded onto our ship, headed for an unknown destination. I also met some of my former comrades from the forest subcamp, who were in much better condition than me and my new comrades from Kuybyshev — having spent the last months in Saratov. The freedom of movement and the kind-heartedness of the locals were exceptional in Saratov, at least for us Germans. I also was reunited with my former wood chopping partner, Egon D., who was in good physical health but still had unending words of hate and intolerance for the Russians, the Soviet Union, the System and its future. He was trained in the Armed SS and carried his judgments around with him in open view, like one would carry a protective shield.

Once everyone was loaded on, the ship steamed on to the south. Some of the men begin to get notions about where we

were heading—there were only two large cities ahead of us: Stalingrad and Astrakhan. Being that the latter had no real industrial base and escaped the war unscathed, only Stalingrad (now Volgograd) came into question. It wasn't hard to guess that we weren't going to be sent back home from Stalingrad. Pessimism and hopelessness set in once again and for some, depending on their mental state, even depression.

The weather was nice during our boat trip. Providing food for the whole mass of prisoners proved to be difficult and, as always, the soup and dry bread we were given wasn't enough. The landscape we cruised past was one of a kind. It could well have been a pleasure cruise, were it not for the fact that we were on a floating prison. The land on the right side of the ship slowly began to flatten and we passed by those typical Russian villages with their wooden homes and could see the docking sites for the ferries that traveled between them. To our left, the fields stretched off into the horizon, where they eventually turned into the steppes leading to Kazakhstan. The only resource we had in abundance was drinking water. At the time, the water from the Volga was still clean and one could fill a pail with it and drink without having to boil it first. The farmer women would stand at each docking site and sell their produce from the fields, which was mainly squash and melons. But we didn't have any money and the ship didn't make stops anyway.

Today, this particular stretch of the Volga has been transformed through a series of locks and many parts of the river bank — with its small villages that we gazed on from the passing ship — have now been flooded and are no longer to be seen. The Volga, the heart of Russia, has lost its innocence. I would also no longer drink its water without some serious reservations. According to the Environmental Ministry, the amount of fish and their varieties has been dramatically depleted over the years.

On the bright side, most of the energy demand for central Russia is covered by the output of the hydro-power plants and does not need to be obtained through nuclear energy.

One morning in the first part of September 1947, we reached Stalingrad and set foot on dry ground. The city was situated directly on the river, along an elevated shoreline, and continued on seemingly endlessly to the north. Three large industrial complexes defined the city: the 'Tractor Factory', the 'Red October' and the 'Red Barricade'. Almost all soldiers from the German military were familiar with the Tractor Factory since it was here that the march towards the East ended late in 1942 and the War took its decisive turn. There wasn't much to be seen of the city itself, but we did notice that a large portion of it had recently been rebuilt.

We were divided into various groups as we were still at the port. The count was in full swing and we were constantly getting regrouped and re-divided; it was clear that we were going to be sent to varying encampments. Sometime later, after uninterrupted cursing and clamoring among the watchmen, the various groups started marching on at the usual prisoner's pace (characterized by a slow speed, feet-dragging, hung heads, drawn-in shoulders and the body slightly bent forward) in the direction of the city. Each of the groups was sent to a different encampment—mine went into camp number 5, near the Tractor Factory. The encampment was home to about 2000 men and the place made a good impression on me as far as cleanliness and facilities were concerned. There was already a great number of prisoners residing there and we were sent in to fill the open slots of those that had been relocated on account of illness. Once we had been shown into the barracks and assigned our bunks, we were able to get familiar with the encampment.

Every time a prisoner arrived at a new encampment, the first

order of business was to find fellow countrymen from back home. To my surprise I quickly located three men that were all from Baden-Baden. The first was named Alfred Köbele, an engineering student from Stephan Street, who today lives with his family in Stuttgart; the second was Erwin Schell from Baden-Oos who sold oil to hotels in Baden-Baden from an oil mill that his family ran in Lichtenau, which he turned into an impressively profitable enterprise upon his return—he lived to be 80 years old, dying in 1996; the name of the third man I have since forgotten, but do remember that he came from Baden-Baden-Lichtenal and was employed at a book and magazine stand on Leopold Square. He was sadly the only one that I lost track of after my return home. I was very pleased to have met three men from my hometown, considering the extreme conditions we found ourselves in at the very edge of Europe. I had only ever actually seen the man that worked at the newsstand before the war. We soon got into discussions about recent events and about people we knew from back home. All three men survived their imprisonment in Russia and we later met up back in our hometown.

The prisoners at the encampment worked exclusively in the Tractor Factory (in Russian: 'Traktorny Savod') or in one of the buildings belonging to it. On either the next day or the days that followed, we went through our obligatory health check and were categorized according to our abilities to work, after which we were assigned to brigades, given a brigadier, and sent off to work. The trip from the encampment to the factory took us about half an hour going at our prisoner's pace. There was a Russian natshalnik in the factory who supervised all the work. He was in charge of the various brigades, appointing the work to the brigadiers. The watchmen only accompanied us to the gates of the factory and back; they were responsible for returning with

the correct number of prisoners.

Our brigade was employed for many different tasks at the factory. We were mainly appointed with the tasks of clearing rubbish, stacking materials, disposing of waste, loading the wagons and doing improvements to the factory building. I still remember how we would have to collect turnings, which would come out through gaps at the back of the factory and fall onto lathes, which then had to be loaded onto train cars. Two men were assigned together to do the work and we had to use what the Russians referred to as a 'nosilki', which was a container with two handlebars on either end that would be carried by two men. They were constructed with wood and were probably also used by the Chinese back when they built the Great Wall of China. We were constantly in awe of the primitiveness of the work tools that seemed to be in use all over Russia. There were few mechanized devices, and most work required large amounts of unskilled manpower. There were three basic tools that we used for the work in the factory: a 'lom', a 'lapatka', and the already mentioned nosilki. A lom was a crowbar and a lapatka was a spade. We also had a wheelbarrow at our disposal — I nearly forgot. The turnings had interlaced spirals on them and their edges were as sharp as knives. We had to use gloves in order to avoid injury and when a pack of turnings was picked out, they would bend and turn like a feather and were quick to spring back with great force. If we weren't careful, we ran the risk of cutting ourselves in the face or even our eyes. One advantage of the work was that there was no pre-set performance norm, which meant we could work as slow as we deemed appropriate.

Another one of our tasks was unloading large stacks of hardened insulation tar that would come out as a liquid and be used for filling joints. The stuff came in blocks of all sizes that would

sometimes stick together and had to be broken apart with a crowbar. We ended up busying ourselves with these tar blocks for several weeks. It had started to become colder and colder with each passing day and finally, in the middle of October, just like every year, we received our winter clothing. This batch was also notably better than the one from the year before. The encampment also contained a washing station and a tailor. The banya and delousing facilities were also above par, considering that we were in a prisoner encampment. The lice problem had been significantly reduced among the prisoners, and though still present, was no longer a pressing issue. The Russians put great importance on delousing, since lice were the carriers of the highly contagious typhus, which they didn't want to break out at the encampment and then make its way to the civilian population.

The cultural group at the encampment was also respectable; some of the men had probably been professional artists in their private lives and we even had an opera singer in our ranks. There was a performance every weekend, which changed its content regularly, and the Russian officers were even known to attend with their wives sometimes. The performances ranged from music concerts, to voice concerts, to comedy sketches, to theater plays, many which were produced by the prisoners. Artists were well-regarded in Russia, and the prisoners that were artists ended up leading a relatively good life. The mail service had also become regular and we could expect to receive letters from home every now and then.

The winter became increasingly brutal up until the end of the year. The temperature at the beginning of December had reached 15 to 20 degrees below freezing and had been accompanied by snow and paralyzing winds from the steppes and from Siberia. About half of the sleeping barracks was below ground level and

only the upper portion and the roof was exposed to the cold winds. To exit, we had to go up a flight of stairs. The construction was optimal for dealing with the harsh winters, and despite the freezing temperatures and howling winds on the outside, the inside of the barracks remained comfortably warm. I somehow managed to haggle my way to an 'OK' and to a dystrophic designation during the visits from the medics and was therefore able to stay with the light labor. But any reduction in food or minimal increase in the work load would have resulted in a sinking into the lowest health category.

In November of 1947, there was a reform in the Soviet Union that led to a sudden improvement in the quality of life for the citizens and consequently also the war prisoners. This was the result of a revaluing of the Russian currency—the ruble—from ten to one. It didn't affect any of the prisoners directly, except maybe the ones back in Saratov, since we didn't have any money before that. From now on, we were not compensated for our work with varying amounts of bread rations, but were actually given rubles as recompense. 'The ruble was now rolling', as the saying so nicely puts it. A side effect of this, however, was that the social differences among the prisoners now increased dramatically. The craftsmen, specialists, and those that were stronger by nature could easily fulfill and even surpass their performance norms and receive their full or extra pay, with which they then used to buy supplementary provisions, mainly bread and fat, at the canteen. Some had come by so much money that they would even give away their soup in the mess hall when it wasn't to their liking; one was lucky to be friends with such high-earners. This was a strange state of affairs in a country that proclaimed classlessness: one class was becoming stronger as the other class was becoming weaker. I didn't benefit much from the new system since there was no money to be made in Russia

through the creation of balance sheets or financial calculation.

