

Shivering on the Precipice

Life as a Prisoner of War
in the Soviet Union



By Dietrich Pütter
Translated by Walter Mugdan

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June 3, 1942 — May 24, 1949

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*The major portion of this account was written in 1954, several years after Dietrich Pütter's return from imprisonment. The final portion was written in the 1980s. Please also note that the spelling of the author's family name varies between the German-style "Pütter", used in historical contexts, and the Anglicized "Puetter", used for modern references.

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<i>Falling into the Hands of the Enemy</i>	1
<i>Miracle</i>	8
<i>Interrogating a Semi-conscious Fascist, Bandit, Parasite</i>	13
<i>Road to Moscow</i>	18
<i>Lubjanka: Where No Cock Will Crow</i>	21
<i>Butyrka: Waiting to Die</i>	32
<i>Temporary Tourist</i>	36
<i>Among Criminal Scum</i>	38
<i>Krasnogorsk: Connecting and Struggling</i>	41
<i>On the Road Again</i>	51
<i>Oranki: Guardian Angel</i>	54
<i>More Selling of the Soul</i>	57
<i>Motley Crew in a Shoebox</i>	66
<i>Rumanian Death Whimpers</i>	68
<i>Inconsolable Hearts at Christmas</i>	70
<i>Pact with the Devil</i>	72
<i>An Unfathomable Treasure</i>	80
<i>More Divisions Within</i>	82
<i>Trail of Misery</i>	86
<i>Arrival at Jelabuga</i>	93
<i>Block VI</i>	100
<i>Hunger Strike</i>	107
<i>Church March of Jelabuga</i>	112
<i>Interlude</i>	116
<i>War's End: Working My Way Home</i>	117
<i>Shuttled to Selenedolsk</i>	124
<i>Westward Bound</i>	136

Falling into the Hands of the Enemy



At the stick of my Ju 88

After the bitter winter battles, in the spring of 1942 the Russian front was static. I was serving as lieutenant and pilot in a long-distance reconnaissance unit, the 3rd Tannenberg 10, assigned to the commanding officer of the Army Group South in Poltava, to scout an area that stretched from Orel in the north and Taganrog in the south, all the way to the Urals, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus with Batum and Tiflis, and as far as Baku.

As reconnaissance flyers—we were equipped with the well-known Junkers *Ju 88*—we always had to fly without fighter escort, so we usually faced a larger number of Soviet fighters. My military career would probably have ended much sooner had it not been that, from time-to-time, the Soviet flak unintentionally shot down one of the Russian fighters that was closest behind us. Nevertheless, our losses were great.

In the early morning of June 3, 1942 I was once again at the stick of my *Ju 88* starting a flight behind enemy lines with my trusted crew—Lieutenant Hans Speth as observer, Master Sergeant Toni Rauh as radioman and Sergeant Herbert Förster as gunner. Between Poltawa and Charkow I encountered a strong weather front with thunderheads, through which I did not think it advisable to fly. I crossed back and forth in front of the storm until I finally got over and past it at an elevation of about 8,500 meters.¹ No sooner did we have the front behind us than the first Russian fighters appeared and attempted to cut off our path.

Though our respect for Russian fighters was not particularly high, on that day we soon noticed that we had to reckon with skillful ones. Additionally, it had lately been said that the Russians would try to ram the enemy if they couldn't get a shot. I had always rejected this as nonsense, since it ran completely counter to my feelings as a pilot and my entire fighting code. However, this spring morning would teach me otherwise.

In the meantime, the Russians had flown one attack after another against us—thus far without success, thanks to our good weaponry. One came within about 30 meters and gunned his plane towards us from above and behind, making his intention to ram us unmistakable. At the last moment my observer was able to shoot him into flames. Not five meters below us he roared past, started into a spin, and went down burning like a torch. He was my crew's seventh downing.

Apparently, the others had run short of fuel because we were suddenly alone, and could finally breathe again. During all the fighting, since reconnaissance was our task, I had continued to hold myself to the railway line linking Charkow, Waluiki, Swoboda, Woronesh, Mitschurinsk, Tambow, etc. We had gotten as far as Woronesh.

My observer had just sat down in front next to me when Toni Rauh, our radioman, agitatedly yelled: "Fighter high, left rear, 50 meters!" We were now flying at 7,500 meters under a very thin cirro-stratus layer. At that instant there was a crackling on the right wing, in the right engine. Just as I was discovering that the

¹ About 28,000 feet

guy shot damned well, my right engine twice shuddered powerfully, broke away from the wing with the engine housing and disappeared. Immediately, the *Ju 88* turned to the right. In the meantime, the Mig² pilot had placed himself starboard next to me and was turning left, bringing the plane in position to fire at us broadside.

The result was horrible. First, my good friend Hans Speth got it; rather torn apart, he fell onto my pedal. I increased the right turn movement of my plane to get away from the murderous fusillade. In the mirror I could see my radioman, Toni Rauh, take a shot that passed through his face and head. Förster, in the bubble³ below me, likewise showed no signs of life. I remained uninjured because only the pilot seat in the *Ju 88* was fully armored. In the meantime, I had gotten out of the line of fire and was heading west, even though I hardly expected to reach the German front, which was more than 400 kilometers away,⁴ as I now had neither defense nor observer.

It took only a few minutes before the first tracers whizzed over the left wing and ate their way slowly, but with deadly certainty, directly into the wing and then the left engine, which immediately shuddered and shook strongly as the housing fell apart. I thereupon shut it off.

There remained but two possibilities: either immediately bail out with the parachute, or attempt a belly landing. I decided upon the latter, since from an altitude of 7,000 meters I could still get pretty far towards the front—reaching which was now my only objective. Additionally, I had had some experience in this arena as during the previous 10 months I had already been shot down

2 The Soviet fighter plane

3 The *bola*, or bubble in which the gunner sits, which is set below and towards the very front of the plane. It can be accessed from the ground, or from inside the plane through a passageway in the cockpit, behind the pilot's seat. It has a streamlined shape with a glass bubble at the back in which are set two heavy machine guns. The gunner lies on his stomach in the *bola*, with his feet—which the pilot can see below him—pointing forwards, allowing him to defend the plane against attacks from below and to the rear.

4 About 250 miles

three times and had, with much luck, just made it. But this time was different.

Suddenly, I heard engine noise. It is a unique feeling to be sitting in a motorized plane without running engines and to hear another plane. I waited for renewed fire, which did not, however, take place. Suddenly again, an unbelievable bump, a loud, splintering crushing noise. My faithful *Ju 88* bounced into a vertical position. As a result of the powerful ramming, my left engine and its housing now also broke away and disappeared. Trying to counter-steer I noticed that I had lost all controls except the aileron.

In the meantime my plane had almost reached the upside down position in this involuntary loop. There was nothing else to be done. Nothing but to get out of this wreck! Pull a handle: the rear part of the cockpit roof flew off; pull another handle and I was out of my seatbelt. At that instant the plane came out of the upside down position and went into a wild spin. Through the force of the motion I was hurled forward into the turret, hit my head on the edge of something and lost consciousness.

At some point fresh air blew across my face, ice cold, so that I slowly came to. I found myself outside the wreck of my plane and falling!! Blood streamed across my face; my head, my whole body, hurt terribly. Slowly I realized where I was. How had I gotten out? The plane, in its spin, had apparently thrown me around in the cabin until I ended up at the roof opening and was flung out. Gradually, I remembered that on my chest I had a ripcord to open the parachute. One pull and the canopy opened, a jerk that pierced through my left shoulder, and I was swinging on the parachute. The remnants of my plane disappeared below me.

It was a pitiful sight to see this otherwise sleek airplane without its tail and engines. The Soviet pilot had rammed me just in front of the tail, at the narrowest point of the fuselage, and had knocked off the tail entirely.

As a child watches a stone falling into a well, I watched after the pieces of the wreck as they disappeared. I then discovered that I was still holding the ripcord handle in my hand. Slowly, almost with amusement, I opened the hand and watched as the handle fell away. I also threw after it the single glove I still had.

With this the thought shot through my head that I might have gone crazy since in this situation I was thinking of such nonsense instead of what was to be done. In fact, there was nothing to be done.

While I was still trying to gather my thoughts I heard engine noise. A fighter roared towards me. Suddenly he opened fire on me, though from a great distance; then he pulled up early so as not to get tangled in the parachute far above me, flew past me a short distance, made a U-turn towards me and again opened fire, this time from in front so that I saw the tracers coming towards me. To my good fortune he was obviously a novice, since he fired more at the parachute than at me. Nevertheless, attack followed attack and I was hit a few times.

I cannot say which emotion in me was more powerful, fear or anger. At any rate, both were so clear that I have never forgotten them. In my anger I tried to pull out my pistol, so as to no longer have the horrible feeling of being completely defenseless. The holster, however, had slid so far around to the back of my belt that I could not reach it with my right hand. And when I tried to reach it with my left hand I discovered that my entire left arm was dangling, incapable of movement. It took a half-year before I was more or less able to use the arm again. My unfair opponent flew his eighth and final attack at an altitude of about 100 meters, completely perforating my parachute. It is amazing that it did not catch fire.

The thoughts that went through my head during these 15 minutes under fire, hanging from my parachute, were, in part, completely absurd; for example, that I had not put my coat on a hanger that morning in the officers' mess, but had instead thrown it over a chair; that I had wanted to go on my honeymoon on this very day; that I didn't have a razor with me; and more of the same.

My descent speed increased. With concern I saw the ground rushing up at me—and then hit the ground with a powerful impact. Luckily I had fallen into a swamp, where I was now stuck up to my hips. A short turn on the parachute lock, a little knock and the harness fell off. A glance at the sun to determine which way was west, then I worked my way out of the swamp. Before

me lay a meadow about 150 meters long, and behind it forest. I started running as fast as I could to the sanctuary of the woods. Four or five gunshots whizzed past me and I reached the forest . . . Suddenly I felt a rushing in my ears, it got black before my eyes, I lost consciousness and collapsed.

It must have been quite a while before voices—indistinctly, as if from afar—pierced through the fog of my unconsciousness and grew louder until I was finally able to open my eyes. The first thing I saw was the sun-dappled crown of a deciduous tree, under which I was lying. The sight was so beautiful and peaceful that it took a moment before I once again realized, with gruesome clarity, where I was. I was lying under a tree in a small clearing and was completely naked. All around me were 15-20 adolescent boys and girls who were occupied with distributing among themselves my clothes, my uniform and whatever else I had with me. As I looked down along my body I noticed that there was no longer any skin on my shins. I tried to move my legs, but could not.

At that moment one of the girls looked at me and saw that my eyes were open and was thus still alive. She cried out something in Russian, which naturally I did not understand, upon which the whole bunch turned and stared at me. My eyes went from one to the next, trying to guess what they intended. Nothing but hate and bloodlust looked back at me. For a second everything was still; then one pointed my pistol at me and pulled the trigger. But he didn't know this weapon and had not taken off the safety, so no shot went off. Then a girl yelled something and kicked me powerfully between the thighs. Immediately they all started screaming and each one kicked and hit anywhere he could. 'This is how the end looks' was just about the only thing I could still think as I watched while a boy swung a heavy wooden club and brought it down on my head. My senses left me and I slid again into the merciful darkness of unconsciousness.

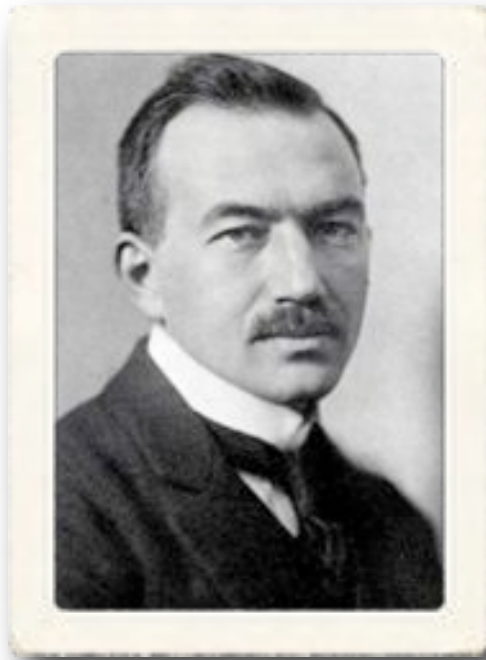
This time it must have taken hours before my remaining, battered life-force gathered itself and I regained consciousness. There were some 8-10 Red Army soldiers, of whom two were medics. I was already lying on a stretcher while the medics were bandaging me. The soldiers kept the howling mob, which had

grown considerably, away from me. To my great amazement, lying next to my stretcher were my underpants, my pants, my shoes and socks and my short-sleeved tropical shirt. Everything else remained out of sight, as before. Then my stretcher was lifted and, flanked by Red Army soldiers, this extraordinary convoy set itself in motion towards a village, in the immediate vicinity of which I had come down.

After just a few steps we were out of the forest and in the meadow. In the swamp I saw soldiers salvaging my parachute. We left the swamp on our right and circled around a small pond, where we passed by the remains of my *жу бб*. Soldiers had already removed two of my three comrades out of the debris. They could no longer be recognized, except by their rank insignia.

Thousands of thoughts shot through my head. Why couldn't I also have gotten a decent bullet during the dogfight? Surely they will kill me soon anyway! On the other hand, I'm still alive. Where are they taking me? It surprised me that I was observing myself from the outside, as if it were not me lying on the stretcher but a stranger, while I myself observed the proceedings with complete indifference.

Miracle



*My father, Dr. August Pütter (Born: April 6, 1879;
Died: March 11, 1929)*

This unique procession came to an end in front of a house in the middle of the village. They brought me into a room furnished in what, as I later often discovered, was the customary manner throughout the Soviet Union. A simple, rectangular office desk, a sort of file cabinet, a couch covered in the usual black, imitation leather, a table and several chairs. I found myself in the office room of the local NKWD agent, the most feared and awful secret police in the world.

They laid me on the couch as the commissar of the village, an older, powerful man with a somewhat sympathetic appearance, talked to me. However, since he understood no German and I no Russian, he soon gave up, went to the telephone and engaged in

endless conversations in which "Woronesh" repeatedly came up. In this village we were about 100 kilometers northeast of Woronesh. I concluded, therefore, that he would quickly ship me off to that principal city of the region.

I probably owe my life to the order to capture me alive, and the fact that the soldiers appeared just in time as I was being lynched.

As I lay on the couch I frequently had short periods of unconsciousness. I also vomited from time to time. After a while four young girls in white smocks appeared, took off the field bandages, painted me from top to bottom with a poisonous green sparkling liquid—a substitute for iodine common in Russia, also widely used as ink—and bandaged me anew. Finally, they dressed me again in my few things. I must say that I was treated extraordinarily correctly by the authorities in this village.

Some time later a Russian air force officer stepped into the room, looked at me for a moment, extended his hand and gave me to understand in his mangled German that he was the flyer who had rammed me and had likewise parachuted down, and that he wished me well; then he left. I was perplexed. The attitude of the Russians here was not what I had previously experienced at the front and thus expected. Later, after seven years of imprisonment, I learned that this was a rare exception.

A bit later there appeared four soldiers armed to the teeth with orders to transport me to Woronesh. After showing their orders to the commissar they yelled loudly at me: "*dawai, dawai!*"⁵ When they realized that I could not walk they yanked me brutally from the couch and dragged me out into an ages-old rattletrap of a car. I sat in the backseat, on each side of me a soldier with mounted bayonet and another in front, next to the driver, turned halfway around with a machine-pistol aimed at me. Thus began the worst car ride of my life.

A Russian road is different from ones we are accustomed to. Wherever the telegraph line goes so goes the road. This means that one simply walks or drives along the telegraph line. Sometimes the so-called road is a kilometer wide, sometimes it

5 "Move it!"

doesn't exist at all; sometimes, depending on the season, it's a sea of mud or a dust mill.

That is the sort of road involved in this car ride. At least it was entirely dry. There could be no talk of shock absorbers in the old wagon, and it amused the driver to bounce particularly hard through every hole or over every bump. At any rate, I no longer believed I would reach Woronesh alive, since due to my injuries and concussion I constantly had to vomit and frequently blacked out. But after about four hours we reached the city limits and came onto an asphalt street. Since I had quite often seen and photographed this important city from above, I was somewhat familiar with its layout. When the car stopped in front of a large edifice, built in a curve, I knew right away what it was: the Interior Ministry with the office of the NKWD and the jail.

They pulled me from the car and dragged me into the building, down two flights of steps, along a corridor and into a prison cell. This cell, which was furnished comfortably by Russian standards, had a wooden bunk, a sort of night table/closet and, next to the heavy, iron-covered door, a sink with running water and a toilet. The door closed behind me and I was alone. At first, though more dead than alive, I was very happy about being alone. A tiny, barred window allowed a view of the blue sky from the bunk, but I only noticed it on the following day since it was now already dark. Though I was now alone and had some peace, I was unable to gather my thoroughly confused thoughts in order to think intelligently. In addition, I had strong pains and was in considerable fear since I did not know what would happen to me, and everything, particularly the prison, seemed so mysterious.

After some point the door opened and a small, black-haired woman who gave me a very mean and dirty impression entered my cell. The interpreter. "Name!" she yelled, with her cigarette stuck as if glued to her heavily painted lips. I was too weak to get upset, and so quietly said my name. There followed, as always in Russia: First name, father's first name, year of birth, etc. When I answered the question about my occupation as "German flight officer," she started in: "Fascist, bandit, parasite—how many innocent children have you murdered? How many girls have you raped?" I could only smile, which further enraged this overheated

harridan. Eventually she asked: "Unit?" My answer was "German air force," with which she was not satisfied. She wagged her forefinger at me like a schoolmaster, saying, "You must say above all complete truth. If you say all, it you will have good; if you not say all, it you will have bad, very bad."⁶ Then she asked me: "Do you want say out all?" When I uttered a quiet but firm "No," she began to scream and curse again, until it got too stupid and I parried with an equally loud "Out," which turned out to be effective because she disappeared immediately.

A little later the door opened again and a gentleman entered the cell. He really was a gentleman, from head to toe: slender, tall, sparse white hair, and a white, well-trimmed goatee. His white coat made it immediately apparent that he was a doctor. A soldier accompanied him. The doctor came towards me without a word, looked at me for a moment and began, still without a word, to examine me in a careless, superficial manner, which stood in stark contrast to his trustworthy face. Each time he removed a bandage and briefly checked what was underneath, he said something in Russian that the accompanying soldier wrote down.

In this manner, starting at my head, he reached my knees and seemed to have no further interest in unwrapping the bandages on my legs. I was thus astonished when he suddenly asked me, in the best German with a slight Baden accent, what was wrong with my legs. Since I could see no value in this kind of treatment, I answered only: "Thank you, nothing; I shall pass on this sort of treatment." I then softened these sharp words, saying: "How is it that you speak such good German?" The doctor looked at me strangely for a moment, then said: "I studied in Germany." Almost automatically I asked: "Where?" Again, the doctor looked at me in an unusually searching manner and answered: "I took my exams in 1926 in Heidelberg."

This sentence electrified me because our family had lived during the 20s in Heidelberg, where my father occupied the chair of physiology at the university. Therefore, without stating the faculty or name, I said: "At that time I lived in Heidelberg, where my father taught at the university."

⁶ As rendered in the account, her German syntax was primitive. I have therefore done likewise in English.

At that the doctor let go of me, stepped slightly back, looked at me carefully once more, then laid his hands on my shoulders and continued eagerly: "Tell me, is your name by any chance Pütter?" I could only nod mutely, since I had literally lost my voice. The doctor, who had been so superficial and disinterested, now gave a completely different impression. "I recognized you by your similarity to your father," he started again, and then continued: "And I owe it your father for a large part of my medical ability, among other things. Now I am glad that I can render to you, his son, a portion of my gratitude, since I had no opportunity to see your father after my examinations."

I lay on my bunk and nearly cried because I could still not quite grasp it all and feared that I had lost my reason. But I was not dreaming. In the meantime, the Russian sergeant moved in the background. A few sentences were exchanged between him and the doctor, and the doctor turned to me again and explained that our conversation had seemed to the sergeant too intimate, so he now had to break it off. He continued, word-for-word: "Please do not wonder about the manner in which I treated you as a doctor—it is my orders; but do not worry, I will come and help you."

With that, this first visit came to an end. Again, I lay alone with my agitated thoughts. How was something like this possible? Perhaps the only Russian who studied with my father—in all of this enormous Russia, one-sixth of the earth—turns out to be the NKWD doctor precisely in the town to which I am first taken after being captured. Can one still call that a "coincidence"?

Over the years, as a result of a series of unusual experiences, I have come to the view that in life there is no such thing as blind coincidence. I have become more and more convinced over time that a guiding force—call it god, destiny, or otherwise—steers the life of every person.

Interrogating a Semi-conscious Fascist, Bandit, Parasite

The duty roster in this prison was such that two female soldiers had the night watch on the floor on which my cell was located. They were about 18-20 years old, quite pretty and rather merry. As they had learned a bit of German in school they tried out their linguistic abilities on me, which in my physical condition was exhausting. But with the natural inclination to be helpful, which apparently unites all young girls across the world, they tried to ease my lot whenever they could. Again and again they brought me tea and sugar, and *Majorca* to smoke. They were puzzled that I didn't want to smoke the *Majorca*, but I was nauseous enough as it was.

Finally they left me alone and in peace. Now the pains started in earnest, particularly in my head. Eventually, despite the pains, I fell into a sort of sleep as a temporary conclusion to this day that, having fallen from a known into a foreign world, was so terrible for me.

In the middle of the night I heard voices in front of my door. Eventually, the key rattled and the doctor appeared in my cell, accompanied by two nurses. One of the female guards locked the door from the outside, while the other stayed in the cell. My bunk was moved into the middle of the room and an especially strong light bulb was screwed in while the nurses prepared the operating equipment. Then the doctor explained to me that I had a fractured skull, two further head wounds, a broken nose, a seriously sprained left shoulder, wrenched tendons in both legs (if I were not lame), five bullet wounds, none very serious, and abrasions and bruises over my entire body. Now he would try to repair me somewhat. And that is what he did.

When it was all over and I had once again come to, this splendid man said goodbye, saying: "In the upcoming days you will probably be interrogated a great deal. Should you collapse, which in your condition is almost certainly to be expected, then I will be called—not to help you as a doctor, but to determine whether your collapse is genuine or simulated." He winked,

turned to leave, stopped at the door and looked back at me thoughtfully and said, hesitantly: "With you I will always confirm it." The door then closed behind him and I was alone again.

What had the doctor just said? I was now in Russian imprisonment, so of course I would be interrogated. But a simulated loss of consciousness would only make sense in order to avoid a particular question—which is just what the doctor appears to expect of me.

In any case, how should I now conduct myself? Should I keep my mouth mulishly shut, or should I try to be deceptive? But deceiving the NKWD? No! I do not consider myself that shrewd. So there is only one choice: from the first, draw a clear line and shut up. Or should one give in, say what little one knows and cooperate to avoid the unpleasant consequences of refusing to talk? It would be so convenient to simply take the path of least resistance.

But that would be treason, a despicable, cowardly betrayal of my comrades fighting and dying at the front. Never again would I be able to look my beloved mother in the eyes, and my fiancé would turn from me in disappointment. No, betrayal is out of the question. After all, I had not hesitated to commit myself fully and risk my life in battle at the front. And the war continues, even if I have suddenly become a prisoner. I must conduct myself just as it has always been fully expected of an honorable officer in imprisonment: Make no statements, participate in no political activities, do nothing that could help the enemy country and thus harm one's own.

After I had gotten this far with my thoughts I suddenly felt completely calm. I felt that the entire problem was simply to preserve my own dignity, and I decided to accept any and all consequences rather than to do or say something that I could not reconcile with my conscience and honor.

Though the first interrogation had yet to happen, I was already clear about my position. Only in later years was I able to recognize how completely this clinched the matter. I owe this doctor—this person—not only the salvation of my bodily life, but also my soul. Through his words—with which, after all, he

intended to say: "Don't lose your nerve, and keep your wits about you; here, too, they only cook with water"⁷—he had gotten me to think carefully about myself and my imprisonment.

I do not know how my path through that imprisonment would have looked if I had suddenly found myself completely unprepared, face to face with the interrogation methods of the NKWD; it is understandable that many who are suddenly torn from the ranks of their comrades and find themselves imprisoned alone, wounded, shattered and treated like a felon, collapse spiritually, particularly if they do not have any sort of religious faith that could provide support. But one who once gives in to the NKWD will never escape their net. The way back is blocked, and even if and when he finally gets out of the Soviet Union, he must live in constant fear of blackmail by the NKWD.

Meanwhile, daylight had come. I could not believe that it had been only 24 hours since my staff told me to "break a leg" and I had climbed into my trusty *Жу 88*. And now I was lying in prison like a criminal. At that time I didn't know that among decent people in the Soviet Union it is almost *de rigueur* to sit behind bars once in a while. Eventually, fatigue overcame me, and I fell into a restless sleep.

Suddenly, I awoke and sat bolt upright. Several prison guards were standing in the cell. They put me onto a stretcher and carried me along corridors and up steps to a large hall-like room. On the way a terrible fear ran through me that they might be taking me out to be shot. I only calmed down a bit after they deposited me in this large room.

Around a huge, rectangular table covered with a green cloth there stood large, gilt, well-kept baroque chairs that probably came from some looted palace from the time of the czars. Several NKWD officials were sitting at the table waiting to interrogate me. After the usual personal questions I felt increasingly nauseous and finally lost consciousness. When I came to again I was lying on the bunk in my cell. In the afternoon there was another hearing, and at night yet one more. All proceeded about the same

7 Presumably an idiomatic phrase, signifying that even the NKWD are just people, like anywhere else

way. The next two days, however, even the NKWD recognized that I was not capable of undergoing an interrogation and was thus left in peace.

Every night my doctor visited me, examined me, gave me medicine and even brought me some light food because I could not yet tolerate the usual prison fare. This consisted of a dish full of watery fish soup at noon and in the evening; and, in the morning, about 400 grams⁸ of jet-black bread from which water poured if slightly pressed on.

When the interrogations began again I noticed that the interval between rescuing swoons was getting steadily longer, so I began to help it along a bit. I could thus experience what had happened, presumably, when I had previously fainted.

First, the translator yelled at me loudly. When that had no effect she sat down again, letting fly with some of the more customary Russian profanities. Then the commissar pressed a bell and shortly thereafter my friend the doctor appeared. The commissar said something to him. Then the doctor began his examination, during which he spoke frequently with the commissar. Finally, several guards appeared, put me on the stretcher again and brought me back to my cell. What this doctor did for me, and the risk he took upon himself, can only be appreciated by someone who knows the workings of the NKWD terror-state.

After I had been there about eight days the doctor told me that, with respect to my health, I was out of acute mortal danger. He had hardly believed I would survive.

In the meantime, the interrogations continued. Naturally, I could no longer just fall over in the first few minutes. So it was no longer avoidable—I had to face the music. I did so in that I tried to explain to the commissar why I could not say anything. Although each day they started anew to try to get some answers from me they did not use any kind of coercion. I must assume that this had to do with the nearness of the front and the expectation of a new German offensive.

⁸ A little less than a pound. A kilogram, 1000 grams, equals about 2.2 pounds

Every night German bomber groups rumbled over the city with *He 111s* and *Ju 88s* and unloaded their death-dealing freight. I was aware that the German spring offensive of 1942 would have to begin in the next few days. So now I pinned my hopes on the thought that our troops would surely liberate me within the next two weeks. As a result of this optimistic notion I did not consider the fact that I was a prisoner of the communists to be particularly tragic. Therefore, I was quite affected when, one day—June 18, 1942—I was suddenly taken out of my cell and loaded into a prison car. A half hour later, at the train station, I was taken into custody by a lieutenant and six soldiers, all NKWD, and brought into a compartment on a completely overfilled train; my unit ruthlessly cleared out the compartment without concerning themselves in the least with the angry protests of the affected civilians, mostly women and children. The tumult in the station and anxiety of the citizenry and soldiers I also assumed to be due to the start of the German offensive.

Road to Moscow



A "relief" break en route between camps—a luxury we were not always afforded

While I sat depressed and miserable in the corner into which they had crammed me, the train slowly began to move, accompanied by the cries of the many people who wanted to come along but could no longer get on board. Where is this train going? What will it bring me? What will happen with my wounds now that my friend can no longer take care of me?

But then I pushed these despondent thoughts aside. Had I not experienced miracle after miracle? Was that not so far the best proof that some higher force, or whatever anybody may want to call it, was holding a protecting hand over me? So, chin up and don't despair, somehow it will all work out. Calmed by these thoughts, I fell asleep exhausted in my corner as the train carried me further towards an unknown fate.

Due to the shaking of the car my pains became more intense and I soon woke. Since I was sitting at the window, I had an unobstructed view and enjoyed being able to look into the

distance once again. Behind the limitless southern Russian steppe the sun was just starting to sink beneath the horizon. The cloudless sky passed in endless beauty from blue and green through all the colors of the spectrum to ever-deepening red and violet. Many more times in Russia I saw similarly beautiful sunsets and sunrises, such as only occur in continental climates; and I always found them to be balm for my soul, which, because of the ugliness of life there, thirsted so for beauty.

Before it got completely dark, I saw, in the middle of the steppe about 7-10 kilometers away from the railroad, a huge industrial facility with tremendous buildings and tall smoke stacks. No trees, no bush, no villages, no houses, no rivers—nothing could be seen anywhere. But the chimneys were smoking. A single spur track, over whose bumpy switch we were just rattling, led straight to this enormous facility. I now knew where we were, since I had often seen this factory from above.

We were traveling in the direction of Mitschurinsk, where it would become apparent which way we would continue because the track divides there. One line heads towards Moscow; the other, over which I had flown some distance, extends through Tambow, Kirsanow and Saratow into Siberia, as the southernmost mainline of the Trans-Siberian railway.

Meanwhile, the Russians in the car had made themselves comfortable, folded the seats back into beds, wrapped themselves in their coats, having first vigorously eaten bread and fish and drunk tea, and now began to sing. One started, others joined in, and eventually everyone in the car was singing. Since the Russians are generally quite musical by nature and have good voices, this choral music—they sang together as a matter of course, the women's voices high above—was a beautiful experience. The songs became increasingly melancholic and slow, until one voice after another dropped out; and after a sorrowful final note the last voice became still and all slept, except my guard detail, who had not participated in the singing.

I, too, sat awake in my window corner, and began to freeze since I had nothing to wear except my short-sleeved shirt, and did not own a blanket. And since I had also not been given anything

to eat except the piece of bread in the prison that morning, and my head and other wounds were hurting considerably, I did not exactly look forward with great joy to more traveling.

After we passed Mitschurinsk and were still rolling north I knew that our destination was Moscow. Late the following afternoon our train rolled into one of Moscow's large railroad stations. Despite the sunshine, I had not shaken off the chill of the previous night. And the sun had just set again.

On the other side of the platform at which our train had stopped there stood a Trans-Siberian express train with beautifully appointed cars containing beds clothed in white and cozy table lamps. Some high Russian officers, and a number of gentlemen in civilian clothes with several very elegant ladies, were just getting in as my guards were bringing me to the station guard office. From there I could look onto a wide street and saw several large cars with American pennants. It must have been American diplomats who had boarded this train.

In the guard office I sat on a bench and waited and froze, not only physically. The hours dripped slowly by while I attentively watched the traffic in the train station to divert my thoughts from how much I was freezing. Again and again I tried to stand up in order to move a little. But my legs simply would not obey.