My brigade, which was given general work, unskilled work even, was very poorly paid. It was impossible to set a real performance norm and our brigadier fought a hard fight for our wages with the natshalnik, as one often witnesses today at collective bargaining negotiations. There was also a long round of back-and-forth bargaining, whose results were dependent on the brigadier's personal relation to the natshalnik or on the natshalnik's good will or current mood. It was even worse within the work group itself: The brigadier distributed the money according to his own judgment of who did how much work, which inevitably led to conflict. Everyone, of course, claimed to have done the most and worked the hardest. I, on the other hand, knew that I didn't have much to show for my work performance. I would usually be given a few rubles as a sort of gratuity, with which I could buy myself something small from the canteen.

The worst aspect of the job was being forced to work inside of that enormous production hall; it was pure hell and I had never seen anything like it before. There was no heavy industry in Baden at the time and I had never been to the Ruhr Area. Although it was much warmer inside of the production hall than it was outside, the whole place was dusty, sooty, half-lit — only as a result of the glowing iron — ,and was deafeningly loud. The workers dashed back and forth in the dimly-lit hall like apparitions, being illuminated by red flashes near firing areas, and again disappearing into the darkness like ghosts. Some men worked on giant steal presses that would crash down onto bars of glowing iron with a thundering bang, sending sparks flying every which way. The bars of iron had to be reformed and pressed flat. I tried to avoid coming too close to one of these fire-breathing, poison-gas-emitting monstrosities. Only Russian specialists were stationed at these presses, and although they

were wearing protective suits, their health was probably still suffering as a result of the work. One of the advantages of working in the half-lit hall was that it was easy to avoid working, plus we weren't as easily recognized as being vanyaplennyjs among the chaos. The best place to seek refuge was in the huge latrine area, which was always in heavy use. The workers had to drink lots of water since the air was so dusty and dry, which led them to often have to use the toilet. There was also drinking water there, which one could take on his own and it was usually possible to convince a Russian coworker to give up a cigarette, which they hardly ever denied. "Zakurit yest?" would be the question, "Da da yest!" the answer. Then you would take the tobacco or the cigarette and say, "Bolshoy spasibo!" meaning, 'thanks a lot' and the business would be done.

The watchmen didn't go into the factory with us and their job was taken on by the brigadier and the natshalnik. It would have been impossible to flee on account of the weather and the huge distance between us and home anyway, which meant that the encampment was the safest place to be. The working day was over — for the Russians as well as the prisoners — at 5 o'clock sharp. When the work was finished, a horrible siren, somewhere near the ceiling of the hall, would ring out for a good minute. Not only did the siren wail, but it also released a steam cloud that was visible all the way from our encampment — we nicknamed it 'the lion from Stalingrad'. The sound of the siren penetrated all the way into our bones and I can still hear the buzzing in my ears today and I jump when I hear a similar noise. Work in the afternoon hours would always slow down as we all waited for the lion to start its terrible wail and signal the end of a long working day. Brutal battles took place right in front of the main gate of the factory up until the German surrender just a couple years back. The German army never did manage to get

inside of the Tractor Factory and behold it in its entirety. There was a memorial on the gate that we passed by every day on our way to work that read: "The treacherous attack of the fascist hordes was brought to a halt on this site by the glorious Red Army, under the command of General Stalin, and it was here that the expulsion and destruction of the German army began, all the way back to Berlin."

The text on the sign was of course in Russian, but all of us that had to pass by it daily were aware of its contents. The sign offered an opportunity for self-reflection, and for reconsideration of the past years, and about the sense and nonsense of the War and its victims. It was still unbelievable for the rest of us that we hadn't experienced any real aversion, hate or feelings of revenge by the Russians. The only exception was the neglected minority of young kids who had not experienced the war and acted in the same manner as extreme left-thinking or right-thinking kids do today. There was also hatefulness to be heard on occasion from people under the influence of vodka, but this was targeted at their fellow countrymen as well as at us.

Deaths were seldom during this third winter in Russia, but they did happen on occasion. Illnesses, depression and incomplete recoveries from past strains were the primary causes of these deaths. We were no longer directly confronted with them as we had been in the past. Those that became ill were sent to the sick bay and if they died, their death was only really noticed by their comrades or by their work brigade.

The year was slowly coming to an end. For us, the end of the year meant Christmas, while for the Russians, it meant the New Year's festival. This came as a result of the anti-religious doctrine of the Communists, who had abolished all church holidays. We didn't get to celebrate Christmas on the 24th and instead used the following Sunday as a substitute. Unfortunately, the-

re wasn't much of a Christmas spirit to be felt among the prisoners at the encampment. I spent the day sitting around and discussing things with the three men from my heimat. The main topics of discussion were food and the possibilities of a release, intensified by news of several releases having taken place in the last two months. There was also a fourth man from our home that I should mention: his name was Bernhard März and he was from Bühlertal-Büchelbach. He worked in the kitchen and when no one was looking, he would slip some bread ends into my bag. He had been a chef at the Herrenwies Spa on the Black Forest High Street, where I would meet him after our release. Our ensemble of musicians rose the next morning and made our way around the barracks, as we had the year before in Kuybyshev, attempting to recreate a German Christmas through music and song. I didn't know at the time that this would be my last Christmas as a prisoner in Russia, but of course secretly longed for it to be.

Unexpected events occurred later at the beginning of March. One of my fellow countrymen, Alfred Köbele, was suddenly released and I was sent to the OK-barracks for eight weeks following a diagnosis from the medics that I was malnourished. There wasn't the slightest bit of meat left on my bones that would have allowed me to do even the lightest work. We bid farewell to Alfred all together, wishing him all the best and giving him many tasks in regards to our family and friends back home. I moved into the rest barracks immediately after that. It probably came at a good time, since I looked like the Grim Reaper, though I somehow felt great and was mentally fit as a fiddle. I came to view this resting order in the middle of a spell of bad weather as a gift from the Communist gods.

For those of us in the OK-barracks, we spent the majority of the time idly waiting from one food distribution to the next. We

played chess and also engaged in unending debates about all the possible and impossible problems of the world and humanity. We had to be very careful about any political comments that we made, since there were likely snitches and informers, even among the prisoners. We organized a lecture series featuring the men who had special knowledge from their professions or life experiences. I became acquainted with a margarine producer from Hamburg, who lectured on the production of margarine and the uses of whale meat and whale fat, and by the end of it all, had us convinced of the quality and benefits of margarine. Sadly, we didn't have such gourmet products at the encampment and had to eat dry bread covered with 'thumbs and pointer fingers' and use our imaginations to imagine other toppings. The margarine producer told us about blind taste tests he carried out, in which participants were given whale meat and beef to eat. He claimed that they ended up not being able to tell the difference. We then began trying to guess who had eaten the whale meat and who had eaten the beef. At the end, he invited us all to Hamburg after our release and told us he would give us as much whale meat as we could eat. This promise made our desire to go home even stronger. I have to admit that I have never made it to Hamburg since my return home and that I don't particularly have a taste for whale or margarine, despite his lecture.

Since I was trained as a businessman at a milk production farm in Baden-Baden and was involved in the creation of milk and cheese, I held my lecture on this topic. All the lectures that had to do with food were overfilled with attendees and one had to scramble to get a good spot. During my lecture, I could practically hear the saliva building in the mouths of the attendees and, at the end, everyone made plans to eat lots of cheese and drink lots of milk upon their return home. During my dis-

cussion, the man from Hamburg made the objection that his margarine was just as good and healthy as real butter. Cholesterol was not a widely-known phenomenon at the time and we were not particularly in danger of clogging our arteries at the encampment. I received lots of applause at the end of my lecture, as though the food I had talked about had gone directly into the men's stomachs. Bakers, butchers and even farmers held lectures, all talking about subject number one at the encampment: food. We didn't have access to news other than what was printed in our prisoner newspaper, 'Neues Deutschland'—which wasn't much.

I've already related stories of the banyas, the delousing, shaving and hair-cutting; but now I come to a problem that was just as important as eating, namely the emptying of our bowels. I've talked about the gutter that protruded through the side of the train car and about the mass bowel movements on the rail embankment and between the trains during our short stops. Back in Saratov, we had a board partition with a hole in the ground at our disposal. The latter was a beam on which we could balance ourselves (like the birds on telephone wires) and let our excrement fall into a trench in the back. The most important thing to do here was not lose ones balance. When the weather was good and we had enough time, we could even converse with one another while balancing on the beam. From time to time, when the weather was good enough, chlorine stones would be strewn on the area.