Nothing wears a person down more than cold. Even the tormenting feeling of hunger paled before this terrible feeling of cold, which left me shivering like an aspen leaf, and against which there was nothing I could do. And yet it was summer! What would happen in winter? Then again, I probably had a fever. So it was almost a deliverance when, late in the evening, there finally appeared the green *Minna*—the usual prison car—to pick me up. After a short drive I was unloaded in the courtyard of a huge complex of buildings. I was taken into a sort of guard office or reception room. My destination had been reached. I found myself in the infamous Lubjanka, the main prison of the Interior Ministry's NKWD in Moscow.

Lubjanka: Where No Cock Will Crow



Photo from the Munchener Illustrierte Zeitung that came to cause me much grief (author, top right)

First, I was taken for delousing, where I had to undress and hand over my clothes. While I was waiting for the return of my deloused things I enjoyed the heat that prevailed in the *banja*⁹, and which at last warmed me thoroughly once again. Thereafter, I was taken into a single cell, in which there was a bed frame with wooden slats and a bucket—nothing else. The harsh, merciless light of a blindingly bright bulb shone down from the ceiling of the whitewashed room, soon causing genuine pain.

⁹ The bath house or washroom in which delousing took place

I had just gotten to sleep when I was woken again and taken to an interrogation; I immediately noticed that here blew a different, much sharper wind than in Woronesh. In Moscow, as a matter of principle, they only did interrogations at night. While the person being interrogated sat alone on a chair in the middle of a room, blinded by lights, the examining commissars hid behind the lights so that they could easily relieve each other; one saw nobody but was always keenly observed.

The Soviets asked everything. When they got no answers, they changed tactics frequently. "We only want the best for you," a commissar assured me, "so why don't you improve your condition?" I answered: "I know that you only want the best from me, but that is exactly what I want to keep!" But that enraged him and he beat me until I fell and lost consciousness.

Night after night I was interrogated. The Soviets claimed I must know some interesting things, since I was an officer and a reconnaissance pilot in the Army Group South; as proof they laid before me an eight-week old Munchner Illustrierte Zeitung¹⁰ in which there was a photo story about the senior commander of Army Group South. Among them were several photographs of me, one showing the IC¹¹ presenting me with a decoration; another showing me at a large wall map briefing the IC about the results of a reconnaissance flight; and a third in which I was reviewing reconnaissance information with my crew, still dressed in our flight gear. I was very surprised. Though I remembered the photographs being taken, I would never have imagined that they could someday create difficulties for me.

The interrogations continued. Frequently, the same question would be repeated for hours. Sometimes these were completely silly questions, such as: How do you greet people when you enter the mess? Or perhaps: When you are eating, are you required to stand up if the commanding officer asks you something?, etc. These interrogations wore heavily on my nerves and were terribly exhausting and depressing. Often I was cruelly beaten. So fear of

¹⁰ The "Munich Illustrated Newspaper"

¹¹ Chief of Intelligence in the Army Group

interrogation grew from day to day, and my physical condition continuously worsened, even though my wounds were healing quite well.

Each time after I was beaten the next interrogation began kindly, friendly and with the subtext: We are your fatherly friend and wish only that you see the truth, namely, that Germany has practically lost the war; that Germany is only being held together by "Nazi terror"; and that every "good person" must, therefore, place himself on the side of the Soviet Union in order to support its heroic and selfless fight against the Nazi criminals. So, whoever does not place himself on the side of the Soviet Union thereby proves that he is against "good" and is thus an enemy of the people, and a Nazi, and must therefore be destroyed. As evidence of the correctness of his discourse a commissar once gave me a pamphlet written in German: "The Postman Zwinkerer." The booklet was printed in 1936 and the plot was set in Hunsruck in 1934. The upright (read: communistic) postman Zwinkerer refuses, as a "good German," to deliver Nazi propaganda; he is attacked by an SA squad, brutally beaten and finally thrown into the local concentration camp. Barrack 19 is the death barracks, from which numerous prisoners are taken daily and publicly hanged. Anyone who does anything the slightest bit blameworthy gets transferred to this barracks. In the morning there is roll-call and everyone must step forward to be counted. Meanwhile, an SA thug capers around in front of the prisoners until he finds one about whom he doesn't like something. With a forceful punch to the solar plexus the brutal SA-man kills the prisoner. Therefore, this SA-guard was known by the prisoners as "the Dancer". Life in the prison camp is described further in the same manner. Disgusted with so much dirt, slander and lies I put away the pamphlet. The purpose was clear: satanize the enemy through false propaganda, which must be repeated constantly, with amplifications of course, until the masses believe what they are told and will fight harder and more mercilessly against the "criminal" enemy.

Meanwhile, hunger started its destructive work with gruesome slowness. The entire ration per day consisted of a single piece of bread, worse yet—if possible—than in Woronesh. It weighed

about 250 grams¹² and was little more than a soggy mass. In addition, three times a day one got hot water; nothing more. When I became a prisoner I weighed 170 pounds, which was entirely normal for my height of 182 centimeters.¹³ A quarter year later, what was left of me weighed only 88 pounds.

At the start of each interrogation I complained about everything. The answer was mostly: "Start to talk and you'll have it better." One night, in the room in which I was always interrogated, there stood a table near me filled with the most fragrant and enticing foods. The appearance and aroma almost drove me crazy. "All of this is for you," began the commissar, "but first answer just a couple of questions." So I remained hungry. When I got back to my cell I was overcome by despair as never before in my life.

The next day I was brought into a different cell. It was a large room in which there stood six beds. Five inmates were there; I was the sixth. The purpose of this relocation was soon apparent. They hoped to have a psychologically based, more powerful effect on my moral resistance in that each of the inmates received a different ration. Mine was the smallest. The next one got about twice as much bread, a dish of soup at noon, and in the evening a little *kascha*¹⁴, and so on. The one who got the most could never finish it all. But he did not dream of giving away even the slightest bit. In any event, the guards saw to it that nobody got more than his allocated amount.

The fates of these five Russians were most interesting. A black-haired, athletically built fellow, now a skeleton, had been a specialty metal worker in Leningrad. He was here on account of sabotage. His lathe broke while he was working at it. Now they said that he had destroyed it at the direction of German fascist agents.

Another—he was a captain in the Red Army—was demoted to private for "giving aid to the enemy." During a German

12 About half a pound

13 Just over 6 feet tall

14 A porridge made from bulgur wheat

breakthrough at the front he had pulled back his unit without having received an order to do so. That was enough to prove that he was a member of an anti-Soviet organization.

The third one was a young fellow who, while at the front, had been so overcome with longing for his beloved that he simply up and left, going until he reached his girl again. There the NKWD arrested him. With these three I had the impression that they were trying to buy themselves free for the price of their service as informants.

The most interesting characters were without doubt the last two. One had recently been locked up because of counter-revolutionary activities. He was a tiny man of over 60 years who was not much affected by his detention. He spoke fluent French and a little German. By profession he had been a jockey before the revolution, to which he had never been able to reconcile himself. He told me that since 1917 he had been more often in prison than free. That he was still alive he attributed to the fact that he was unassuming and that while in prison he received food from his relatives.

The last one was a middle-sized man, formerly, certainly, very powerful. His brutal, pock-marked face displayed an embittered, hard and inflexible expression. His physical condition was such that I was amazed he was still alive. This man, anything but sympathetic, was a native Yugoslavian from Serbia. He might have been about 40 years old. He had been a card-carrying member of the Communist Party since 1923; and wherever the communists had stirred up trouble during the previous 20 years, he had been there. He had been jailed in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, England and Czechoslovakia. Of course, he also participated in the Spanish Civil War. Thereafter, he went back to Yugoslavia. When the German Army arrived in Yugoslavia he slipped into the Soviet Union and, after several special courses, joined the Red Army.

In the great encirclement at Wissma he was overtaken by the German advance. He succeeded in avoiding capture by German troops and managed to hide himself until winter. Then he took off on foot, and in weeks-long marches across the front lines, worked his way through to the Soviet side.

Instead of the anticipated praise, the NKWD arrested him and claimed that because he had stayed on the German side so long it was entirely clear that he had become a German agent. So for six months he had been sitting here. His allotted rations were, after mine, the worst. After I had lived in this cell for about 14 days, one morning he didn't wake up. He had starved to death. In the afternoon his corpse was removed. This is how the end looks, I thought despondently. Who will be next? When will I get there?

In transferring me to this cell the Soviets obviously intended to soften me up. The interrogations lasted continually longer, often the whole night. The commissars changed. Higher-ranking officials appeared on the scene. One concentrated entirely on the names of the officers of my unit, which he absolutely wanted to get from me. Finally, I relented and said names, albeit invented ones. But soon enough I regretted having done so. In any case, their methods suddenly became considerably crueler.

One evening I was brought, as usual, for interrogation. Again the fully laden table stood next to me. "Will you finally be sensible and tell the truth?" I said nothing. "How strong are the engines of the *Ju 88*?" "I don't know that," was my answer. Smiling coldly the commissar replied, "Now we will help your memory until you do know it."

I was taken into another part of the building. In a corridor a door was opened. I became very scared. The room behind it was so small that only one person could fit in it. I was pushed inside and the door was slammed shut. I could not fall over, only sag more and more into myself, since my legs could still not fully support me. In the top of the door were a few air holes. In the corridor was a clock that ticked loudly and struck every quarter hour. After half an hour my knees were scraped raw. I got cramps in my feet. My whole body was one entire ache. After an hour I was already foaming at the mouth.

After eight hours the door was opened. I fell out, stiff as a board. They dragged me into the next room, undressed me and laid me naked on the stone floor. I had no idea what was to come next, when water poured down onto me—warm, warmer, hot, too hot, unbearable. Suddenly ice cold. This time I collapsed.

When I regained consciousness after a few moments, I was helped back into my clothes.

Then it was back to the interrogation. "Now," the commissar asked with a smile, "do you know the strength of the engines of the *Ju 88*?" I could hardly sit. My head ached to bursting, as indeed everything hurt. Next to me there stood wonderful foods, whose aroma threatened to rob me of my senses. The fear in me cried, you must eat or you will die. Since that time I have really understood the most human of pleas: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." But then something in me, a sort of enraged defiance and more, led me to say: "Of course I know how powerful these engines are, but you will never learn that from me." The sadistic grin on the face of the commissar disappeared and gave way to a brutal rage. He sprang up and began to beat me indiscriminately.

When I came to again I was lying on my bed in the cell. This morning the young Yugoslavian communist died. I was certain that I could not survive much longer. Actually, I was amazed that I was still alive at all.

One of the most important discoveries that I made during the war and imprisonment is that human beings are able to endure much, much more than one can generally even imagine. But everything has its limits. Three more times they locked me into the standing cell, each time for eight hours. The fear in me grew so strong that it threatened to overwhelm me completely. At the least unaccustomed noise I would flinch in fear; my mouth was constantly dry from nervous tension. Oh, if only I could die!

During one of the next interrogations I sat opposite a man with an inscrutably cold but intelligent face. He tried it in a completely different way—offered me tea and cigarettes, moved closer towards me, and attempted to converse as if we were friends sitting in a café. Thus he tried, in this harmless way, to draw me in. But I was already much too apathetic to pay any attention to the conversation. Soon he lost patience and started to threaten me. Finally, he slapped me so hard that my left eardrum tore. His name was Rudenko. Later, after the war, as a general and representative of the Soviet Union, he sat as a judge at the Nuremberg trials. Thank god I never saw him again.

Now I had once again to face the commissar to whom I had given the false names of staff officers. He remained sitting calmly behind his desk and posed a few questions without reacting in the slightest when he received no answers. Finally, he said: "We have already expended far too much effort and patience on you. It isn't worth it. You are not that interesting to us and we have other prisoners who are more cooperative. Since, moreover, you lied to me about the names of your staff officers, my patience is at an end. Or do you deny that you lied to me?" He opened a file and began to read from it. I was speechless. Not only did he have the correct names of the officers in my unit, but he was also well informed about the other duties I had had, was fully knowledgeable about every unit and post I had previously held and even knew the name and rank of my father-in-law, who was a high German officer. He closed the file and said: "So, now you are astounded, aren't you?"

One year later I was able to solve this riddle. Master Sergeant Maurer was a crew member of a plane from my unit that had been shot down a few weeks before me, the only one of his crew to have survived. He had nothing better to do than immediately offer the Russians his services and knowledge. So Maurer became a compliant, many-faceted tool in Russian hands. As I later heard, he functioned as ranking German officer¹⁵ in a certain Camp Pottmar, and was much hated. He must have provided the Russians with the necessary information with which I was ambushed.

"What do you have to say to that?" continued the commissar? "Nothing," was my answer. "Now you listen carefully," the commissar continued. "I will now give you your last chance to ease your fate, and to work with us and for us." At that he opened a drawer in his desk and took something out. "If you continue to be recalcitrant, I will personally do you in with this weapon." He showed me the gun—a *Nagan*, the usual, large Russian service revolver.

¹⁵ In German, *Lageraltester* or *Activaltester*. Literally, the oldest or most senior prisoner in the camp. The *Lageriiltester* was the commanding officer of the POWs; since he functioned as the long arm of the Soviets, he was invariably one of the those men who had become subservient to the Soviets.

Carefully, he loaded the weapon, pressing one round after the other into the magazine. Then he laid it on the table in front of him and again posed the question: "How powerful are the engines of the *Ju 88*? Will you now finally tell me?" "No," was once again my answer. The commissar then arose, walked around the desk, sat on the edge of the desk facing me, and said: "Just last week, here at this same spot, I shot a German captain. He didn't want to have it any other way. Now you are the next one. And believe me, no cock will crow for you."¹⁶ With these words he lifted the revolver until it was pointed straight up and then lowered it very slowly towards me and counted: "One—two—will you talk?"

All sorts of thoughts swirled through my head. That no cock would crow for me was, at any rate, certain. Well, hopefully, he shoots well, since it is after all, a salvation. Better this than to be starved and tortured. Too bad they didn't get me during the aerial fight like the rest of my crew. I would have been spared much. But by then I was terribly indifferent to it all. "No," I said, and closed my eyes. He counted "three," waited a second, which seemed to me an eternity, and shot. As the bang sounded, I recoiled sharply, but in the same instant was irritated because by the time you hear the bang the shot has long since passed. So I was alive.

I opened my eyes again, inwardly called myself a coward and actually sensed some regret that I was still alive. The commissar had shot above my head into the wall. Now he stood about three steps in front of me and glared at me. I likewise looked him in the eyes. Finally, he turned away, went to the desk and pressed a button, without saying a word. Immediately, guards appeared and brought me back into the cell.

Why didn't the commissar kill me? After all, nobody would have questioned it. And he doubtlessly had the authority to do so. What caused him to spare my life, contrary to practices of the

¹⁶ An idiomatic expression, "*kein Hahn kraht nach Ihnen*," which presumably implies that "there is nobody who will look out for you, or have any concern for you," or that "there is no authority to hinder me from killing you."

NKWD? I don't know. In any case, this was one of the many riddles that Russia posed for me over the years.

While these thoughts were still echoing through my head, I was once again removed from the cell. They indicated that I should take along my things—which is to say, my hat. Aha, I thought, this looks like a transport. So I left this cell in which I had learned so much. My primary occupation had been to converse with the jockey. I had gotten many worthwhile tips for living in prison from him, as he always knew how to take care of himself. He always had tobacco, and from time-to-time he secretly rolled himself a cigarette. Naturally, there were no matches or lighters, but he had a clever knack for making a light. From his quilted jacket he plucked out a bit of cotton and rolled it into a sausage, the ends of which were very tight while the middle was comparatively thin and loose. Then he laid this cotton sausage on the floor with a piece of wood from the bed over it; he rubbed the cotton with the wood quickly and energetically, back and forth, then threw aside the wood and tore the cotton sausage apart in the middle and blew on the thin parts—and look!—the cotton glowed like a bad fuse. But it was good enough to light cigarettes. This means of making fire was new to me, and greatly impressed me.

From the jockey I also learned much about the Soviets' methods of using informants, which my own experiences later confirmed. And in this cell I had for the first time come to learn the strictly regimented daily schedule that is specified for Soviet prisons. At 5:30 in the morning is reveille. Everyone had to get up immediately and make his bed, to the extent there was anything to "make." In the meanwhile, the appointed cleaning personnel had to sweep the cell, dust, etc. After about 15 minutes the door was unlocked and a guard brought the cell inmates to the washroom and toilet; two men had to bring along the wooden bucket customarily used in the cell for relieving calls of nature.

The morning walk was organized in such a way that one never was able to look another prisoner in the face. And in the toilet or washroom, the guards never let the prisoners out of their sight for even a second. Incidentally, for me, the results of washing were not so great since I possessed neither soap nor a towel. After

returning to the cell nobody was allowed to lie down on the bed again without special permission. Sitting on the bed was allowed. Smoking was forbidden, as was card playing. Conversation was permitted only in a low voice; and so the list of rules and restrictions went on. In all Russian prisons there is always a peephole in the door through which one is constantly under observation. And with even the most trivial violation of the rules, the observer came in immediately to reprimand the individual in question. When you had a certain number of reprimands—I think it was three—you were thrown into the prison dungeon for a specified time. The dungeon was much feared.

At night you were not permitted to sleep with your arms under the blanket (concern about suicide attempts). I had already ignored that rule in the first nights I passed in this cell because I was freezing. Thereupon, the following drama took place: a female guard rushed in, pulled away my blanket and scolded me. Calmly, I covered myself up again and said: "*Nje ponemai par russki, ja njemezki offizerra,*" which means "I understand no Russian, I am a German officer."

The guard disappeared and came back after two minutes with the guard leader. The same show began. But I covered myself up again with the same words. Both of them yelled at me, but since I could "not understand" they both ran out and appeared after a few minutes with the duty officer. The farce was repeated again. Finally, when some 10 Russians were standing helplessly around me, the duty officer shook the jockey, who had been pretending to sleep, and instructed him to translate. He stated, however, that he knew no German. So the Russians gave up, and I continued to sleep as it suited me. The other cell inmates were much amused, and their regard for me increased considerably.

Butyrka: Waiting to Die



A fellow prisoner—whose time was nigh

Now they were taking me away. I was again shoved into a prison car and left Lubjanka without further formalities. But after only a short while I was again unloaded in a prison. This was the other large and infamous NKWD prison near the Interior Ministry, named Butyrka. Again, the customary intake procedures took place, with delousing, shaving, etc. By the way, this shaving did not concern itself (as one might suppose) with the beard, but rather with all other hair on the body, starting with the head and continuing with the shoulder and chest, pubic area and legs.

Then I was taken down endless corridors to a cell that outdid all I had seen previously. A tiny, rectangular room with the usual bright lighting. The only furnishing aside from the obligatory bucket was a sort of night table or box standing in the middle of the room. I pushed the box into a corner, but even on the diagonal I could not lie down stretched out in this cell. A tiny,

barred window, black with soot on its outer side, barely enabled me to determine whether it was light or dark out.

There I lay in apprehension about what would happen next. But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing happened anymore. The interrogation by the commissar who had nearly killed me had been the last. I had no bed, no blanket, nothing, so I assumed at first that I was in a sort of waiting cell, and hoped to be moved into a different, more usual cell in a few hours or days. But it turned into two months. Hour after hour, day after day passed in deadly, unvarying uniformity. The rations remained the same, about 250 grams of bread per day, and water. Hunger ruled my thoughts and conjured up hallucinations of banquets and feasts. Memories of freedom, of activity, were slowly extinguished. Eventually, I slid into an animalistic state of vegetation and waited to die. The daily interruptions, such as the walk to the toilet and inspections by the guards, lost their reality and were washed away in hallucinations and dreams. Only receiving bread remained distinct. Loss of strength continued, bodily as well as spiritually.

Starvation is like a serious, painful disease. Only someone who has really suffered from hunger for a long time can have an accurate concept of how much it can hurt. So I dragged myself from one bread delivery to the next—I no longer knew any other unit of time—and waited for the end.

Again and again I tried to gather my thoughts and make plans for how I should behave at the next interrogation (which, however did not take place). I couldn't do it. My thoughts trailed off and trickled away. Instead, fantasies of sun, sea, sandy beaches with palm trees and tables full of food floated before me. In my fantasies I built highways and railways throughout Europe, and sometimes forgot entirely where I was. Only much later did it occur to me that it might be thanks to my fantasies, and my capacity to disengage internally, that I did not go completely crazy.

At some time—it was probably the first week of September 1942—guards came and took me out of the cell. They brought me to a waiting cell near the main guard station. A strong, young

Russian farm boy of about 20 was already sitting there. He was wearing the kind of semi-military clothing that is customary even among Russian civilians: high boots, riding pants and *gymnastiorka*. The *gymnastiorka* is a sort of shirt or blouse with patch pockets, and is worn over the pants.

When I entered the cell he was cowering on the stone bench with his head in his hands, and was crying silently to himself. Distracted by my arrival he calmed down. We tried, to the extent possible, to communicate. I learned that he came from the Ukraine. Because he believed in god, having been brought up that way at home, there were difficulties. Eventually, he was convicted for anti-Soviet opinions and had that day been thrown into prison here. He couldn't understand any of it, since he loved his Mother Russia and would never dare say anything against Father Stalin. Again and again he passed his plump hands over his clean shaven head and stared at the locked ceiling door with the beseeching helplessness of a caged animal.

After a while a guard appeared and brought each of us a plate of *kascha*. Before my cellmate began eating he put the plate on his knees, bowed his head a little and crossed himself with an immeasurably pious faith that I had never before experienced, and prayed. I was deeply affected. His countenance, previously so troubled, grew calm and peaceful, and devoutly he began to eat. It occurred to me that the persecuted Christians at the time of Nero must have looked like this. Little wonder that such a person would be ground up in the gears of the heartless communist government machinery, inasmuch as the mere existence of such faith in something heavenly makes a lie of Marxist propaganda.

This plate of *kascha* was my first warm meal in almost three months. What life hides in a little plate of porridge! Immediately, I was filled with the will to live. The apathy, the torpor of the last months fell away in an instant. What is happening? Why have I been given food? What do they want from me? In the meantime I had finished eating—or rather wolfing down—and foresightedly put the pretty, colorful wooden spoon that had come with the plate into my pants pocket. For almost a year it was the only eating utensil I possessed.

Then I was brought into the guard office, where there was even a translator next to the duty officer. After the same complicated procedures as at my arrival, I was handed over to three pleasant-looking soldiers who took my papers, and took me by the arms and locked me into a prison van. When the gates of Butyrka locked behind me in the departing vehicle, they were, thank god, behind me forever.

Temporary Tourist

After we had driven a short distance the van stopped. It was unlocked and one of the soldiers stuck in his fat head and asked me, in an unusual German similar to that still spoken in some villages in Hunsruck, whether I was German. When I said yes, he explained to me that he and the two others were Volga Germans;¹⁷ they pitied me, and inquired whether I would like to see some of Moscow. Then they brought me up front to the driver's compartment of the van and drove on.

They had orders to pick up convicts from five different prisons and bring them to various Moscow rail stations. So the drive went from one prison to another until the van was finally stuffed with more than 20 convicts, for the most part youths 6-15 years old. Then it was off to various rail stations, where this sorry freight was turned over to NKWD units. It went on this way for about five hours until I was the last one to be delivered.

During these hours the soldiers had touchingly cared for me with tea, sugar and bread, and explained all that there was to be seen in Moscow. We passed by Red Square, Lenin's Tomb, the Kremlin and many other large buildings. I was interested to observe life on the streets. I was struck by how shabby, poor and miserable most people looked who weren't in uniform. But one also saw elegant ladies with make-up. The large, rather wide main streets of Moscow made a good impression with their smooth asphalt paving. There was heavy traffic everywhere, which was well regulated. I particularly liked the fast, modern, buses that ran on overhead electric lines, which were everywhere to be seen in large numbers. I found it surprising that many of the large, new buildings already gave the impression of being run down, although from their dates they were only 2-5 years old. Notwithstanding the traffic on the streets, nowhere did I get an impression of the kind of spirited, pulsing life that one was accustomed to in Berlin, Rome or other cities.

17 Ethnic Germans living in the Volga area of the Soviet Union

Now that the drive was over I was dead tired, but also saddened because for a few hours I had almost forgotten that I was still being treated as a criminal—not even as a POW—and thus had fewer rights here in the Soviet Union than a stray dog. I sincerely thanked my guards, who had been so compassionate, and was now handed over to an NKWD unit that had obviously been waiting for me because, with much "*dawai, dawai,*" I was quickly brought into an NKWD railcar.

Among Criminal Scum

The NKWD railcars look like inter-city train cars, but strongly encaged. On one side a corridor leads along the entire length of the car from which the compartments open, like the compartments in an express train. On the side with the compartments the car does not have any real windows, but only a few small, glazed and barred rectangular holes right under the roof. These cars are a trademark of the Soviet Union. There are no trains that don't include at least one or more such cars. Often, indeed with schedule-like regularity, one sees entire trains made up solely of these prison cars. Every day whole armies roll through Russia's endless distances, slaves—without rights—of a terror system that is fearfully compelled endlessly to reshuffle its prisoners.

I was driven into a cell in which there were already 16 prisoners. It was indescribably cramped. And there was a pervasive stench, as in an animal cage. The noise of the prisoners was unbelievable. Girls and women were locked up a few cells away. Cursing, yelling and ugly laughter passed back and forth among all the cells. There were mostly young people, but some older and even old people among them. Oh god, I thought, with fear and disgust, where have I ended up, a German officer among the criminal scum of the Russian jails!

When some of them tried to begin a conversation with me they noticed that I didn't speak any Russian. Now they absolutely wanted to know where I came from. When I explained to them: "*Ja njemski offizerra,*" they immediately arranged a better place in the cell and treated me with a certain deference that I had not expected. An older man tried with great effort to explain to me the war situation. After many difficulties I finally understood. All of southern Russia, including Woronesh, Stalingrad and the Caucasus, were in German hands. In no more than two months the war would be won by the Germans and everyone here would be freed and able to return home.

I was astounded. For three months I had heard no news about the front. And now this. Apparently, the planned summer

offensive had been a complete success. Well, then, my imprisonment could certainly not last much longer. As if in corroboration, at that moment an air raid sounded. Suddenly, I saw a *Жу 88*, flying its course at a great height under intense fire by Moscow flak. A reconnaissance flight, it appeared.

When, to the west, it finally disappeared from my wistful view, I was overcome with the misery of my situation. It was dusk, and my earlier hopeful attitude collapsed and my heart grew very heavy. Through the heavy bars of the cell door I saw the shadow of the Soviet Russian guard as he patrolled back and forth along the corridor with his machine pistol, a symbol of domination and the impenetrable barrier between me in my cell and the freedom of the delicately lit evening sky.

After being endlessly—and none too gently—shunted back and forth, the train finally pulled out of the station. It was night. The uncertain light of the pale, wan moon shed scant illumination on this rolling prison with its diverse inmates. The oldest prisoner in my cell was in his mid-sixties, the youngest not even 10. Most were youths 10-15 years old who had long drifted as *besprisornys* through Russia until being caught by the police during an assault or robbery.

In rags, underfed, always running from the might of the state, belonging to nobody; even today in Russia, numberless young people drift about in organized bands, stealing, robbing, looting—not stepping back from murder—to secure their living. The pale, joyless, greedy faces of the children, with eyes that belied their age and spoke not of love and kindness but brutal self-interest. As squalid as they were in every respect, particularly regarding sexuality, they were nevertheless pitiable creatures, these children with the appearance and behavior of adults.

At a little station not far from Moscow our car was pushed onto a siding and left standing. When it grew light the following morning the convicts¹⁸ began calling for bread, calls that the guards ignored. These pleas became yells that consolidated into

¹⁸ That is, persons in prison because they were convicted of crimes, as distinguished from a prisoner of war

an overwhelming, infernal, brutish chorus of: "*Chleba! Chleba!*":
"Bread! Bread!"

After a while two guards appeared with a sack full of *sucharie*, a dry bread that they began to distribute among the prisoners. Normal bread, baked more thoroughly than usual, is cut into slices and dried until the last trace of moisture is gone. This dry bread keeps for a long time, making it a practical food for transports and marches because it also weighs so little. Thereafter, another guard arrived with a bucket full of tea. Each person held out his cup or some other container and was given a ladle full. For me, another unanticipated difficulty arose: I had no cup, nor any other kind of container, and therefore got nothing.

A boy in my cell had for some time been looking covetously at the beautiful, braided belt on my pants. Since I had again frozen dreadfully during the night and in the morning, and was still freezing, and since the boy urgently wanted my belt, I finally traded it for his little coat, a thin, black child's coat that did not, of course, fit me, but something that I could hang around my shoulders nonetheless. It was the first barter deal I concluded in the Soviet Union.

In the course of the morning we were unloaded with much "*dawai*" and "*sa dies*" and were supposed to march to a nearby building hidden under some trees. Two of my cellmates grabbed me right and left under the arms and, to my joyful amazement, my legs began to move and carry me (if I exerted myself a great deal). We reached the building, which turned out to be a jail. In a room near the guard post the usual admission procedures took place.

When they got to me I was singled out and kept in a waiting cell. After a time an NKWD officer showed up to get me. Carefully putting one foot in front of the other, I followed him through an attractive park area; however, in some of the trees there hung loudspeakers from which there blared, at an insane volume, a tinny piano concert. Finally, the path curved and climbed slowly up the side of a long ridge to a paved street, which ended a little further on at a wooden fence, in front of which was a barbed-wire fence. In front of me was the well-known POW camp, Krasnogorsk.

Krasnogorsk: Connecting and Struggling

As I drew nearer I could see that German officers in full uniform were strolling along the camp road. A terrific excitement gripped me. There could no longer be any doubt that I was being taken to this camp. And here there were people from Germany, people with whom I could speak once more. I would no longer be alone and would make friends. Surely there would also be enough to eat so I would no longer have to worry about starving to death. I would no longer be stared at day and night by the eyes of a prison guard. I might again be akin to a human being. Tense, full of anticipation, I entered the camp and was immediately locked up in a heavily barred room.

After a little while an unbelievably fat German soldier showed up and brought me a bowl full of *kascha*. I ate voraciously. When he returned to pick up the empty bowl I asked him what was going on, and why I had been locked up again, since this was preoccupying me. By way of an answer he only told me that he was not permitted to speak with me—the Russians had forbidden it because I was a fascist. "I'm a *what*," I asked in reply, "a *fascist*?" The soldier disappeared. Well, I thought, this is starting out pleasantly.

Half an hour later a Russian came in, accompanied by a German lieutenant who shook my hand, introduced himself as Lieutenant Wild and stated that I would now be in an officers' barracks that was under his supervision. Then he led me out of the administration barracks. No sooner had I arrived on the camp road than I was surrounded by people all speaking to me simultaneously. Where do you come from? How do things look at the front? When will the war be over?, etc.

I looked all around me. The first thing that caught my eye was a number of posters on the walls of the barracks: "We are here thanks to the Führer!" "Only victory of the Red Army over the fascist German thieves can save the free world! We trust the wise Stalin, the fatherly friend of all peoples!"

When I had read that far I had to laugh out loud over so much primitive Soviet propaganda, and then asked: "Say, what's with this raving nonsense, this silly communist propaganda?" Suddenly the faces around me turned blank and cryptic. The circle quickly evaporated except for three or four men who placidly stayed on, as Lieutenant Wild pretty brusquely said: "Mr. Pütter, I advise you to take care with your remarks. We will not tolerate any criticism of the Russians' procedures or camp administration." I was completely confused and speechless. What's going on here, anyway? Has everyone gone crazy?