I've also already described the situation back at the forest near Syzran-Penza. There, we simply did our business on top of a pile that froze into a solid mass in the winter and then thawed later in the spring; I won't recount the details again here. We were like rabbits in the wild that deposited their droppings on the same spot time and again rather than spreading them out in

the field. The actions of the rabbits, however, are not dictated by the cold but rather by their instincts. The situation was quite different in Stalingrad; here, we had an actual latrine that was situated in a long wooden building with holes sawed into the wooden floor above a waste pit. It was like a standing or kneeling water closet without rails and we were protected from the elements and in from the cold. The temperatures in the winter had reached 25 degrees below and the waste that had fallen into the pit had formed a cone that looked like a mushroom or a stalagmite in a cavern. When this brown column grew large enough and reached the bottom of the hole, the facility management personnel would have to come and knock the thing over with a pole, otherwise the column would have kept growing and made that position unusable. The fallen columns came to lie on the bottom of the pit like trees in a forest that had been knocked down by a storm, until the warm weather came and melted them like an alpine glacier struck by a warm southerly breeze. These sorts of latrines were also to be found between the apartment buildings in Russia, though probably only for emergency use during harsh winters when the water pipes froze and the heaters broke. The Russians were, compared with Western standards, decades in the past. I have chosen to relate these stories to the reader since they were part of my daily life as a prisoner and because they were, at times, so bizarre.

It was the end of May when my OK-time was finally up and I was sent to the encampment wash station for several days. During my OK-time, I had been given kasha rather than the typical soup portion and the bread ration that was also significantly larger than normal. I couldn't help but compare the Russian strategy to the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale: we would first be fattened and then be fried up. The wash station at the encampment was ancient; a real witch's kitchen. Only undergar-

ments were washed, no pants or shirts or anything the like. The whole station was full of steam and smelled of a particular detergent. We had the task of removing the wet clothing from the soapy broth with wooden sticks and placing them in a spin-dryer. They were then brought to a drying room full of warm air. There were many workers employed at the wash station and we were able to take long breaks to get air and to recover. There were no supervisors or watchmen in the station and we could take our breaks at will and there wasn't anyone pressuring us to keep working. My working partner was a theology professor from the University of Marburg named Dr. Hall. At least that's how I remember it, though I'm not a hundred percent sure of the university anymore. I would come into discussions with him about all sorts of topics, from the meaning of life and the imprisonment to his conceptions of God and of death, with whom we had all built a close personal relationship to in the past years.

Giving a description of the meaning of God or his existence is difficult using words, according to the professor, since human language lacks the faculties to fully or correctly do so, which also applies to the roll of faith. The professor said that some people have faith while others simply do not. He attempted to relate the phenomenon of God to a certain example: He told me to think of a bedbug, which, on account of its anatomy, was completely flat and could only think in two dimensions. The existence of a third dimension is completely unimaginable for the bedbug. People, on the other hand, are able to think in three dimensions and imagine them spatially. We can see and describe the bedbug and can be certain of its existence. There then also exists a fourth dimension that was necessary for the creation of man, which is exactly as impossible for us to imagine, as is the third dimension for the bedbug. This fourth dimension

is the existence of God and this dimension can only begin to be accessible through faith. The bedbug cannot access the third dimension, since it was not given the ability to do so by nature. God has an influence on us that He exercises through the fourth dimension, without us even noticing and without our having counter-influence; just like how we can influence the life of the bedbug, without its being able to fathom our existence. This was the theological teaching of Professor Hall, employed in the wash station of prisoner encampment number 5 in Stalingrad on the Volga in May of 1948.

Presentations were also given at the encampment from time to time. They were organized by the ANTIFA group and there was usually an pre-planted agitator who voiced his opinion during the events too. The goal was to show us the advantages and logical basis for Marxism-Leninism and its historical preeminence and inevitability over all other systems of the world. Discussion was encouraged directly following these presentations. The professor would regularly have comments to make and he was allowed to voice his opinion. I can still remember the contents of some of the things he said: "I still stand by the Christian Occidental tradition and cannot accept what you are teaching in the least bit. My view of the world is completely unrelated to your own and is based on wholly different moral standards," and so on. He would go on for a little while longer and then was quieted. The prisoners would become restless and the ANTIFA—now embarrassed—would look around the room, trying to undo the damage that had just been done. Everyone was astounded at the professor's daring but no one would applaud him for the sake of their own safety. The possible approaching release was more important at that moment than a discussion about ideology. I'll have to conclude by saying that nothing ever happened to the professor. Maybe the Russians wrote him off as an

old man, unable to be reeducated, whom they allowed to voice opposition time and again—according to the long-term prisoners at the encampment. In any case, he was banned to the wash station where he wouldn't be able to do any more damage. Maybe they thought they could soften him up with all the steam. I also heard that he had had his troubles with the Nazis as well, which led him to not being promoted to a higher rank. The professor was a lanky man and not cut out for hard work. Sometimes, I doubt that he ever made it out of the encampment alive, which was reinforced by the fact that my searches for him after my return home yielded no results.

My sojourn in the wash station lasted about two weeks, at the end of which another sensational event occurred. A new external subcamp was being set up and, as if now established in the laws of nature, I was selected for redeployment. The leaders of the encampment were again trying to get rid of the prisoners that couldn't do much work, just as had happened the last time. The encampment received money from the factory for the output that the prisoners produced and had to use this money to maintain the encampment. It was therefore in their interest to have as many capable workers on hand as possible who could fulfill the performance norms or even surpass them — thus the tendency to banish the incapable workers, 'bloha rabotnik', to the external subcamps. This time around, we were actually able to determine where we were headed based on the preparations being made, namely, to a kolkhoz between the Don and the Volga rivers — right at the great bend in the Don between Stalingrad and Kalach. The place was the site of a battlefield where the most brutal battles for the fortress of Stalingrad were fought. Even though the battles had taken place over 5 years prior to that, we were still able to make some grim finds in the area.

At the Kolkhoz

After my widely varied career as a construction worker, wood chopper, quarry worker, waste remover, ship loader, and calk sprayer, I now was about to become familiar with the duties and aspects of agricultural life. We were transported to the external subcamp in cargo trucks. Our new home was a group of tents that had been set up by the military and was probably broken down every winter since work on the land was seasonal. Nowadays, the Don-Volga Canal can be found on this site, connecting the two rivers; at that time it had not been built. Life in the tents turned out to be bearable; the weather was nice and we were able to breathe fresh air again. The main encampment, however, was overrun by fleas. I had already become acquainted with their brethren during the war: clothes lice, crabs, head lice, bugs, cockroaches, scabies, and also normal human fleas. But the pests at this tent encampment really took the cake — I had never experienced anything like it before.

The fleas would come out in the thousands, mainly taking up residence in the military blankets we were given to sleep with. They seemed to be a sort of sand flea that would have been common in the desert areas of the Bedouins. I had to think of the author Karl May, who, in his books, would greet the desert inhabitants with the line: “I wish you a night without sand fleas.” We tried to squash them while they were on the blankets, but it was useless; there were too many. The only ‘good’ thing about the fleas were that they didn’t often bite and when they did, it wouldn’t swell that much. Despite that, I soon had a wide, red, inflamed and itchy area around my belly that looked like a red belt. Our spirits took a dive on account of this plague and sank even lower at the realiza-

tion that the food portions were, to our surprise, even lousier than back in the city. Our food came from a field kitchen and I had the feeling that our valuable foodstuffs — like sugar, fat and fish — had found their way into other hands.

Our work in the field involved planting cabbage, the collecting of melon and squash seeds, as well as the planting of potatoes. The work was done on the open field under the shining sun.

In hindsight, it seems unimaginable that the work done at the kolkhoz was done by hand and with such simple tools. In order to plant the cabbage, we had to use a spade to dig small holes in rows—much like with asparagus back at home — after which a grow root was placed inside, covered with soil, pressed, and immediately watered. There was a set number of pieces that we had to process in order to fulfill our daily performance norm.

This work lasted until the whole field reserved for cabbage had been filled; next were the melons and squash. The word for cabbage in Russian is 'kapusta' and the word for squash is 'tyckva'. Both of these crops were grown from grain. Each of us received a sack that was open at one end and filled with seeds and we went to work planting the seed on the field just like in the time before mechanized agriculture, like in Van Gogh's painting 'The Sower'. The whole brigade was put in a working row and awaited orders from the commander. When word was given, we would bend down and dig a deep hole with our trowels, place the seeds inside, cover the holes with dirt and then stand at attention again. The line then moved two or three steps forward, paused for a moment, and started the process anew. Upon command, the brigade sprang forward and the whole thing reminded me of the Dancing Procession of Echternach, except that we didn't spring backwards. Our working pace was set by the natshalnik, which was dependent

on the size of the field that had to be cropped that day. The natshalnik was experienced and established an efficient work flow. He divided the work in such a way that we were even able to take regular breaks between the rows. A wagon carrying soup came out to the field around midday and after lunch we continued working until 5 o'clock, our speed slowing with each passing hour.

The potato planting was carried out in the same tedious and antiquated manner as everything else. We received another sack that we slung over our shoulders, only this time somewhat larger and filled with seed potatoes. We moved in the same order and timing as we had with the squash. The earth would be made into piles and the potatoes would be planted with the spades and our hands. Here too, the agrarian specialists set a certain number of potatoes that had to be planted by the end of the working day. This setting of worker performance was a common feature in all parts of the Soviet state run economy, even the agrarian sector.

Our natshalnik would often disappear long before the working day was over. At the end of the day we would hear a signal and make our way over to a pit, into which the rest of the seed potatoes would be thrown. There is a contradiction here that I would like to shed light on. Considering the fact that we were given an insufficient amount of food at the encampment, it would have been logical for us to take some of the potatoes back for cooking or roasting. This, however, was strictly forbidden and we would even be patted down by the watchmen at the end of the day to make sure we hadn't taken anything with us. According to the official plan, the potatoes had to end up in the ground, one way or another, and could not be taken home, ultimately resulting in a huge amount of waste. I knew that such a system would not be sustainable in

the long term and I was astounded by the Russians' dogmatic adherence to this system, which they were convinced was the best possible.

We often came across remains from past battles during our work in the fields. Sometimes we would discover objects such as gas masks and weapons. Other times we would find bone remains or skulls from fallen soldiers and sometimes even leather pieces that were still in good condition. We dug up horse bones and pieces of wood from wagons or from foxholes, which were buried just beneath the surface. The battlefield was quickly leveled off after the confrontation so that agriculture could start back up. The sandy soil was very air permeable, which caused the corpses to decay rapidly, leaving only bones behind. We took the opportunity to mourn the fallen soldiers and came to the conclusion that, although prisoners of war, we were lucky to have come out of the war alive. When we came across bones, we would bury them deeper down and covered them up again.

A few weeks later, we were sent back to the potato field to do weeding and it was obvious where the leftover potatoes had been buried at the end of the working days. The potato shoots had sprouted out of the ground, densely packed next to one another at these disposal sites. They had thin stocks and looked like stinging nettle, forming a low hedge. None of the men at the kolkhoz took it upon themselves to take care of this and trim the hedge, since responsibility rested in no one's hands in particular.

The land between the Don and Volga rivers was almost completely flat, except for a few low hills that weren't used for agriculture and were covered with grass. Small water basins could be found in the low-lying areas, having been formed by water from melting snow or from floods. The basins

were teeming with frogs that had turned the area into their breeding grounds. We would go hunting for frogs when our path back to the encampment took us past the basin. It was easy hunting and we would simply whack the frogs dead with a stick and then place them in our cookware or into a sack. These frogs were larger than the green water frogs that we had back at home and someone claimed that these were Siberian bullfrogs. The watchmen tolerated our frog hunts and the encampment leaders also didn't raise any objections. Once back at the encampment, we would take the collected frogs out of our sacks and cookware and proceed to skin them. The livers were removed and would be cooked separately, since they excreted a tasty yellow fat—twenty livers would amount to about a cupful of pure fat. The frogs were then boiled in salty water and we would nibble the meat off the bones, not only from the legs, but from the entire frog.

We never left the working fields together in one large group. Sometimes the different working groups would finish their working days at different times and usually the brigades were assigned to parts of the field that weren't very close to one another. We would walk back unaccompanied by watchmen, sometimes alone and sometimes in small groups. The count took place only after everyone had returned for the day. One day, on my way back to the encampment, I caught sight of a shepherd with his herd of sheep. I closed in on the herd, trying my best to remain undetected. As soon as I had seen the herd, the first thought that came to mind was 'milk'. The shepherd allowed me to approach and when I reached him I said a greeting and asked if he had anything to drink, making the corresponding gesture with my hands. Without hesitation, he released the leather drinking pouch from his belt and handed it over to me. I put the pouch to my mouth and chugged

it down without stopping. It was full of fresh sheep milk.

I thanked the shepherd with all the Russian expressions I had in my arsenal and ran back to the others, not wanting to be the straggler. This was an event that I would never forget, the sort that I had experienced many times during my imprisonment. This reminds me of some lines from a Russian poet, whose name I've unfortunately forgotten:

You are poor and rich,
cruel and merciful at the same time,
little mother Russia.

(Later, while writing this book, I found out that these words come from the poem 'Russia' by N.A. Nekrasov. This is a loose translation that deviates slightly from the original Russian text.)

The produce from our kolkhoz was made exclusively for the Tractor Factory. Once harvested, the goods were sent to the kitchen at the factory for preparation, the excess being sold off to the personnel. Commerce — which would have been responsible for transportation, storage and quality control in a free economy — was banned in the belief that production would become more efficient. But this turned out to be a miscalculation. Since there were no private interests involved in the processing of the goods, many of them would end up rotting, being misplaced or landing on the black market. This was one of the contributing factors to the constant lack of goods in Russia, especially food. The population was given consolation from harvest to harvest and always promised a bounty that would never actually be achieved in the given conditions. Bread ration coupons were still being given out in the Soviet Union in 1948, having by that point already been done away with in West Germany. The citizens were able to use these coupons to acquire bread for a certain price

that had been set by the state. Anything above the allotted amount would have to be purchased for a higher price on the free market. Crops grown in the little private gardens were used for individual consumption or sold on the open market, being one of the most important pillars of the Soviet food supply chain. Enormous amounts of emergency provisions were shipped over from America to harbors in the far eastern parts of Russia to help the Soviets during the war.

Another one of the strategic tricks of the state run economy was the so-called 'subbotnik'. This was a particular day or certain hours outside of the normal working time, during which pressure was put on the workers to 'voluntarily' work longer. We were often deployed for subbotnik on Sundays and holidays. This method was used to fulfill the planned production targets that had been missed or to cover up the sloppy work that had been done. The planned production targets had to be met, as far as the next level of the bureaucracy was concerned, regardless of man, machine or health. The subbotnik was a practice carried out in all socialist countries and our compatriots in East Germany were likely also familiar with it. It was an oblation that had to be offered up to the holy 'Plan Fulfillment' by means of 'voluntary' force.

Once the planting and seeding were complete, we were assigned general tasks, such as weeding, replenishing the non-growing areas and thinning out dense growth clusters. Our natshalnik was satisfied that his performance norm had been fulfilled, at least on paper, which meant that he could send his lists and reports on to the higher authorities who had already calculated the harvest for this year. But the calculation never ended up equating to the actual harvest numbers.

There was a ranger assigned to our kolkhoz, who was given a very special task — he was employed as a mouse catcher. Let

me explain: there was a certain species of mouse that inhabited the Don/Volga region, named 'zissling' by the prisoners. They were rodents that moved underground and fed on the roots of agricultural crops, causing great damage in some cultures. These mice were larger than the field mice we were used to back at home. The ranger took on two of the prisoners as helpers and they would together set off in the area on mouse hunts. The two helpers were well-fed and lived in tents, which would be relocated after a certain time, like nomads. When the brigade returned, the two would look as though they had been stuffed with food and they were radiating with life compared to the others. They would capture up to a dozen zisslings a day and then get to grill them or fry them up each evening. They even claimed that the meat tasted excellent, which I can believed since the mice were strict herbivores. Everyone hoped for a deployment with the ranger, but there were unfortunately only ever two spots to be had at one time.

Even the mouse catchers were reimbursed based on a performance norm. The basis for performance review here was the number of captured zisslings, which had to be proven with the cut-off tails. I conducted some further research into the rodents when I returned home and discovered that they existed in the eastern regions of Germany and were called 'Zieselmaus' (long-clawed ground squirrel). The rodents in the Don-Volga region were more likely to have been speckled ground squirrels. The Russian name for them was 'susslik' and, for whatever reason, this word was transformed into 'zissling' by the prisoners.

Our tent encampment at the kolkhoz was situated on a raised parcel of land and at the bottom, about one kilometer away, there was a small village. The village was a collection of typical wooden houses that had been built for the workers of

the kolkhoz after the war. There were sheep stalls in the village, which also belonged to the kolkhoz. The stalls were likely the ones that the shepherd I had run into kept his sheep. The village was a ghost town during the day, as the men and women were off working in the fields, only a few remaining to tend to the herds. There was also a stone well in the village and water had to be obtained by lowering a pail attached to a chain and a pulley down into the depths of the ground.

Sometime around the end of August, I was ordered to come along with the natshalnik and a few other comrades and go to the village. One of the men that came along was a dentist from Saxony. We were given spades and, without much instruction, we were sent to the sheep stalls. We were to clear out the dried-up manure that was deposited like little pieces of turf, which we cut out in uniform pieces with the spades. The pieces of 'turf' were then stacked into piles with space between them so that they could dry out fully. Once the natshalnik felt that we had gotten a hang of the work, he left us to continue on our own, not even setting a performance norm. There was probably no official performance norm for sheep manure stacking at the time in the Soviet Union, which we found astonishing. This being the case, we decided not to strain ourselves and took it easy.