A quiet voice spoke up next to me: "Come along, leave the Russian vassals." I turned around and looked into two merrily smiling, blue eyes in a darkly tanned, well-chiseled face. It was Lieutenant Erwin Fleig, a well-known, successful German fighter pilot. He took me by the arm and brought me into a barracks, in which a bunch of German officers were sitting around. We were greeted with "*Halloooo*." One said: "Here you find yourself among decent men; now tell us first what you've been through because you certainly look unbelievable."

And I told my story; the words bubbled out of me because it was such an indescribable relief to finally be able to talk it all out of my heart. The others let me speak without interruption, sensing that I had to pour out my soul. After a time I stopped because I was too weak.

And then the others reported and explained to me the situation here in the camp—that under the lid of the various political viewpoints there was already a rift among the German prisoners of war. What does "political perspective" mean? I suddenly discovered that I didn't even have a political perspective. After all, what had been our previous life? We were young officers, enthusiastic flyers, and had gone to war—just as throughout history and in all countries young, impressionable men had gone into battle, impelled by the belief that they were defending their fatherland and serving a just cause. We had not concerned ourselves with politics. Among the fundamental principles of the German military was, unequivocally, to be non-political; indeed, we considered it our chief responsibility to serve, unaffected by

the current political climate, the state—which means the government.

Since the time of Frederick the Great this basic tenet had been deeply rooted in the German military, which had nothing in common with the concept in 1945 of "militarism." The moral justification flowed from the self-evident assumption that the uppermost objective of every administration was the well-being of the people, that is to say the state; as Frederick the Great had put it clearly: "I am the first servant of my state." Only in this context is it comprehensible that the German armed forces also served so unconditionally the National Socialist state; especially since even among the leadership of the military, the ability to understand politics was—as a consequence of the aforementioned fundamental principle—completely inadequate. When the realization finally dawned that Hitler's objectives did not serve the good of the German people, it was already too late. An historic tragedy without equal ran its course.

But that is not within the scope of this memoir. I am merely trying to describe the perspective of the idealistically oriented portion of the German armed forces, which did not change even in the face of that most dangerous propaganda: *the ends justify the means*. Thus it was axiomatic for us to also remain apolitical even as prisoners of war, particularly since any other behavior would automatically play into the hands of the enemy.

The Russians understood only too well that they could only make a significant breach in the front of German POWs if a way could be found to tempt them out of their political reserve. Since in the terminology of Bolshevist propaganda every statement has political significance, so too in the POW camps the propaganda machine was put into high gear. In this regard, any and all methods were acceptable to the Soviets. From the almost unnoticeable, hidden threat, through enticement, bribery and blackmail all the way to open, brutal force, everything was tried—regrettably, most often with success.

As the winter of 1942 drew near, the few German POWs living in the Soviet Union recognized fully that, given the starvation rations they were receiving, many would not live to see the

following spring. With astonishing accuracy the Soviets then sought out those prisoners who were morally the weakest and most unscrupulous, and offered them better rations if they were prepared to work for the Soviets and inform on their comrades. Outwardly, the matter was disguised in that the people signed a membership declaration in the so-called anti-fascist camp group. The goal of this "Antifa" was to overthrow Hitler with the help of the Red Army and build up a "democratic" Germany in the image of the Soviet Union.

The Russians recognized that this initial Antifa movement would be a magnet for criminal elements. But this didn't bother them since their purpose was to first establish a group that was completely in their control. The prime mover of this Antifa was the political instructor, Wagner, outwardly as well as inwardly a Mephistopheles just as one imagines him. Born in Munich after the First World War, Wagner participated in the hostage murders of the communist commune in Munich and had to emigrate at an early date. In Russia he led a miserable existence until 1941, when the German-Russian war began. Then they remembered in Moscow that they might be able to use Wagner to work over the German POWs. One must admit that he made the best of this opportunity. He was unquestionably responsible for establishing communist cells in the German POW camps in Jelabuga and Oranki in 1941-1942. Of course, it was obvious that the Russians placed only people from this group into all positions¹⁹ in the camp.

During the summer of 1942, among others, one man—Captain Hadermann—played a role in the Antifa, providing the Soviets with invaluable propaganda services in that he was the first non-criminal member of this organization. By profession a teacher, Hadermann was an intelligent but naive idealist who had long been an opponent of Hitler, and was caught in the delusion that in the camp he could freely advance his democratic ideas even if, in some respects, they conflicted with communism. This was exactly what the Russians needed by way of a billboard to attract others. After Stalingrad, when the Russians had more

19 Leadership, administration and other important jobs filled by POWs

powerfully charismatic people in hand, Hadermann disappeared from the scene. But in late September 1942, when I arrived in Camp Krasnogorsk, Hadermann was the shining star in the firmament of the Antifa.

While I was still sitting in the officers' barracks and listening to accounts about politics in the camp, a soldier came in and told me I should go to the camp administration. When I arrived there I was greeted by the camp leader,²⁰ Reyer, who explained to me that I first had to go to the *banja* for de-lousing, prior to which I could not enter any quarters. Incidentally, he had heard that I had introduced myself in the camp with fascistic remarks. He warned me that neither the Russians nor he himself would tolerate it if I were to disrupt the anti-fascistic education work in the camp. At that he left me standing there and went away. In the meantime, Lieutenant Wild showed up and told me to go quickly to the guard station where the group that had to go for de-lousing was ready.

There I saw a sad picture. A group of about 30 German POW soldiers²¹ was standing, sitting or lying around, waiting to be taken to the *banja*, which was some distance outside the camp. The physical condition of most of these poor guys was only a little better than my own. Their clothing was nothing but rags and tatters. In this state they had to work eight hours a day. In front of the gate waited about 20 more soldiers, who had only just been captured and transported here. All of them came from the fighting around Rshew. Half of them were wounded, some very badly. Two young fellows lay on the ground. They had been shot through the lungs and were suffering terribly. They, too, had first to go to the *banja* before being allowed to enter the camp.

Finally, Russian guards arrived and drove us like a herd of animals along the road to the *banja*. The wounded had to go along, dragged by their comrades. As usual, we were required to undress in the *banja* and hand over our clothes for de-lousing.

20 A German POW; a variety of leadership positions were held by prisoners, and many matters were under the authority of such POW leaders.

21 Enlisted men, not officers. Under the rules of war enlisted men can be made to work, but not officers.

Then each received a bowl full of warm water and a thumbnail-sized piece of soap.

The appearance of the wounded was frightful. With respect to the two with chest wounds, fluid ran out of the bullet holes with each breath they drew. Both were obviously aware that they would not likely live to the next day. If the Russian guards couldn't help them, why did they have to torture them so, by dragging them to the de-lousing? The guards, completely unaffected, pressed us to hurry up. Even before the clothes came back from de-lousing, one of the men with chest wounds collapsed and was dead. It was no dying, but a miserable dissolution.

Finally, we got our things back, and soon this miserable train was again set in motion under the "*dawai, dawai*" of the guards and the groaning of the wounded. The two men dragging the remaining one with the chest wound almost couldn't keep up. And behind them the Russians hurried us along by constantly allowing the dogs on their leashes to get almost as far as the legs of the last ones in line. When we reached the camp gate and had to wait a little, the badly wounded man loudly shouted out his agony: "I'm dying, Mother, Mother, I'm dying." His voice dried up, he sank into himself, took a few deep breaths and died like a candle that, at the last, flares up and then extinguishes. His agonized cry rings to this day in my ears and soul as a reproach, a question, a call for help.

Then the gate opened and we were allowed into the camp. We were not allowed, however, to bring along the dead man, who, on the following day, still lay outside just where he had died. And on the administration barracks hung a poster saying: "Only victory by the glorious Red Army under its wise Father Stalin can bring peace, freedom and prosperity to the peoples enslaved by capitalism."

In the camp the regular soldiers were led into a special barracks, while I went once more to the officers' barracks, just as food was being given out. A POW stood at a bucket filled with some undefinable fluid that was supposed to be soup and called out the names in order. The person called out held out his bowl,

while the server stirred about energetically with a ladle and finally dispensed a half liter.²²

This food distribution procedure was the same wherever prisoners lived in the Soviet Union. It was a holy ritual. All eyes attentively followed the apportionment, watching suspiciously to see if anyone was being favored. When everyone had received his portion, the remainder was distributed, again in order, as seconds. Nobody imprisoned in Russia will ever forget how important seconds seemed. It was like a holiday when one got seconds—an additional allotment, the enjoyment of which was a rare event.

After the soup, the *kascha* was distributed in the same way. *Kascha* is simply porridge. Everyone got about two tablespoons of it. Since I had not yet been added to the rations list, I received nothing. Therefore, the server—Lieutenant Eisenreich, known as Little Father Eisenreich—brought me to the kitchen to straighten things out. Captain Hadermann was standing in the kitchen. He was quite friendly towards me and saw to it that I, too, got something to eat. Altogether he took great pains to behave as correctly as possible, in order—as he said himself—to counter the prevailing Antifa abuses. But he thereby placed himself in sharp contrast to all those Antifa members for whom the only thing was to secure advantages for themselves. They considered corruption, and getting more to eat at the expense of the others, as their privilege; it was, after all, the price for which they had sold themselves to the Russians. This behavior of Hadermann was the second major reason why he disappeared from the scene relatively soon.

When I had eaten my portion I suddenly got severe stomach pains and became nauseous; a few minutes later I got rid of all the food through the same path along which I had taken it in. The pains disappeared immediately. My stomach was simply no longer accustomed to work. For a few more days I always had the feeling that I would burst whenever I ate anything—from rations under which POWs were dying of starvation.

²² About a pint

On the afternoon of this first day in Camp Krasnogorsk a "mandatory gathering" was prescribed, and a majority of the inmates assembled at a suitable location. The senior camp officer, Reyer, opened the gathering—generally called a "meeting" in Russia²³—with a venomous attack on the wicked fascists in the camp, particularly among officers who refused to comprehend that Germany had lost the war, and that only the Antifa, under the guidance of the Soviet Union, could bring about the salvation of the German people.

Then appeared a man who had, too obviously, characterized himself as a "worker," and took the podium. It was Wilhelm Pieck, formerly a communist emigrant from Germany, later president of the so-called National Committee for a Free Germany and, after the war, president of the Soviet occupation zone in Germany known as the German Democratic Republic, or DDR.

His speech consisted of Soviet propaganda slogans strung together, and differed not at all from such speeches that are still given today, to excess, in the east block and by leftists the world over; except that today the word "Germany" is mostly replaced by "America." After every second sentence Pieck let his voice drop a little more and inserted an expectant, artful pause, upon which the Antifa adherents dutifully hastened to break out in clamorous applause.

Somewhat apart from the gathering, there leaned against a barracks a Russian commissar with the rank of staff officer who had responsibility for POW camps with respect to political matters. Although his intelligent face remained completely opaque, his demeanor displayed an unmistakably scornful, superior derision. What could he have been thinking? Exceedingly depressed and melancholy, I left this puppet show and returned to the barracks.

The next day I had quite a fever and, suffering from angina, had to go into the camp clinic. Here there were beds actually covered in white linen. I was weighed upon being admitted into the clinic. At first I did not want to believe it was only 44

23 The English word "meeting" was used in Russia.

kilograms,²⁴ but when they held up a mirror in front of me I almost failed to recognize myself and finally began to comprehend my condition. It was a miracle I was still alive.

The clinic doctor was, like some of the soldiers serving as medics, an Italian POW. He asked me if I understood Italian. When I indicated I could not, he spoke about me in Italian with one of the medics. Nevertheless, I understood the importance of one sentence in which the doctor expressed his opinion that within one to two days I would surely die, given my extreme weight loss, and now, in addition, a fever. Thereupon I said: "No, Doctor, this one won't die yet!"

In the clinic I observed for the first time some of the diseases that were so typical among Russian prisoners, such as dehydration, furunculosis, edema and scurvy. All of these are manifestations of deficiencies resulting from malnutrition. Since there was in the clinic neither better nor more food than elsewhere in the camp—if anything, less—the doctors were rather powerless against these diseases, particularly since there were virtually no medicines. Thus, the treatment consisted primarily of prescribing rest.

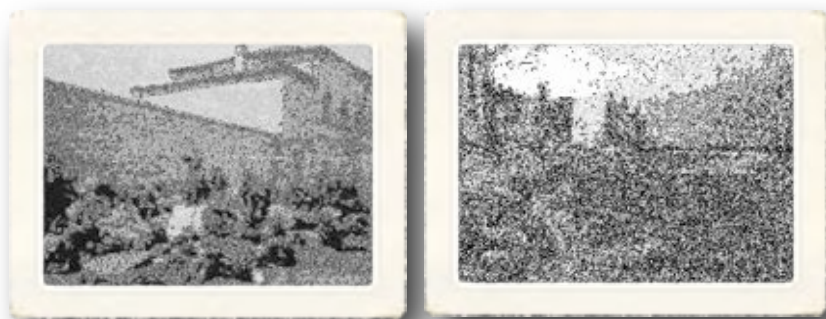
Now that I was lying here in bed, resting and not freezing and no longer waiting in fear of the next interrogation, a great tiredness overcame me and I slept through the next two days and nights. I only awoke halfway when there was something to eat, swallowed the meager amount and immediately went back to sleep.

On the third day of my stay in the clinic a Russian soldier entered the room in which I lay and laboriously spelled out something, which eventually turned into my name. Another patient who understood a little Russian explained to me that I had to take all my things and go to the guard station. The doctor, who had hurried over, protested that I was still too sick with a severe fever. But *nitschewo* it made no difference. I was handed my clothes; I got dressed, took my cap and my little coat, my spoon and my newly acquired possessions—a bowl and cup—and left.

²⁴ About 97 pounds

When I got to the guard station nearly all the German officers who had been in the camp were gathered there. The Russian duty officer of the day stood at the open door with a few guards and slowly read out one name after the other. Each person called up had to go to one of the guards who thoroughly frisked him; whereby one lost everything the guard felt one should not have. Regrettably, my bowl also made its way onto the pile of confiscated items.

On the Road Again



Left: Packed and ready to go
Right: Church with golden cupola at Oranki

Our loads thus lightened, we were squashed into two prison vehicles. When our truck was, in our view, already more than full, about 10 men were still standing outside. Our protests did not, however, interest the attending guards in the slightest, and after a few minutes all were in the vehicle and the door was locked. We were literally crouching on top of one another.

Then we took off. As we had guessed, we were taken to a railroad station near Moscow. It was a true deliverance when the door was opened and we could get out. With the customary shouting—"dawai, dawai"—we changed over into a railway prison car as I had already come to know it. Normally, each compartment in such a car is designed for six people, but we had to cope with 18.

And then we waited—which is, in fact, at all times, the primary occupation of prisoners of war. We waited for the train to leave so that we could find out where the journey was going; we waited for the next distribution of rations; for night, so that we could sleep; for the next day, to once again receive a piece of bread; we waited for news from the front, for the end of the war; and always we waited for that great event, the return home to freedom. Only one who has been robbed of the freedom he otherwise takes for

granted can gauge what it means to have lost that freedom, and to wait in this way. Hope is the only elixir of life for the prisoner.

The shunting finally began. During the two hours we spent at this railway station we saw three long prison trains full of Russian convicts rolling towards the east. Then we too rolled eastward. In the compartment we folded down planks so that we were now lying three high. Next to me lay one Reverend Kretschmar. We passed the time by planning in detail a trip through Italy that we wanted to take after our return home in November – naturally, of this year. If someone had told us that the war would last three more years, and our imprisonment yet many more thereafter, we would have ridiculed him as a crazy pessimist. We simply hoped to be home soon, therefore, the war must end soon—with a German victory. We wanted it so, and therefore believed it would be so.