The task started becoming unbearably boring after about a day or two and the village offered no reprieve, since it was completely devoid of people — everyone was out in the fields. I finally decided that I would venture out and do some exploration and discussed the plan with my comrades. They were fine with the plan as long as it didn't mean any more work for them. I was hoping to come across something edible during the expedition. There was not a sound to be heard and I made my way to the center of the village without any anxieties.

I had gotten about a hundred meters into the village when I suddenly heard the sound of galloping hooves coming nearer. Just as I was about to hide myself, two officers on horses appeared, catching sight of me, and they came to a stop with a jerk. We had our eyes glued on one another for several moments until someone made a first move. One of the officers was our encampment leader and he had brought someone with him. I was on high alert and my knees were trembling as I stood there and waited for my punishment. The encampment leader started yelling at me furiously, "Stoy, stoy! Idy syuda! Potshemu!" and so on. In English: "Stop, stop! Come to me! What are you doing here?" He was beside himself and mad as a bull; he had never expected to see one of his prisoners walking around freely in the village. I won't repeat the long slew of curses that continued to spew from his mouth, an art form that most of the Russians seem to be good at.

When he was finished yelling, I started with my pre-rehearsed list of excuses that, unfortunately, didn't quite fit to this particular situation. Once I told him that I was from the brigade working at the sheep stalls, he began to calm down. He hadn't been aware of this fact and that made things somewhat better. He rode and I ran all the way back to the stall, where he gave my two comrades an earful, even though they hadn't done anything. He ordered us to keep working and then report to him at the encampment once the work day was finished, then he rode off with his partner. We immediately started to ponder what would be awaiting us when we reported to him later that day. Various theories were thought up and tossed away. We thought of every punishment we could, including a removal to a penal camp. We argued amongst ourselves until the two of them finally convinced me to admit that I was the main guilty party, which wasn't all that far from

the truth. On the other hand, we had talked the plan out before I had set off into the village and, had I brought back some goodies, no one would have said, "No, thank you."

We went to the encampment commander as instructed after work. Our punishment was no evening soup for that day and we had to go to the garden belonging to the officers to weed and water the plants until sundown. Just before he dismissed us, he told us that we would still be allowed to get our bread ration that evening, which improved our moods a bit. The other men in the encampment hardly paid any interest to what had happened to us; everyone was worried about their own matters. Owing to the fact that we were divided into different parts of the field, the normal sense of camaraderie and community had not formed at this encampment during that time. This team was an assembly of men from various encampments that belonged to the Tractor Factory.

Soon, the amount of work that had to be done in the fields began to decrease. The planting was finished and the harvest was still a good ways off. It was clear that the Russians wouldn't keep us on to do filler work, like clearing the animal stalls, for much longer. But our time at the kolkhoz wouldn't come to an end as easily as I had assumed.

Our encampment commander wasn't satisfied with the trifling punishment he had given us and still harbored resentment towards us somewhere deep in his heart. He turned up the next morning at the count, which was unusual, and I got an uneasy feeling in my stomach. He made his way to the front of the lines, keeping a stern look on his face, and proceeded recounting the events of the previous day, with full theatrics. He explained how the 'otchkah' (four-eyes) was likely the main culprit; being that the other two men had at least remained at their work site. He said that I should receive a parti-

cularly tough punishment for my bad behavior and be sent to a penal camp — he used the word 'shtrafnoy lager'. Since we were in the Soviet Union — a democratic land — he didn't want to make the decision unilaterally, but wanted us to come to a consensus. He continued on in a calm voice, "Anyone who thinks the otchkah should be sent to a shtrafnoy, please raise your arm." I looked around the group in nervous anticipation, but no one lifted their arm, the troupe stood there, unanimated in the morning sun. I could see the astonishment and disappointment in the commander's face. He seemed to become a little bit embarrassed and probably thought to himself: "The Nemetzkiye (Germans) continue to stay by each other's side even as prisoners and don't leave any of their men out to dry." He was wrong on that point: the truth was that the other men were too lazy and inert to lift their arms. They couldn't have cared less if I landed in a penal camp or not; they had their own things to worry about, like catching frogs, and also didn't care much about satisfying the commander either. He had made a mistake in the way he formulated the question. He should have asked: "Who is opposed to the four-eyes being sentenced to the penal camp?" Then the result would not have been quite as rosy for me. I could well have been sent to the penal camp as a result of the indolence of the other men.

One evening — it must have sometime in the middle of the year, since we were busy with planting at the time — after the food distribution, we were called together for a count. There was a grassy dell at the edge of the tent encampment that served well as a gathering spot. We all seated ourselves along the edge of the dell and looked on as several officers and guards came over, attired in their decorated parade uniforms, with serious and solemn looks on their faces, ready to

give us some news. We had no clue what was going to be announced, but were prepared for anything—from news that we were being released with immediate effect, to news that we would be held until the year 2000. What was finally said turned out to be a grave disappointment for everyone: an officer told us, with exaggerated disbelief, that the People's Republic of Yugoslavia had left its sister nations in the Socialist Block and decided to fight its own way into the future. He went on to say that American Capitalism was to blame and that it was also preparing to go to war with the peaceful people of the Soviet Union. We were told to protect ourselves from capitalism once we returned home.

We looked on in disbelief, thinking the whole thing was a joke; not one of us could have given a rat's ass. There couldn't have been anything less interesting than the path that Yugoslavia was taking into the future. The first signs of fatigue were becoming visible and some of the prisoners even laid themselves back. But the man kept on talking; getting redder and redder with each passing moment, sweat starting to run down his face. He instructed us to thoroughly discuss this affront on socialism amongst ourselves. I couldn't fathom how anyone could have worked themselves up into such a fervor over something so seemingly trivial. We later found out that all the leaders of all the encampments received the order to discuss this matter with the prisoners directly from Moscow. The subject was forgotten before we even disassembled. Much later, after I had returned home, I came to realize the true importance of this issue in regards to Soviet post-war politics — the matter had Moscow nervous and scared. Tito in Belgrade was as dangerous to Stalin as Martin Luther had been to the Pope in Rome. It seemed as though the Eastern Block was starting to fragment. This was the reason behind

all the nervousness that even managed to find its way into the prisoner encampments. But, as I already mentioned, we were apolitical at the time and completely unaware of the events unfolding in the West.

Release and Journey Home

One morning, about two weeks after the mishap at the sheep stalls, we went out to the front of the encampment for our morning count and noticed a cargo truck parked on the road in from of the gate. We also noticed that the watchmen were acting more restless than usual. The commander and his deputy were busy shuffling through papers, leading me to believe that something bad was about to happen. I assumed that a new subcamp and relocation were involved. I decided to make myself as inconspicuous as I could and hid myself in the mass of prisoners. As soon as I did this, the organization began: names were being called off and ordered to line up on the side. After about twenty names had been called, the commander paced back and forth in front of the remaining mass of men and looked for further candidates. I was trying my best to stay out of his sight, but he managed to catch a glimpse of me and immediately yelled out, "Otchkah, otchkah, idy syuda. Na pravo!" I could see the satisfaction in his face at having discovered me. 'Otchkah' was the Russian equivalent of 'four-eyes' and the rest meant, "Come here. Stand to the left." Another two or three men were picked out and lined themselves up, after which we heard, "Prepare for transport!" The preparations didn't take long and we soon found ourselves in the back of the cargo truck, heading east down a bumpy road, in the direction of the sun.

The truck had to stop for a few moments on account of a malfunction and we learned from the driver that we were headed for the main encampment. The driver was a real character—he went on and on about how bad he found the current state of affairs in the Soviet Union. He had apparently spent some months serving in the Red Army as a truck driver in the

eastern parts of Germany and couldn't stop praising the German roads. He told us he could drive a whole kilometer with a glass of beer in his hands, without a drop spilling out; here in the Soviet Union the beer glass would have been empty after 20 meters. He spoke a bit of German and we asked him how he got along when he was there: he told us that he had no troubles and in his heavy Russian accent, let us in on his secret: "Allllvays looking, allllvays asking." I got the impression that he longed to be back in Germany.

We still were uncertain of the cause or reason for our return to the main encampment and speculation abounded. Based on my experiences, I knew that such sudden actions by the Russians seldom result in anything good and was I therefore skeptical. For that reason, I was therefore shocked as we reached the encampment and the other prisoners cried out, "You're going home!" None of us wanted to believe it, since we had heard these words many times in the past. Our feelings alternated between hope and joy on the one hand to skepticism and uncertainty on the other. The watchmen, however, were acting especially generous and friendly, which led me to believe that something definitive had changed.

From that point on, everything proceeded quickly and without friction, which was unusual by Russian standards. On the following day, we underwent a medical inspection, were sent to the banya for cleaning and delousing, received clean clothing and were free to spend the rest of the time roving around the encampment. The delousing was a precautionary measure: at that particular point, we had few remaining lice on us, being that the fleas from the countryside didn't dwell on human bodies or in clothing. There were bugs in the barracks of the encampment, but they too only dwelled in the cracks of the sleeping bunks. The clothes were used but in

good condition: we received military undergarments made of rough cotton that had bands and buttons for fastening onto the arms and legs, a light gray cotton jacket, and lace-up shoes made of hard, gray canvas with rubber soles that were cut from factory waste. They were good shoes for walking in and I even used them for a time after my return home. We were also given better food, such as kasha instead of the typical soup, even being allowed seconds.

The predominating mood was friendly and relaxed, since it was now clear that we were being allowed to go home. In the back of my mind, I still feared that the whole thing might fall through or that some of us would be held back at the last moment. The Russian system was characterized by uncertainty and we all knew that we couldn't consider ourselves free until we had crossed the German border. That meant the West German border, since East Germany was still under Soviet control at the time. A careless slip or an unfavorable report by an implanted informer would have brought the dream to an end. I behaved neutrally and tried my best not to be noticed, especially since I had a reputation of being a prankster. I still don't know if I should thank the commander's rage at the sheep stall incident for my release or if my name was actually on the official list. It's possible that the majority of the men were already on the list and that the commander was at liberty get rid of a few extra prisoners that he wasn't fond of. In this case, my early release was either the result of coincidence or of luck by having been caught wandering around the Russian village, in search of food, by a short-tempered officer of the Red Army.

From this point on, no further dramatic incidents came to the fore; everything went according to routine. We went out for a count on the third day, the names of each man being

read off once again. We then made our way to the Stalingrad freight train station on cargo trucks and when we arrived, a transport train was waiting for us. We left the encampment without much hoorah. Our comrades were already off at work and the ones we were friends with had already said their farewells on the previous evening. Erwin Schell from Baden-Oos had some important messages for me that I was to give to his wife when I returned. The messages, of course, had to be oral, since any form of writing was forbidden from being brought back and would also have been foolish to attempt. Erwin Schell ended up returning home a year after I did.

Prisoners from all parts of Stalingrad were assembled for the transport. I don't have the slightest clue how many encampments there were in total; our encampment was number 5, so there would have been at least that many. There were probably more encampments upriver that we had no idea about, other than the enormous industry complexes named 'Red Barracks' and 'Red October'. A modest 50 prisoners from encampment number 5 were present on that transport, out of a total of approximately 1000 to 1200 men. We were transported in freight cars that had received the designation of livestock carriages after the war but had seldom been used to transport their foreseen cargo. General freight was mostly transported in these cars, which were practical for loading and unloading. I did, however, come across some cars that had rings in the walls, used for tying up livestock. In times of peace, they were not intended for the transport of people.

But that was all unimportant for us and we were just glad to be headed home. All the men from encampment 5 were put together in one car. This time, there wasn't an upper level inside of the train car as there had been on the transport in. The Russian trains were larger than the ones back at home,

on account of the wider track gauge. I only knew the other men from the encampment fleetingly and had not developed any sort friendship or camaraderie with them, which is why I don't remember any of them today. A field kitchen had been installed in the car for warm food; otherwise we were given dry bread. Fresh bread was not available on transport trains in the Soviet Union, probably as a result of the state-run economy. Organizing a primitive bread scale to ensure an equal distribution of bread had been a problem when the transport was being prepared. Each train car had a pre-selected bread distributor, who also served as the car speaker. There were no guards present for the transport as there had been on all previous trips and we were only accompanied by a small number of soldiers that were hardly seen for the duration of the trip.

We finally got underway and started heading west. I don't remember if the trip started in the day or in the night time—my memories of the time following the release are not as clear as they had been at the encampments. The excitement settled down after a while and we started turning our thoughts to the future and the potential situation back at home, which we had no more than a foggy conception of. The trip back was during the harvest time and we were impressed by the sight of the huge, golden, undulating wheat fields that looked like a wavy sea being moved by the wind. Seeing the wheat fields made the dire lack of bread in Russia unfathomable. We traveled through the Ukraine and reached Brest-Litowsk in 14 days. The train chugged on by day and by night, sometimes stopping for an entire day and sometimes for a few hours, before abruptly setting off again. Our train took no priority and was directed so as not to disrupt any of the normal rail traffic. Our discussions oriented themselves more and more on subjects

pertaining to the heimat and we were spiritually starting to move away from the past. Subdued optimism could be found among those of us going to the West and restrained anticipation among those going to the East.

The weather remained pleasant throughout the whole trip and the door of the car could be left open, giving us an unrestricted view of the passing landscape and its harvest-ready fields and rebuilt wooden villages. We didn't see much of the cities, being that the train would almost always stop at freight stations. I don't recall noticing any destruction from the war, even though we were traveling through areas that had bore the brunt of many attacks a mere five years back. Some of the men sat at the edge of the open doors and let their legs dangle out of the train car. A rumor was going around that two careless passengers had hopped out of the train to pluck blackberries at one of the stops and had been left behind as the train set off without them. It was just a rumor that I was unable to confirm, especially since it had played out several train cars down, but anything was possible. The main events of the day were the food and water distributions and the weighing out of the daily bread rations, which was always critically observed by the whole group, lest someone get a crumb less than their pre-determined amount. Everyone still held fast to their traumatic fear of not receiving what was due, acquired from life at the encampments. Finally, we arrived at Brest-Litowsk, a border station on the border of the Soviet Union and Poland.

Everyone knew that this border was a trouble spot that had to be overcome and could even mean the end of the journey home for some; all sorts of unsettling stories were starting to go around. The great inquisition was before us and also the most thorough search that we had yet been through. We were

ordered to disembark from the train with all of our belongings — which weren't that many. We were then called off one at a time by name, at which point we made our way through several gates, where everything was exactingly searched. The undersides of our arms were even re-inspected, in search of the SS 'bird' tattoo. The Soviets wanted to avoid that someone from the wanted list might have managed to slip through their grasps at the last minute. They were especially on alert for paper and writings that could have later been valuable material for espionage. Some of the men had written journals and others had recorded food recipes. Writing down recipes had turned into a favorite activity of those who spent time in the recovery barracks. The psychological reasoning for this was the playing out of hunger fantasies; most of the recipe collectors were neither able to cook nor planning to try out the recipes once home. I can still recall some of the dishes that I hadn't known from back home and had come to develop a craving for, such as 'poor knight', 'curd wedges', 'plum dumplings', 'red grits', 'unpeeled potatoes and herring', and even 'French fries', to which I had first been introduced during the imprisonment. Our fellow countrymen from the north of Germany thought we were kidding around with them and wouldn't believe that, in Baden, we would be given a piece of fruit cake to eat along with our potato soup. Most of the paper that we used was obtained from multi-layered cement sacks and was a favorite product for trade by the people at the construction sites.

I had managed to hold on to some photos of friends and family for three entire years, evading all previous searches. Before arriving in Brest-Litowsk, I decided to play it safe and shredded the photos into small pieces and threw them to the wind from the moving train. One never knew which control-

ler would end up finding the photos and how he or she would interpret them. It was often the case that important decisions rested on the momentary mood or spiritual state of just such a person and one could end up being lucky or unlucky. It was therefore sensible to minimize the number of items that could come under scrutiny and not challenge fate. The recipe for success was: hide all signs of fear; make a clueless expression; feign trouble hearing.

Fortune was on my side during these inspections and I survived unscathed. We had no idea how many of us were held back and would only come to know this upon departure. The most important thing for me at the time was the fact that I was through.

The transport train changed its track gauge from the Russian to the European system on the other side of the border. I don't quite know anymore if we re-boarded the same train that we had come in on, or if we were put in a new one. I do, however, remember that we were kept locked inside the train cars on our way through Poland and not allowed to exit unaccompanied. All contact with the Polish locals was also expressly forbidden. The situation hadn't changed since our original deportation and the Russians were still uneasy about the prisoner transports through Poland.

There isn't much to report about the rest of the journey through Poland as it was quick and without incident. One thing that did catch my attention was the large number of women working the fields in their colorful head scarves. We waved at them from the passing train and they would wave back. I can still remember the distant and hazy silhouette of Warsaw emerging from the fog as we passed the outskirts of the city. We finally crossed the Oder River Bridge one morning at the beginning of September. The car erupted into

cheers and jubilation as we crossed over; we had now finally left Soviet and Polish sovereign territory and were back in Germany. We were still in an area under communist influence but nonetheless in the German language area. The feelings that surfaced when we laid eyes upon German writing—on the train stations and the buildings that we hadn't seen in years — were indescribable.

We finally were able to leave the Russian transport train and boarded a train belonging to the Deutsche Reichsbahn, which is what the rail company in East Germany was called at the time. The German Democratic Republic (GDR for short) had not yet been founded by this time. The entire train personnel was comprised of Germans; we were no longer threatened by Russians with machine guns. The food service was being carried out by the Red Cross and we weren't in a freight train, but a normal passenger train with seats, movable windows, luggage racks and toilets. Everything was an unfamiliar luxury for us at the time and we took advantage of it to the fullest. Our greedy appetites moderated themselves a bit since we now knew that our meals were secure. Provisions had been made to assure that we had enough space on our journey in the train and everyone made themselves as comfortable as they could. Rather than having to drink water, we were given tea.