After a few days we were unloaded at a small station about 60 kilometers south of Gorki. Some prisoners were already there and knew that Camp Oranki was about seven kilometers away. During the journey, the condition of two prisoners suffering from dysentery became quite troubling. Since I too had had bloody diarrhea, I was likewise no longer capable of walking. We three were loaded onto a flatbed cart and driven behind the others to the camp, which we could already see from far away.

Above a comparatively clean village, in beautifully rolling countryside, there stood a large church, the golden cupola of which shone into the distance. This church, now a prison camp, formerly the center of a lovely cloister, was known in art history for the painted ceiling of its cupola (by an Italian artist unknown to me) that depicted the resurrection of Christ. Unfortunately, only once did I get a fleeting glimpse of it, and in semi-darkness at that, so that I did not acquire a lasting impression of it.

The remaining stone buildings of the cloister were grouped around the church. To the northwest was an open space surrounded by what were once stables, carriage houses, the *banja*, the bakery and a smithy. The entire facility was secured: in the direction of the village, along a steep slope, by a large wall; and in other directions by a double enclosure of barbed wire.

The stone buildings gave the impression of having been tolerably well maintained. Initially, these constituted our living quarters, until later, when the Stalingraders came, and the stables and sheds were also converted into housing.

Oranki: Guardian Angel

I have no recollection of arriving at the camp because by that time I was no longer entirely conscious. I found myself again in a bed in the camp clinic. Two others were there as well. A medic brought us something to eat, then gave me some sort of medication. Again I lost consciousness—and came to. It was dark. I was freezing and realized that I was naked. My position was extraordinarily uncomfortable—my head and legs were lower than the middle of my body; moreover, I was lying on my back. So, at first, all my efforts were directed at turning myself over. As I reached beneath me to brace myself, I discovered for the first time where I was. I was lying on a heap of corpses. To my amazement, this realization could no longer horrify me. I was too weak for any strong emotional reaction. My unexpected release from jail, and the first days back among people who spoke my language and shared my views, had wound me up spiritually—and thus physically as well—to a state of high tension. Now the reaction to this tension had set in, exacerbated by illness and fever.

Not even fear, the most basic expression of the drive for self-preservation, registered anymore. I wanted the end, since I expected nothing more from life as a prisoner; from death, by contrast, everything: emancipation. Only one wish was left, to lie a little more comfortably. So I gathered my last strength to change my position. When I had turned myself halfway, I lost my grip and rolled down from the corpse pile. My powerless arms hit the floor with a thump—just as steps were coming along the hall, and past the door to the morgue. As a result of the noise I had made the door was opened and I felt a soft female hand take my wrist and search for a pulse. I once again sank back into a fog of unconsciousness.

At some point voices from seemingly far away penetrated my consciousness; they became louder and clearer, and finally I was awake. I lay in a bed in a large hospital room. A few other patients were discussing the composition of a wedding banquet.

At this it dawned on me that I was still alive, in that—provoked by the conversation of the others—I felt incredibly hungry. I wanted to say something, but could not speak. All I could do was groan. The others became attentive, and one said: "By thunder, I would not have believed that he would regain consciousness." Then he stood up, came over to me, took a few pieces of sugar out of the box next to my bed and placed them in my mouth. "That will do you good. In addition, your "400s" from the last two days are still lying here." "I beg your pardon?" I finally got out. My voice seemed entirely alien to me. He repeated his words while holding several pieces of bread before my eyes. The "400" was the daily ration of 400 grams of bread.

Then he told me what had happened. After the transport I had been placed with the other two invalids in a special room, the dying room, as he called it. The same night the other two died and the next morning they took me for dead as well because I was unconscious. So along with the other dead ones they threw me into the morgue, in which there were already 10 corpses. Only at noon on the following day had the Russian female doctor happened to hear something in the morgue and discover that I was still alive. That was yesterday. After that she had come every few hours to look after me and give me injections.

I ate a bit of bread and fell asleep while doing so. After a while something bumped me and I woke up. A young woman in a white coat was sitting on the side of my bed and, looking at me, took my pulse with one hand then softly stroked my bare-shaven head with the other. She was not large. Her fairly slim, well-formed figure was accentuated by her long, rather pretty legs. Her narrow face would not, despite the prominent cheekbones, have been out of place in northern Germany; and her dark eyes, of an indefinable color, made a particularly good contrast to her ash blonde hair.

"Now, how are you?" she asked in Russian. I could not answer anything, but just looked at her. The fact that, suddenly, a woman—a person—was sitting at my bed and being good to me seemed unfathomable and overwhelming. She came every day a few times, sat down at my bed and, with an almost motherly gesture,

laid a hand on my head. And each time, in addition to the medication, she brought me something nourishing to eat; a piece of white bread with fat, or a hard-boiled egg, or some cheese or sausage. Once she even brought me a glass of milk. Thus, I was able to recover again.

I owe my survival to this Russian doctor who, cold and unaffected, watched daily as masses of POWs died of starvation. Why didn't she simply let me die, too? Now that she had brought me back from the dead, she apparently felt a sort of maternal sympathy for me. Later on I learned that she even bought some of the food—like fat, sausage and milk, which, of course, were officially never available—for much money on the black market, in order to bring it to me. I have never forgotten that.

More Selling of the Soul



Announcement in Germany of the death of my crew—and me

After some time I had once again achieved a physical condition comparable to average in the camp. I was, therefore, discharged from the clinic and placed in Block 4a, where the officers were quartered. By means of a steep staircase one came into a large room. On both sides of a broad corridor, in which stood a few tables and benches, there were double-decker wooden bunks. In this building and on these bunks lived more than 200 POW officers from various nations.

As in Krasnogorsk, here, too, all the key positions and agreeable jobs were occupied by Antifa people. At that time the main role in the Antifa was played by a certain Augustin, an extraordinary, not uninteresting man, who nevertheless achieved a certain infamy. The son of affluent parents, he began some kind of studies after his *Abitur*²⁵, which he never completed. This was not at all because of stupidity—on the contrary, I believe that Augustin was quite intelligent—but rather on account of his

25 The examination taken by German students at the end of their secondary education

restless and adventurous disposition. His studies so bored him that he looked around for something else.

When he was called up to fulfill his military obligation he concluded rightly that peace could not last much longer and decided to become active and eventually became an observer in the air force. After the start of the Russian war, as a lieutenant, he flew reconnaissance in the east. Within a few months he was shot down and became a POW. With the same ruthless determination that had already previously distinguished him, this unscrupulous adventurer now followed the path that appeared to provide him with the most advantages. Recognizing correctly that halfway measures are useless, he did not merely join the Antifa, but placed himself—with his knowledge and capabilities—actively at the disposal of the Soviets.

Naturally, Augustin first had to prove to the Soviets that he was serious; after all, he might have switched back to the German side again at the first signs of German success at the front. He tried to provide this proof of reliability while he was in Camp Oranki. With the most unbelievable cynicism he betrayed every German who dared to say the least thing against the Soviet Union. In contrast to many other Antifa people, who tried to play themselves up to us as good Germans but then ran to the Russians behind our backs, Augustin did not cloak his behavior in any way. He told us quite openly that he would do all he could, firstly, to destroy those of us in the camp who tried to oppose him, and secondly, to assist the Soviet Union in every way possible to win the war. He would do anything that would gain him an advantage, without allowing himself to be restrained in the slightest by any moral compunctions. In December 1942 Augustin was brought to Moscow, where he completed a special training course. Then he joined a special operation at the front.

At this time the German base at Weliki Luki, encircled by the Russians, was still offering embittered resistance. Though they substantially outnumbered the Germans, the Russians were nevertheless unable to overpower this base before Christmas 1942. Their request for unconditional surrender was declined by the German commander, Lieutenant Colonel Freiherr von Sass.

So the Russians attempted a ruse. Augustin appeared before the base with a commando of Russians in German uniforms, identified himself as the leader of a scattered German task force, the remnants of which were with him, and asked to speak with the commander, to whom he wished to attach himself along with his men. It was his plan to advance through this stratagem as far as the headquarters bunker, and then destroy it with hand grenades.

The Germans, however, found the whole thing rather unusual and took all precautions. The attack failed and Augustin and his Russians took flight; nearly all the Russians fell under German fire, while Augustin and Gold—a former German communist—reached the Russian lines uninjured. Both were awarded a Soviet decoration.

And in the POW newspaper "*Das freie Wort*"²⁶(what a mockery), which was put out in Moscow by communist emigrants from Germany, there appeared pages-long panegyrics to these two traitors.

Later, Augustin was sent to Minsk to assassinate the German *Reichskommissar* for the conquered Eastern Territories. Once again in German uniform he managed to get to Minsk, but was exposed before he was able to carry out his assignment. He was arrested as a deserter and traitor and sentenced to hang. Thus the life of this unscrupulous traitor ended in well-deserved fashion, for in his own way he contributed decisively to making the enslavement of German POWs so terrible that ultimately more than two million of them perished in the Soviet Union.

Notwithstanding that Augustin and his comrades in the Antifa held power in the camp, at that time—in the fall of 1942—they were still in the minority. Nevertheless, the rift among German POWs was already a well-established reality, accompanied by an increasingly bitter fight. While the one side—the Antifa—could, with Soviet help, actively prosecute this fight by every means, we on the other side had no other weapons to bring to the field beyond passive resistance, attitude, faith and idealism.

26 Literally, "The Free Word" (i.e., "Free Speech")

The Russians cranked their propaganda machine into high gear. So-called mandatory meetings were held almost daily. Immediately after the start of such meetings, Commissar Wagner, accompanied by some Antifa leaders, went through the living quarters and chased anyone he found to the meeting. There, frenzied speeches were given, which usually climaxed with threats to opponents of the Antifa that they would never get home and would, after the war, be sentenced by "progressive" (read communist) peoples' courts. Then the newly-won members of the Antifa would be identified and some of them would be called up to the speaker's podium to state publicly their decision. Often, this led to unintentionally comical scenes. One time, for example, there appeared on the stage a certain Lieutenant Carisius who said: "I have signed²⁷ because I recognized that the salvation of Germany can only be achieved through the Soviet Union, since in Russia everything is better than in the rest of the world. In Germany and in the German Army I was always starving, while here, for the first time in my life, I have really gotten full." Or another one explained: "Since I have recognized that otherwise I will never get home, I have signed."

In the meantime, the muddy season had begun, reminding us that outside the door stood a long, Russian winter, which many of us would probably not live through. With great trepidation we looked into a future that lay dark and threatening before us, although the most unbelievable rumors still circulated in the camp and even among the Russian civilian population. These rumors maintained that German troops had not only captured Stalingrad, but had struck out northward along the Volga, had encircled Saratow and now stood before Kuibitschew. Now it was clear that the war would shortly be over because the German tanks would soon be here on their way to Gorki via Kasan.

Among the Russian civilian population an unmistakable, nervous disquiet began to spread. In addition, rations had become so bad that they too began to die of starvation. Then one day the workers in a small factory went on strike. The workers

27 Signed a statement enlisting in the Antifa and supporting its goals

were all women who only wanted more to eat for their starving children.

The NKWD struck back mercilessly. The entire workforce was shot, other women from the villages were forcibly brought in, and by the next day the factory was fully up and running again. Anyone who dared to speak of the strike, even obliquely, ran the risk getting enmeshed in the gears of the NKWD, from which there was no escape.

At this time, a POW, Lieutenant Friedrich, a physics student in Leipzig, attempted to escape. His disciplined soul, his clear and logical mode of expression, and his modest and comradely manner had earned him much sympathy and respect. He was a stranger to fear. He was, therefore, frequently one of those who, in lucid sentences, told the Antifa people what many of us thought and felt.

For some time he had been working voluntarily with a unit that was cutting trees in the forest, into which during working hours he one day disappeared. Only when the unit was gathering for the march back to the camp was his escape noticed, which had an effect on the Russians like a poke in a wasp nest. Immediately, search units with dogs were set loose and camp security was tightened.

Friedrich's escape was the primary topic of conversation in the camp. While Augustin and company were nearly overcome with anger, our best wishes and hopes accompanied him. Unfortunately, he was nabbed the following day at a nearby train station. His plan had been to travel southwest on a train that passed at the same time each day. He arrived at the station shortly before departure time. Over his uniform he wore a dyed flight suit, in which he could pass quite well for a civilian. Regrettably, on that day the train was delayed for hours. So Friedrich had to wait nearby. A government official, who was also waiting for the train and was bored, approached Friedrich and spoke to him. Friedrich could not evade him. Since he could speak no Russian, of course, he did not answer. He was eventually recognized as a German POW and arrested.

At noon he was delivered back to the camp. His face was almost unrecognizable, so badly had they beaten him. He was

locked up in the dungeon, a sort of cellar that was wet and completely dark. Here, in this ice-cold hole, Friederich had to pass a hundred days, often interrogated at night by the NKWD, on half rations. When he was let out after 100 days he was nearly blind. His complexion was greenish-yellow and he was so weak that he was almost unable to speak. As a POW in the Soviet Union—the workers' and peasants' paradise—one was, after all, completely without rights. Friederich did not survive his imprisonment.

Camp life returned to its usual pace. One waited, froze and starved. A few played chess, until the Russians took away the pieces; or cards, which were in any case forbidden. Others occupied themselves by learning French or English. But the main interest (aside from food) was, as always, news from the front, which was, however, rather limited.

In their news accounts the Russians had until now simply said nothing about the German summer offensive of 1942; therefore, we were all the more astonished when they suddenly announced the fierce defensive battle for Stalingrad. When the Russians let it be known that on November 22 they had encircled the German 6th Army, we merely laughed and did not believe it. It seemed impossible to us that an entire German army of 22 divisions could take a position that would lead to encirclement by the enemy. And if the encirclement had actually occurred, then surely it would most rapidly be relieved. After all, we could not imagine that Hitler—the man who held Germany's fate in his hand—had lost all touch with reality and was possessed by a hubris beyond imagination.

In the meantime, Antifa propaganda continued. The temptation of receiving more food was, for many, simply too strong. The winter had started, and one did not want to die. Additional food—and therefore survival—beckoned from that direction. So many gave in and signed. We named them the Kaschists, since they had been bought, outright, with *kascha*.

When, as a boy in school, I learned from the Bible that Esau had sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, I could not understand it. How could one take such a step with such serious

consequences for just a little food? In my Russian imprisonment I now had to experience how far hunger can drive people; how many men, whom one had formerly known as sensible, even courageous, now—under the abrasive workings of hunger—heedlessly threw overboard all principles and morals to garner for themselves some material advantage.

It was fear—fear of offending the Antifa and thereby the Russians, fear of the dungeon, fear that after the war one would not be allowed to go home, fear of starving to death—it was always fear, the naked, creature survival drive, which completely changed people. And fear is so human because all people are afraid. The only question is how long the resistance of the spirit and will can withstand the animal fear within us. Those in power in the Soviet Union understand this precisely. And the NKWD understands with an all-too-devilish virtuosity how to proceed with the weapons of hunger and fear.

In my opinion the remarkable confessions in most all major and minor trials in the Soviet Union have only been achieved through hunger and grinding, chronic fear, and not by torture or even drugs. The only power that may overcome even hunger and fear is faith. Moreover, it is less important what one believes than that one believes. I believe that this oft-proven point is one of the most crushing arguments against materialism.

Back to camp life in Oranki . . . Despite the confusing relationships, on account of which one almost dared not trust one's closest neighbor, there were nevertheless a number of men against whose unclouded attitude all propaganda and coercion was ineffective. In particular, three air force officers were among those who, time and again, drew the ire of the Antifa because their attitude bespoke entirely of the archetype of a good officer. These were the three first lieutenants: Sochatzy, Hein and Mantwitz.