The train departed from Frankfurt on the Oder and made its way to Dresden via Cottbus. The train made stops along the way so that the men who lived in the areas could disembark. We were able to witness the first reunions of the prisoners with their family and friends from within the train. Most of the receptions were happy and cheerful, while others were sad and dramatic. On the whole, a jovial mood had set in and we were all basking in it. The inhabitants of the areas

where the train made its stops often came over to give us gifts of food, mostly baked goods and cake, and did so despite the general shortage of products. The soup given to us by the Red Cross was thick and hearty and we quickly re-accustomed ourselves to normal and regular meals.

But this wasn't the case for everyone. There were some that, on account of their prolonged malnutrition, had trouble digesting all the food they were taking in and ended up needing medical attention. The main symptoms were stomach aches, diarrhea, constipation and bloating of the arms and legs. Some didn't survive the journey home and died shortly after their return. Many went down the same or a similar path during their imprisonment as I had. In the three years of my imprisonment I was given no meat, no sausage, no real vegetables, no cheese, no milk, no eggs, no salad, no fish, few potatoes, little fat and very little sugar—at least not officially. Our primary sources of nutrition were soup and bread containing barley, millet or cabbage. We had access to the 'gourmet' foodstuffs mentioned above once in a blue moon and only through sheer coincidence. It was no surprise then, that some of the men were physically unprepared to start eating 'normal' food again and had trouble doing so.

The next larger city we came to after Cottbus was Dresden, where we stopped for a whole day. The rest of the men hailing from East Germany were released from the transport and the West Germans were given fifty ostmarks as 'welcome money' and were free to roam. This money could only be spent in the East though. We got the chance to explore the still destroyed center of the city and look for things to buy. The residents in the city were just as poor as us and had little money to spend. Several sellers had set up shop for the arriving prisoners near

the train station and offered various goods — many made by their own hands. I took the opportunity to buy myself a pocket knife and my bounty of fifty ostmarks was gone in one blow. I was a property-less, workless repatriate in the French Occupation Zone and this would be the first item that I purchased on my return home. The basis for my hoped-for prosperity — that I took upon myself to achieve as compensation for the years of hunger and suffering — had thus been laid. Soon we continued on towards the West and the next station was Plauen in Vogtland. There, we spent our final night in an East German release camp in Oelsnitz castle, near the train station.

Oelsnitz was a castle built in the middle ages and had escaped damage during the war and held over the centuries; it wasn't quite clear to me why a castle had been chosen as a release camp. It wasn't even along the main route from Dresden to the border crossing and we had to take a large detour to reach it. We only spent one night there and I therefore can't recall too many details of the place. One thing that I do remember, however, was the complete sterility of the place — I had never experienced anything like it during my entire military and prisoner career. On the morning of our departure, the medical staff came to us and we were powdered up. We looked like stucco-workers who had just finished work when they were done. They powdered up even the most intimate areas of our bodies, wanting to be cautious and avoid the introduction of fungi and parasites into the West. The substance that they were using would likely today be considered highly toxic. It seemed that this intrusive procedure was the sole purpose of our detour to the castle. It was also possible that the Americans, adhering to a different standard of hygiene, had, required this before transfer into the western regions out of fear of contamination. A note was surely made in our

documentation recording the procedure.

We set off again the next morning and this time traveled directly to the border station near the town of Hof an der Saale. Though we were several kilometers away from the border, we could already smell the sweet air of freedom and everyone's heart was beating in longing anticipation. We didn't know how to mentally process the idea that we were free again after so many years of imprisonment. We were also still nervous about the Soviet secret service, which could have theoretically emerged at any moment and snatched us up.

We finally crossed over the border, which, at the time, was the political front between the two world powers of America and the Soviet Union who weren't on the best of terms. Our names and hometowns were called out at the corresponding station and we were handed over, along with our documentation, from the Eastern rail police to the Western police, and then the train rolled on. The tension was finally broken and jubilation set in once we crossed the rail bridge over the Saale River and approached the town of Hof. We were safe at last. I associate this particular bridge with my departure from the East and therefore still have a clear image of it in my mind from that day.

We were quartered in an American encampment when we got to Hof. It was the first time in my life that I had laid eyes on a real American in uniform and it was a total culture shock for me. The American soldiers moved much less formally and more relaxed than their Russian counterparts. The interaction between men of varying service grades was also much friendlier and the rank differences hardly made themselves known. Even the barracks and their facilities were of a different style and higher quality than those I was used to in the Soviet Union. The ample amounts of goods were clearly visible here, in

stark contrast to the short supplies across the border. We enjoyed the good food and better cigarettes that we had accepted with much enthusiasm. But the Americans soon arrived and got right down to business. We were individually interviewed by the secret service and asked about our work in the Soviet Union, about the observance of strategic military objects, about production figures at the major factories, about air bases, about barracks, about troop training areas and much more.

They weren't able to get much information from me, owing to the fact that I had been employed in a forest, at a quarry and at a kolkhoz, all of which were of little strategic military value. I wasn't even exposed to any potentially important production figures during my time as a waste remover at the factory. The output at that factory was so small that it didn't present any strategic danger to the US. Despite my lack of real knowledge, the American secret service was able to construct a relatively telling picture of the Soviet Union from the tidbits of information that were provided.

It was now the middle of September. There was a slight cosmetic shortcoming on the American encampment that had the effect of grinding on our souls a bit, namely, the barbed wire fence. The purpose of the fence, however, was not necessarily to keep the occupants in, but rather to keep potential intruders out. Be that as it may, we prisoners had developed a keen aversion to barbed wire in the last several years.

After our brief stay at the American encampment, we continued on with the train. My comrades that had their homes in the American occupied areas of Germany left the trains at the larger stations along the next part of the trip. Since most of the men's return had now been reported via telephone, they arrived at their hometown train stations to awaiting friends and relatives, often with red carpet-like receptions. Those that

remained on the train were also moved by the spectacle. The contrast between frog hunting and flea smashing on the Don and Volga just four weeks ago, to the current state of things in the land of milk and honey, made our reality feel like a daydream. The fear that this would turn out to be a dream after all remained within us. Spiritually disconnecting ourselves from our past proved to be more difficult than expected.

The trip then made its way in the direction of Ulm on the Danube River. When we arrived, we were brought to the national transit camp of Ulm-Kienlesberg, which was situated in an old fort above the city. It was the first encampment we entered that was completely run by the German authorities. The purpose of our stop here was the review and registration of our states of health, which was, for the first time, carried out thoroughly and by professionals. The personnel at the camp was almost entirely composed of doctors and nurses. After the medical inspection, my state of health was determined to be 'good'. There were no physical illnesses found and my heart was in working order. Only my weight was deemed unhealthy at 56 kilograms, equating to first degree dystrophy, or, in plain English: malnutrition. To get a real conception of how malnourished I was, one has to consider the fact that I had, by that time, been given regular meals since my release from Stalingrad four weeks prior. It took a few more weeks for me to regain a relatively healthy weight and in the process I also had to overcome a couple of health hurdles.

Once we reached Ulm, all the repatriates that were headed for the French occupied zone were put together in one group. We had grown smaller and smaller in number and those of us that were left over were the ones headed for the southwestern tip of Germany. I had very briefly gotten to know the men that were

now left while we were at the return encampments and during the train trip. Everyone ended up going their own way in the end and I no longer have distinct memories of any of them.

Our trip from Ulm to Tuttlingen was organized by the German authorities and they had reserved the seating area in the passenger car especially for us. We were still under the watch and command of the officials. We were again put up in a release camp, this time run by the French, when we got to Tuttlingen. This camp was also surrounded by barbed wire. The French made sure to carefully check the identity of each of the incoming former prisoners. They took our fingerprints too, which was the first time, and also the last, that I had to give them. The officers at the camp were from the dreaded 'Sûreté National' and they were on the lookout for anyone that was on their special list. Among us were also men from Alsace and even from France itself that were trying to elude the French authorities through aliases and other tricks. The ones that were caught would not have an easy road ahead of them.

I received my long-awaited certificate of discharge without any troubles. Every repatriate received fifty deutschemarks from the French as a little start up money. The currency reform had happened in June of 1948 meaning that the money itself was brand new and, in its current form, completely unfamiliar to me. All of us would have to relearn how to go about our normal days with money. In the past years, we had only been given the essentials from an official source and hadn't had money, other than when conducting deals on the black market at the encampment or with the Russian civilians. Money was rare in the Soviet Union and only accessible to us through illegal means.