While Mantwitz, who stemmed from Flensburg, seemed like an indestructible boulder in the surf, Sochatzy, whose home was Salzburg, embodied the elegant self-control and fine old culture of his home, in which a clear spirit and firm will are bound together with a genuine, grand humanity. And Hein, whose home was

Schlesien, incorporated in his being the mid-point between the two others. His Protestant mentality and his selfless sense of responsibility for others gave help and support to many. So it was no wonder that by the fall of 1942 there appeared in the Antifa newspaper "*Das freie Wort*" articles agitating against these three men. It is, therefore, that much more important, I believe, to discover that after the war, despite all Antifa threats to the contrary, men of this sort were nevertheless eventually released by the Soviets to go home.

At that time the name of Lieutenant Count Einsiedel first surfaced. In the newspaper "*Das freie Wort*" there appeared laudatory articles about him; in the camp, pamphlets he had authored were distributed. At first we considered it impossible that a man with such a name—a great-grandson of Otto von Bismarck—could so besmirch his home, his family and all tradition. But one day he appeared in the camp. His entire behavior was that of a spoiled, selfish boy who wanted a toy, but upon getting it, became spiteful.

Einsiedel asserted that the main reason he joined the Antifa was that he was against Hitler, who had not yet awarded him the *Ritterkreuz*,²⁸ which, in his opinion, he had already earned. We were speechless. Thereafter, the Antifa prescribed for him exactly what he was to say.

Einsiedel made a very nice career for himself in the Soviet Union, since the Antifa—and later the so-called National Committee for a Free Germany—could make good use of his name, which he continued to make available to them without reservation in return for a better life during his imprisonment. Later he attempted to cloak his conduct in the mantle of a fighter against Naziism. However, the impression that he made at that time in Oranki was so pathetic that the Russians hastily transported him back to Krasnogorsk near Moscow. But everyone who experienced him at that time knows that his conduct was a betrayal arising out of fear.

28 "Knight's Cross, a high military decoration

The next attraction presented by the Antifa was the originally German communist emigrant Herman Matern, who travelled on Moscow's orders through the POW camps in order to make propaganda. He was so colorless a personality, and left behind such a minor impression, that I would surely not remember him today were it not that one frequently finds his name on the list of the prominent bosses in Germany's East Zone, where his absolute subservience to Moscow guaranteed him a good position.

Motley Crew in a Shoebox

The inmates of our camp were a right colorful, intermingled congregation. Next to Germans, the Rumanians were the most numerous. But Finns, Hungarians and Italians also had to share with us the lot of imprisonment. This motley assemblage of nationalities was rounded out by a few Poles, Bulgarians, Yugoslavians and Spaniards. Even a Frenchman and a Dutchman were blown here by fate.

In December 1942 we suddenly had to exit our quarters and were driven into a few small rooms in another building, Block 3. Although until that time we could not complain about lack of space, now it became unimaginably tight. In one room, which was probably no bigger than 5 x 5 meters, there now roomed 52 people. There was about 29 centimeters²⁹ of room per person on the double-decker bunks, which were so low that one could not even sit upright. Lying on one's back was impossible. Nested together, everyone lay down simultaneously on one side. Turning around onto the other side was possible only when everyone, upon command, rolled over at the same time. On the lower bunk, where I lay, it was often unbearably cold, while our comrades on the upper bunks could hardly breathe due to the unbelievably foul air directly below the ceiling of the room.

The communal life of so many people in such cramped quarters was more than problematic. A quarrel was always breaking out somewhere, old friends became enemies, irritability and anxiety set in more and more. Lice infestations increased. Fleas were plentiful. And the bedbug plague was indescribable.

And then scabies broke out as well. At first only one fellow had it, but after a few days most of us came down with it. The itching drove many of us to the edge of madness. If the body became somewhat warm the itching was almost unbearable. During the night, in desperation many tore from their bodies the rags of which our clothing consisted and dived naked into the snow, whereby some got sick or died from the freezing temperatures of

²⁹ Just about 12 inches

a Russian winter. It was weeks until this plague was overcome through the application of sulfa ointment, which was finally delivered. As a result of excessive sulfa treatment, however, I, like many others, got furunculosis, a kind of boils, from which I suffered for months.

During the night, as a result of malnourishment, one had to get up 10 times or more to pass water. When one returned, one's own place was occupied by one's sleeping bunk neighbors, which often resulted in quarrels and anger when, through pushing and shoving, one reclaimed one's place.

But the worst was yet to come. After they had squeezed us together in so few rooms, they hastily started building bunks in all the other rooms in the camp. Supposedly coming were thousands of Rumanian soldiers who had been captured in the bow of the Don River.

Rumanian Death Whimpers

And indeed they did come, harbingers of the looming catastrophe in Stalingrad. The condition in which they arrived, moreover, was worse than could have been imagined in even the most horrible fantasy. After being captured and thoroughly plundered, with the outside temperature at -25°C ³⁰ and no winter clothing, the Rumanians were driven into railroad cars.

After weeks in transport, virtually without rations, they finally got to Oranki. Many had starved and frozen to death en route. And now the seven-kilometer march to the camp through a piercing snow storm

Only about half the Rumanians reached the camp under their own power, towards evening on December 18, 1942. They were driven together into a large courtyard and not permitted inside because they were first supposed to be deloused. So they crouched on the ground in the snow, teeth chattering, and cried. The crying of thousands of freezing and starving creatures penetrated through the entire camp, above which it appeared that fatal cold was streaming out of the sky which had, in the meantime, cleared. It did not stop at walls or doors, and sounded in our ears as a terrible accusation against a system in which a human being was no longer valued as a human being, but rather as part of a mass, as a number or as a thing, which can be heedlessly destroyed on a whim. This death whimper of several thousand poor, tortured people is among the worst things I have ever experienced.

Meanwhile, one sleigh after another came into the camp and dumped its frozen human freight into the snow in front of the mess building, which was converted into an emergency hospital. Those of us veteran prisoners who could still walk were ordered to carry the sick ones. But mostly we carried corpses. Faces and hands of most were black and unrecognizable due to frostbite. Many were already frozen stiff as a board, but were still alive—or

³⁰ About -13°F

dying—as we brought them into the large hall of the mess building and laid them on the floor.

The camp doctor who had saved my life simply walked endlessly through the rows and with her foot poked those who were not moving to see if they might still react. If, in fact, they did not they were counted as dead and taken back out by special burial units³¹ and carried to the mass graves located outside the camp. Some who were still alive were in this way thrown back into the snow, where they then really died. But the whimpering, "healthy" prisoners in the courtyard were also starting to die from the cold. When the sky began to lighten the next morning, several hundred more Rumanians lay frozen in the snow.

Meanwhile, the *banja* was working in high gear. Many who were no longer capable of tolerating the sudden temperature difference in the sauna-like *banja* died there.

The hardest work in the *banja* was taking the deloused things out of the heating chamber and hanging into it the clothing of the next group. A number of us had already gotten lung infections doing this and some had died. Since, due to the arrival of the Rumanians, the *banja* now had to work in high gear day and night it was a welcome opportunity for Augustin to finally wipe out his "special friends." And so Hein, Mantwitz and Sochatzy were assigned to this hard work until they too collapsed with lung infections, which they miraculously survived.

31 In German: *Totentragerkommandos*; literally, corpse-carrier units

Inconsolable Hearts at Christmas

Reverend Kretschmar and I had to cut wood for the *banja*, for which I actually received a uniform jacket, since even Camp Director Popescu could see that a short-sleeved shirt and a child's coat was, in the Russian winter, too little even for a German officer. But on the second night I collapsed from exhaustion. Kretschmar helped get me back into our quarters, where he collapsed himself. That was during the night between the first and second day of Christmas. A few days later Kretschmar was dead. And just in September we had still dreamed of being home by Christmas and undertaking a trip through Italy.

Additional transports arrived, Rumanians, Italians and Hungarians from the divisions of our allies that had been crushed in the bow of the Don. The destruction of the 6th Army in Stalingrad cast its shadow ahead.

Christmas 1942 was the saddest of my life up to that point. We had no light in our extremely tight quarters, only pine shavings we had cut ourselves,³² the ghostly light from which made the sad faces of the POWs look even worse than they already were. Like most of the others, I laid down on the bunk after the onset of darkness so that sleep might let me forget that tonight was Christmas Eve. But I could not fall asleep. And so my thoughts wandered to my unreachably distant home and I tried to imagine how things might look there now. But when one then had to turn over on command or one's bunkmate stretched out in his sleep so much that one could hardly lie down anymore, the contrast between reality and memory became so painful as to drive one to despair.

Suddenly, the door was opened and the glow of a small candle surged into our room—in which it was completely quiet, in contrast to other times. In the door stood Major Cramer, highly respected by all of us, who as senior German officer, represented the German minority to the Rumanian senior camp officer,

³² Presumably burned as a sort of tiny, wooden torch

Major Popescu. In his hand he held a small pine bough with a lighted candle on it, to which all eyes were drawn like a magnet. With a few clear words this good person reminded us of Christmas and its meaning and found a way to bestow a bit of hope and consolation to our inconsolable hearts. Then he went to the next room, as "Silent Night, Holy Night" sounded in ours; though somewhat timid, nevertheless it was able to awaken in us for a few moments a frail sense of security, which we carried as a gift into our sleep and dreams.

Pact with the Devil



Soaking in—or ignoring—the propaganda

But the war continued. In the meantime, the resistance in Weliki Luki had come to an end. The Soviets negotiated a surrender with the German commander, in which, among other things, it was determined that the officers would retain their side arms. But once again our experience was ratified: what the Russian promises he does not deliver, but retains; and when he opens his mouth he lies. When the Weliki Luki men arrived in our camp they had been plundered just as thoroughly as all the other prisoners.

We often asked ourselves how it was that the Russian so often consciously lied to us, without it mattering to him in the least if we discovered the lie. I believe there are two different motives behind the lie. On the one hand the Bolshevist teaching tells him: "You may and must do everything that is useful to the communist state, and which harms its enemies"—in other words, the ends justify the means. Since all non-communists are "enemies" of the people, and therefore damnable, they are much beneath the

progressive communists. If they believe our lies, that is good for us and merely displays their stupidity; and if they find out, then that is of no consequence to us because non-communists have no honor.

The other sort of lie embodies an old characteristic of the Russian people—sympathy. For example, if someone asks you how far it still is to the next village and you know that the distance is, say, 10 *verst*,³³ above all don't tell the questioner 10 *verst*. After all, it may be that he has already walked a long way and is tired. Tell him five *verst* and he will be happy that he is so close to his destination. For at least the next three or four *verst* he will travel cheerfully. And when he then notices, well, then it is after all only a little more than five *verst*. And he'll manage those, too.

And so it was, also, for us in the prison camps. When we complained about the bad rations, insufficient fuel, etc., the Russians often started out by promising us decisive improvements. When we then asked when that would be, they said, "*Safra budit*," which means: "It will be tomorrow." But in Russian tomorrow means maybe, or later, or not at all. And "*budit*" signifies: "It'll be when it is." But then, mostly, there was nothing. And one simply had to get used to that, exactly like the "*skara damar*" that we heard *ad nauseam* after the war. Literally, this means: "Soon it's off to home." As we learned, however, "soon" can mean many, many years.

A few weeks after the arrival of the big Rumanian transport all enlisted men were transported out of the camp, as Oranki was to become purely an officers camp. Of the many thousands of Rumanians who arrived at the camp, only a few hundred left it; the others still lie in mass unmarked graves near Oranki.

New transports arrived, often with only 10-20 officers. But one day the Stalingrad officers arrived—that is to say, a portion of those who were still left—and thus visible proof of the unbelievable fact that an entire German army had been lost at one time.

33 A measure of distance

Emaciated, exhausted and ill, but nevertheless marching eight abreast in good military order, they entered the camp. We were amazed at what was, from our "*plenny*"³⁴ perspective, their magnificent equipment with winter uniforms, knapsacks, coats, blankets, cook kits, etc. Rank insignia, medals and decorations were to be seen. What had arrived was for us almost like a piece of our homeland.

Among them were some whom we had known from before. Despite the prohibitions, questions flew back and forth. Now we were no longer a pathetic little bunch of Germans in a camp controlled almost entirely by Rumanian officers who naturally first took care of their countrymen before anything was left over for us. We hoped that with this increase we could establish a firm front against the Antifa and the Soviets, and thereby improve our living conditions.

But it happened otherwise because at first the Stalingraders brought with them the most terrible disease for wreaking havoc in a camp: typhoid fever. After a few weeks the whole camp was just a hospital. The great typhoid death began. In the camp everything that might have contained the disease was unavailable. Death made the rounds, and our room, too, became emptier. The mass deaths during the first four months of 1943 in all POW camps of the Soviet Union grew to such catastrophic proportions that Moscow finally decided to take counter-measures before all German POWs died, particularly since the typhoid fever also spread to the civilian population.

Moscow has officially declared that 93,000 German officers, non-coms and enlisted men were taken prisoner in Stalingrad. It is, however, firmly established that in Stalingrad more than 123,000 living Germans fell into Soviet hands. If even 30,000 of these were still alive three months later, it would be a lot. At best, only 5000-6000 of the Stalingraders returned from Soviet imprisonment.

This was the genesis of the famous order from Stalin, the point of which was that no more POWs could be allowed to die. This order did not, however, prevent the demise of more than 2

34 A *plenny* is a prisoner.

million German POWs in the Soviet Union. But at first the order worked like a miracle. New ration standards were established. While we had previously been receiving only 400 grams of bread and two watery soups per day, the new standards looked considerably better. Had this order of Stalin's actually been carried out in the following years there would have been more than a million fewer families in Germany who would have had to mourn loved ones who starved to death in the "peasants' and workers' paradise". That it was otherwise was the result not only of the inadequacy of the Soviet system with its well-known corruption, but equally of the disastrous work of the Antifa, the BDO³⁵ and the National Committee for a Free Germany, which saw it as their right to "live better" at the expense of the general population of POWs. All later cloaking with political motives cannot obscure this disgrace.

However, May 6, 1943 became for us "Miracle Day". Suddenly there was fatty soup, white bread and black bread—a total of 600 grams—some butter and sugar, porridge with bacon and meat, egg cakes and, not the least, 15 cigarettes per person per day. Initially we thought that the war was over, until the commission from Moscow showed up, read out Stalin's order and promised to improve significantly living conditions in the camp. Russian doctors appeared and delousing was systematically and effectively carried out. We were also immunized against all sorts of diseases (three syringes for the entire camp), and the typhoid fever subsided.

Unfortunately, the miracle was short lived. No sooner had the commission and the doctors disappeared than the backsliding started. The soups became thinner and thinner, the egg cakes dropped away, meat and bacon were no longer seen, the porridge became less and the cigarette deliveries very sporadic and scanty. The good things wandered into the cook pots of the Russians and the Antifa so that the rations received by us "regular *plennies*" (*plenny* = prisoner) sank back nearly to the earlier starvation level.

35 "Alliance of German Officers"

In the meantime, the Antifa had not remained inactive. The propaganda was revised. All they wanted was to fight against Hitler in order to build up a democratic Germany after his annihilation. Of course, communism was the most desirable objective, but Germany should decide for itself what it wanted, and retain an armed force, etc. Thus the Antifa was able to attract to their side many men who were sincere, but foolish enough to close their eyes to reality (particularly as hunger and fear spoke very persuasively to help matters along). If today many of these men claim that they could not have anticipated that the Soviets wanted nothing more than willing tools, it is simply not true; after all, among the Stalingraders as well there were enough clear-sighted men who, together with us, lifted their voices in warning.

When the Soviets finally succeeded in getting even the first German generals to make declarations of sympathy for the Soviet Union, the avalanche eventually began to roll. In September 1943, in Moscow, under the colors black-white-red,³⁶ the so-called National Committee for a Free Germany was founded under the leadership of Wilhelm Pieck;³⁷ and in support of it the BDO, the *Bund Deutscher Offiziere* under the leadership of General von Seydlitz.