I was able to leave the French encampment later that evening and went off to the train station with a ticket to Baden-

Oos in my bag. I soon realized that the next train in my direction wouldn't be leaving until 10 o'clock that night. The rail traffic was still irregular and full of gaps on account of the war and I was lucky to even have found a connection on that same day. The other comrades that were with me had all taken the train towards Freiburg, via Titisee/Höllental, and I no longer remember any of them. We hadn't known each other well enough to trade addresses before departing and it was clear that the camaraderie, togetherness and co-dependency that had developed between us during the imprisonment had slowly started to deteriorate since our release. Everyone had their mind set on their own life and on the newly accessible future and most of the men were nervous about their return, not knowing what awaited them back at home. The postal exchange that we had had back in Russia was limited to a few cryptic lines and their meaning had to be deciphered and guessed by the recipients. Nasty surprises and tragedies later befell a number of the men upon their return home. The fact that the heimat was now under French control was also something that had to be considered; we had switched from one military zone to another. The former ideological system under Hitler had, thank God, fallen apart and there was now a new and unfamiliar one in place that was awaiting us. The excitement about the return home was a mixture of nervousness and fearful anticipation.

I had my first experience of life as a free man at the train station. There was no barbed wire, no count, no guards, no commander; it was an odd feeling. The locals went their ways without batting an eye at the released prisoners of war — the novelty having worn off after seeing many over the years. I proceeded on to the reception hall of the train station and was glad to find a restaurant inside; I entered tentatively and took

a seat. There weren't many patrons inside, the selection was limited — as was the money — , and food was only available with food coupons, which could be acquired at one's local office at home. I ordered a beer — which was the first one that I had had in years — and was given a menu, somewhat covertly, by the waiter. As I read the dishes on the menu, my mouth began to water and I was drawn to a sausage platter. Without a meat coupon, the dish cost 28 deutschemarks, an ungodly amount. I couldn't resist; I hadn't eaten sausage in nearly three and a half years. After I paid, my money reserves were down to less than half of what they were.

The train departed around 11 o'clock and set off through the Kinzig Valley and Offenburg towards Baden-Oos. The train was full, despite the late hour, due to the fact that there were no private cars in Germany at the time and only a limited number of trains were running. This was the first time since my enlistment in 1940 that I had the freedom to find my own seat on a train. There was a colorful mixture of passengers present and most of them dozed off apathetically during the trip. I still remember one funny incident that was, at the time, a very typical occurrence: At one point during the trip, as the whole train car was silent, a young boy loudly said to his mother: "Mama, there's a pirate train over there!" The woman reacted quickly and prevented the boy from blabbing on. I later got into a conversation with the woman and she explained—her hand covering her words—that the French and the Dutch were in the Black Forest, cutting down wood and transporting it back to their countries. The locals called these transports 'pirate trains'. During the Nazi times, one had to choose their words carefully, so as to not bring danger on oneself; in the Soviet Union, one never knew who was listening in to one's conversations; back at home, I was now learning that it was

also advantageous to keep one's mouth closed.

The train passed through Offenburg and arrived at the train station in Baden-Oos around 3 o'clock in the morning. As I left the train, I was finally able to again take the first breath of my local air; there were no fumes in the air and I could smell the Black Forest and the nearby fields. The whole town was completely silent at this late hour and there weren't even any lamps burning in the windows. I heard the first sounds of people when I started to approach the houses. There was a window open somewhere and I could hear the sound of music, laughter and celebration — a strange sensation for me at the time. I paused for a moment and listened. When I realized that the people were speaking French, I became a little irritated; I was later told that many of the houses in the town had been seized by the French. Based on the celebration I heard upon my arrival, it must have been a Saturday night or a Sunday morning that I returned.

I continued on down Schweigrother Street towards Weststadt and heard the sounds of celebration coming from other houses. Something was being celebrated and I wasn't sure what, though I was pretty sure it wasn't my return home. The French had all sorts of reasons to celebrate: they were on the winning side of the war, they had their own occupation zone and, the ones stationed in Germany had access to plentiful food and alcohol supplies.

The closer I got to my own apartment, the queasier I started to feel. I had intentionally not sent news of my return and my spontaneous arrival could have resulted in any number of overjoyed or awkward reactions. I also wasn't sure if my parents and my sister still even lived in our old apartment, or if refugees or occupiers had taken up residence. Both turned out to be the case. A very special victor of the war had moved

in to our old attic apartment; he was a small soldier who went by the peculiar name ‘Louis’. He was one of those men who would follow around the defeated troops of the other army like a fly, wanting to snatch up one of the many ‘slacker’ posts that were to be had. These men were more feared by the civilians than even the military itself. It took a great effort to get him to leave our apartment after my return. The family ran into some good fortune later, after Louis was caught stealing stall rabbits from one of the neighboring gardens and was ordered to leave the town immediately.

Moving on, dawn had now started to break and just as I was about to reach home, something came over me that made me change directions. I decided to search out one of my childhood friends, Franz Jägel. Before the war, he had lived in a room on the ground floor of an apartment building not too far from my home. I didn’t know if he would be home, let alone if he had survived the war, but decided to find out up; and indeed he was home. I knocked for a while and he finally started rolling up the shutters. A look of surprise went over his face when he caught sight of me and he immediately opened the door. We had last seen each other in 1940, as we were in Ludwigsburg, participating in a training for new recruits. He didn’t land in an imprisonment camp owing to a head injury he had received. There was only a single piece of decoration in his room: a dried-out, dusty laurel wreath hung above his bed, which he had won after taking first place at the national .22 caliber rifle shooting competition before the war. He was well known for being an excellent shooter at the time and could have hit a wild dove sitting atop the highest tree with a 6 mm flobert-pistol. The dove population, however, wasn’t greatly affected by his sharp shooting, but would later, on account of our modern

times, be decimated through environmental degradation in the surrounding forests and fields. Franz was himself shot during the war and was now partially lamed, forcing him to live out the rest of his life partly handicapped.

We spent the next few hours talking about everything that had gone on and was going on during and since the war and in our hometown. He told me that everything was well with my family; my father was home again, my sister and also my bed-ridden grandmother — who was taken care of by my mother — all lived at the apartment. My brother also survived the war and remained in East Germany after meeting a girl there, whom he married. The other important detail—named Louis — I've already mentioned. More than half of our friends from school and from our youth were either missing, imprisoned or had fallen. Compared to many other families, mine had escaped the war with only a few scrapes and bruises.

Later that morning around 8 o'clock, after getting the relieving news from Franz, I set off on the last leg of the journey home, which only took a few minutes. It's still difficult for me to write or speak about my feelings and sentiments, especially since it would be hard for most people to relate to and considering that half a century has since passed. For these reasons, I'll just touch on those last moments without any sentimentality and as briefly as I can. I made my way up the steps, rang at the door, and beheld my mother as she opened the door. Only she and my sick grandmother were home at the time. Upon seeing me, she was paralyzed with surprise and I no longer remember exactly how we greeted each other. I sat myself down on a chair in the kitchen and began to ask questions and tell my story. After a while I was feeling hungry and my mother gave me a small loaf of bread and some marmalade. My mother was shocked as, in a matter of minutes,

I had finished off both of them not leaving a crumb. The traumatic fear of going hungry remains with me, like a thorn in my soul.

Explanation of Old Expressions

FO-Station	Surveillance station deep in the direction of the battle front.
Panye Wagon	Wagon manned by one to three soldiers, which is pulled along by small horses from the steppes of Russia.
Gittler	Russian pronunciation of ‘Hitler’. The Russians cannot pronounce the letter ‘h’ when it is at the front of a word, for example ‘Gauger’ for ‘Hauger’.
Ivan	Nickname for Russian soldiers.
Latrine	Primitively built communal bathroom.
Zemlyanka	Stable underground bunker that accommodates up to 300 people.
Kommißausdruck	Terminology the soldiers use amongst themselves.
Trolley	Narrow gauge dump cart running on a track, usually pulled along by people, horses or miniature locomotives.
Gestapo	Secret police of the state.

Epilogue

A few years back, when I read the memoirs of my grandfather Karl Hauger relating to his time as a prisoner of war, I became very interested in his experiences but, at the same time, realized that there was a great disconnect between me and those events that had occurred almost fifty years ago and in a foreign country.

In an attempt to remedy this, I decided to sign up for a three week Russian language course in St. Petersburg and, while there in July and August of 1996, to stay with a Russian family. After the language course, I boarded the Trans-Siberian Railway and took a five day trip from Moscow to Irkutsk, being the sole Westerner during the whole trip. While in Siberia, I stayed with two more Russian families in their dachas (Russian wooden houses) directly on Lake Baikal. In this relatively short period of time that I spent in Russia, I came to know some of the characteristics of Russia and its people, many of which my grandfather had also experienced during his captivity. One reality of life that left a lasting impression on me was the catastrophic effect that Communism had on the land and its people. Another, equally impressive, realization was the warm-heartedness and the generosity of the Russians, as well as their stoic equanimity in face of their permanent and all-encompassing plight. I realized that my grandfather's memoirs have in no way lost any of their authenticity and give the reader a true glimpse into the former and current conditions of life in Russia. I find it to be very important—especially in the present day and age, as many migrants from Eastern Europe are resettling in Germany — for people to be aware of these realities.

Marcus Reuter, Rastatt, August 11th, 1997

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