A few months earlier a number of German communists from Moscow had travelled to the various POW camps to spread propaganda. And so early in the summer of 1943 Walter Ulbricht came to Oranki as well. His appearance in the camp turned into a genuine fiasco for him and the Antifa. In no camp at that time was resistance to the Antifa as firm as here, since we so-called "long-timers"³⁸ had not forgotten the establishment of the Antifa nor its effects. A circle had formed that did not allow itself to be intimidated by the Antifa.

36 The traditional colors of the pre-war German flag

37 After the war, Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht (mentioned elsewhere) became leaders in the creation of the German Democratic Republic—known to us as East Germany.

38 In German, *Altgefangenen*; literally, "old prisoners"

Ulbricht started with the mistake of attacking those German officers who still refused to believe that the salvation of the world could come only from the Soviet Union. Shortly before the start of this assembly, the Russian Camp Commissar Sergejew had summoned the Oakleaf-decorated³⁹ Air Major Assi Hahn into his office and locked him up there because he was familiar with Hahn's vitality and his disdain for the Antifa. As he was locking him up he said to Hahn: "Until the assembly is over you will stay here so you can't cause any trouble." But Hahn threatened to demolish the entire place, and to leave a big pile of s--t on his desk; so Sergejew, who knew that Hahn would carry out his threats, decided to let him out.

Hahn hurried to the assembly, where he arrived just in time to hear Lieutenant Wild, the first speaker after Ulbricht, whom we already knew from Krasnogorsk, give a wild oration against the so-called folk hero Hahn, who, along with his friends, dared to ridicule the Antifa movement in the camp. Hahn, who combined an extraordinary gift for clever and witty discourse with unbelievable vitality, promptly answered and so derided Ulbricht, Wild and the Antifa that the majority of the inmates gave him an uproarious ovation. Subsequently, a few others of our circle jumped in and refuted many of Ulbricht's statements, until he suddenly grabbed his briefcase and dashed out to the scornful laughter of the POWs.

Does Walter Ulbricht, at this writing, the most powerful of Moscow's puppets in Germany's East Zone, still remember this assembly, and what he said at that time? In any event, he did at that time come out with something that was surely his own opinion, as we now know: "Woe to you"—and by "you" he meant the entire German middle class—"Woe to you, when we come to power, for we will annihilate you because you have looked down on us with contempt long enough; and then we will really live!"

We did not at that time imagine that this criminal with no conscience would someday be given the power to decide, almost arbitrarily, the fate of 17 million Germans in the so-called DDR. And the free West courts him and his criminal cronies who hold

39 A military decoration, similar to the Purple Heart

power in the rest of the East Bloc, just as it courted Hitler before the war⁴⁰.

However, after the founding in Moscow of the National Committee for a Free Germany, Ulbricht no longer expressed his true opinions so frequently. From then until war's end, Ulbricht advocated the cooperative efforts of all elements of the German people. And only when, through the SED,⁴¹ he held the reins of the East Zone tightly enough in his hands did the old cloven hoof⁴² reappear, and Ulbricht started to convert his true beliefs into reality.

Despite all our warnings against a pact with the devil, the number of members of the BDO increased steadily, even though the majority consisted of fellow travelers who did not want to come into conflict with the Soviets and the Antifa. Nevertheless, development of the Antifa in Camp Oranki was entirely different than in other camps. The Russians and their German helpers made few efforts to win over the POWs in the enlisted men's camps. After all, with respect to the non-commissioned officers and the enlisted men, the primary objective was simply to flog out as much work as possible. Because the enlisted men had to work right from the start of their imprisonment—and work hard, much too hard—living conditions in these work camps were considerably worse than in the officers' camps, in which the question of work was not yet of primary concern. That came later.

The enlisted men were, however, coerced to sign up for the National Committee through open terror, unveiled in much propaganda: not signing up was equivalent to death in that it resulted in one being required to do heavier work without commensurate work rations.

40 A reference to events before the war when diplomats from all over the world visited Hitler, sought ties with his government, and even blocked the acceptance of Jewish refugees in many countries

41 *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* [Socialist Unity Party of Germany] was the successor to the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) [Communist Party of Germany] in East Germany.

42 That is, the devil's cloven hoof

The contrary was true in the officers' camps. Today, when a former officer claims that he was compelled, while in Soviet imprisonment, to sign up in order to save his life, in 99% of all cases that is simply not true; rather, it is intended to cover up his own (by the way, thoroughly understandable and forgivable) weakness or fear. In actuality, it was an admittedly surprising fact that while the Soviets exercised unparalleled psychological pressure through their political instructors and German lackeys, it only went up to a particular point. Signing up, or not signing up, was never a life-or-death question, and seldom a political question, but almost always exclusively a personal problem of the psychic and moral powers of resistance of each individual. Countless examples can support the accuracy of this statement.

In May and June 1943 living conditions in Camp Oranki were better than ever before or after. The rations were sufficient not only for a continued vegetative existence, but made it possible to regain some strength. If a large percentage of the POWs were nevertheless not able, in these eight weeks, to attain a normal physical condition, that demonstrated with shocking clarity how terribly we had deteriorated in the previous famine.

An Unfathomable Treasure



Huddled under a coat, a fellow prisoner seeks respite from the cold

One day the Russian camp commandant ordered that a portion of the clothes taken off the POWs who had died be taken to an open space so that the filthy rags in which we were dressed might be replaced. In this way, I, too, received a new uniform jacket and pants. In the afternoon, when the official distribution was complete, whatever was left over was made available and everyone threw themselves onto the pile of worn-out gear in the hopes of getting their hands on something useful. Because I felt too weak, I had not dared to participate. Only in the evening, when nobody else was occupied with the leavings, did I go over and poke around in the pile. Suddenly, I saw a bit of black lamb's wool, pulled on it and eventually held in my hands an enormous, almost new and undamaged German army driver's coat, with leather trim and fur lining.

Words failed me completely. How is something like this possible? Hundreds before me had rutted through these things

and nobody found this coat? Extraordinary! Anyhow, I immediately hastened to my bunk in order to properly inspect the unexpected acquisition, which represented—in the context of Soviet imprisonment—an unheard of treasure. This coat accompanied me through a subsequent six years of imprisonment, and all the way home; several times it kept me from freezing to death and served as my mattress and blanket. Luck, coincidence or fate? I do not know. At any rate I still feel an astonished thankfulness for it.

More Divisions Within

At that time the Soviets introduced voluntary labor to maintain physical strength and improve living conditions. Many participated gladly since it was a welcome opportunity occasionally to be able to forget the barbed wire and to get additional rations.

When, after some time, work began to be valued as a pro-Antifa political posture, thus revealing the true purpose behind the labor initiative, many withdrew hastily from the work program. Others, by contrast, found it too difficult to renounce the additional rations. Thus they landed by coercion on the side of the Antifa. Again, the Soviets achieved major penetration.

Many who were in the process of changing over to the side of the Antifa were ashamed to admit it, and denied it until their membership was officially made known and they were given a lucrative assignment. Captain Markgraf was a typical example. He had proved himself splendidly at the front, and had genuinely earned the *Ritterkreuz*.⁴³ But in the camp he was unequal to the burden of long-term hunger, although this did not prevent him at first from taking a most extreme position against the Antifa and condemning its members as traitors. But in September 1943, when a number of Antifa people were brought to Moscow for the founding of the National Committee for a Free Germany, to our greatest surprise Markgraf was among them. He assured us that he had nothing to do with the Antifa, and couldn't prevent it if the Russians chose to bring him to Moscow.

When he came back he explained that, though he had been present at the founding of the committee, something like that was out of the question for him. In the following days he made great efforts to find out from us what we thought and what we intended to do against the National Committee. Then the POW newspaper came from Moscow, now bordered in black-white-red and renamed "Free Germany," with accounts and pictures of the founding of the National Committee. Markgraf had participated

43 Knight's Cross; a military decoration

actively. Everywhere. He finally admitted it in camp and received his assignment—first in the bakery and later in the mess hall. Soon we realized that during the past few months he had been working as an informer for the Soviets, since all of our conversations were known word-for-word by the Russians. Thereafter, Markgraf developed into the worst commissar-type in the Bolshevik mold. With unscrupulous lack of compunction he betrayed everyone and everything for his own advancement. With absolute single-mindedness he started to climb the dangerous and uncertain ladder of Soviet leadership, one rung after another, until after the war he had attained the position of chief of police in East Berlin. After it was already said that he would be promoted to the command of the entire police force in the East Zone, he suddenly disappeared. I am unaware of why.

However, if he is still alive he is now probably much worse off than we ever were as POWs and, moreover, he would now be without the least bit of hope, which we as POWs still had.

After July 1943 rations in Oranki slowly but surely became meager again. Incidentally, whatever we got came from America. Not only flour, dried fruits, meat, butter, bacon and sugar came from the USA, but even the millet and salt that constituted our main nourishment. The civilian population and the Red Army, too, lived off the American shipments, without which the Soviet Union would without doubt have collapsed under the blows of the German armed forces. Since almost all food that we received or saw came from the Oscar Mayer company in Chicago, we liked to say that Oscar Mayer won the war.

But after the war, those in power in the Soviet Union wanted to forget entirely that they have exclusively the Americans to thank if today they are still able to maintain their reign of terror in Russia and the East Bloc. Unfortunately, communist gratitude for American help is displayed in inverse relationship.

Another type in the Antifa was Lieutenant Wild, already disagreeably known to us from Krasnogorsk. In Oranki, too, he understood how to maneuver himself into good assignments. Thus after the arrival of the Stalingraders, he worked as chief medic in the hospital; however, this did not involve caring for the

sick, but rather enriching himself (which was also the motivation for several others to volunteer to work as medics).

However, in defense of the honor of the German medics in Russian imprisonment I wish to explicitly emphasize at this point that among those who volunteered to serve as medics there were a large number of people who were conscious of their responsibilities, and who worked in selfless and self-sacrificing ways for the welfare of their patients.

In contrast: Wild and company. And so we were not altogether surprised when one day it came out that Wild had occupied himself in the most heinous fashion as a corpse robber, for in his luggage he had stowed away an impressive quantity of rings, watches and other valuables. When this became known, Wild nicked himself a little on the wrist in order to fake a suicide attempt. So he entered the clinic as a patient, and disappeared from the limelight. Later, this affair did not create for Wild even the slightest hindrance to his attaining, once again, positions in which he could continue to enrich himself at the expense of common POWs.

It is entirely understandable that many people lost their nerve under the more-than-depressing living conditions of this imprisonment. It was, therefore, all the more important that there were always a few men whose optimism and inner joyfulness seemed indestructible. Understanding, wisely, that a good attitude makes it easier to tolerate every misery, they suggested that everyone should tell a story; however, the story could not be based on the truth, but had to be concocted. The one who could tell the best stories would then be given the title "Lord of the Liars."⁴⁴

Among others, Flight Captain Gunter von Wenczowski in particular brought us hours of laughter with his fantastic "pilot slang" and thereby helped give many back the courage to live. Although von Wenczowski—undisputed Lord of the Liars—had already been shot down and imprisoned in 1941 during the first days of the Russian war, and only returned home in October 1953 after more than 12 years, he never lost his sense of humor

44 In German, "*Der UJgen/ord*"

and his irreproachable attitude that helped him and many others get through difficult times in prison.

Similarly, the magnificent First Lieutenant Gerhard Fromlowitz, whom we prized so greatly, always knew how to find the right word at the right time—to our joy and to the irritation of the Antifa.

After formation of the National Committee, innumerable officers who, on account of their unclouded stance, were too troublesome for the Antifa and the Soviets, were assembled into a transport and sent marching eastward. Supposedly, they were heading for Siberia, but to our joy and relief we met them all again a few months later in Camp Jelabuga.

As always, when many people live together, all sorts of talents are present. And so there were some who lived for music. Before long a large orchestra was established, with instruments that were, for the most part, self-built in the prison camp. We also had a large, superb chorus, and a quartet of pop singers with guitar accompaniment, the "Oranki Boys,"⁴⁵ who were excellent and afforded us some cheerful hours. Thus the news that all Germans would be transported away from the camp, and in the middle of winter no less, had a rather depressing effect.

⁴⁵ Not a translation—the English word "Boys" was used.

Trail of Misery

But we told ourselves: we survived here, we'll survive elsewhere too; and we calmly let things come at us. By contrast, among camp bigwigs—many called themselves "experts"—there prevailed considerable excitement and confusion, inasmuch as they all possessed rather extensive baggage that now posed problems for them.

Around the start of December 1943 the transport set off. Again, upon leaving the camp, we were frisked in the now familiar way, and then marched off to the railway station along the road that had been built by the prisoners themselves. When the camp finally disappeared behind a hill I almost felt regret and sadness because, as bitter as imprisonment is, in the last months in Oranki we had at least known where we were. At the camp the Russian doctor had brought me back from the dead and had since then tried, with friendliness and understanding, to make my life a little easier. But now, once again, we were marching into the unknown. What would conditions be in the next camp? Maybe even better? It seemed unlikely. Well, we'll survive, we thought. And it is a blessing of heaven that we cannot see into the future: had we known at that time all that lay before us, and that most of us still had six to eight (and for some, many more) years of imprisonment ahead of us, I believe many would have lost their will and given up the fight.

Those who lost the will to live collapsed. It was amazing to see how, on the one hand, some men with well-trained, powerful bodies were incapable of withstanding anything and died, while on the other hand there were thin, emaciated and frail figures, whom one would give at most a few more weeks to live, who nevertheless withstood and survived every exertion and affliction because they were supported by a powerful will to live, faith, and self-discipline.

Finally, we reached the railway station and were loaded into the waiting cattle cars. It was freezing. In the middle of each car stood a tiny stove, made from an old fuel drum. In front of it lay

two pieces of a tree trunk. There was a stove and wood, but we could not make heat because we had no way to cut the wood. During frisking at the camp even the last rusty nail had been taken from us. The Russian guards had an axe and a saw, which was supposed to be transferred from car to car under close supervision in order to cut the wood. But we soon saw that it would take many long, cold hours before they got to us.

It would have been enough to make you despair—or, more accurately, freeze—if there had not been among us one of the most practical people I have ever known, and who knew how to handle this situation. Walter Pausch, a lieutenant in the First Cavalry Division, came from the Rhineland, where his family owned a vineyard. He was not only a first-rate vintner, but also an extraordinary equestrian. In the summer of 1941 a shot in the head threw him off his horse; left for dead, he landed in prison where his wounds were so severe that he was left to die. But a miracle happened, and he survived. Unafraid, tough, practical and honorable, he had nothing to do with the Antifa and was always ready to help us. During his imprisonment, Walter Pausch always owned tools—sometimes more, sometimes fewer. If everything was taken from him during a frisking, it often took only a day before he once again had gathered the most necessary items. How he managed that remains a mystery to me. So, too, he had managed this time to smuggle through a small saw blade. Though it was not much larger than a table knife, it was sufficient. So we started eagerly to cut the tree trunks into pieces, and soon our oven was glowing; and though it was much too small to warm the entire car, it provided an opportunity to thaw out a little in the immediate vicinity of the stove.

At some point the train finally started moving. The wildest rumors were circulating—which we called "*parolen*"⁴⁶—about the destination of the transport; in prison camps, generally, rumors play a large role. Rumors arise, nobody knows exactly from where, revise themselves as needed, and disappear again to make room for new rumors. They move with the speed of the wind among friends and enemies, not only in the camp, but often in

46 Passwords, or watchwords

whole camp groups, even if these are separated by thousands of kilometers.

During this transport, rumors swung between going home and going to a convict camp in Siberia. However, the "going home" rumors soon subsided as we rolled ever eastward, and finally crossed the Volga near Kasan.

One night the rolling wheels stopped. We were on a siding in the little station of Kisnia, about halfway between the Volga and the Ural Mountains. Some among us were familiar with this station and knew that the city of Jelabuga lay about 80-85 kilometers distant on the Kama River. They had already been here as prisoners in 1941. This news did not have a particularly uplifting effect, for the prospect of marching 85 kilometers through deep snow, with no road, without suitable clothing and still in a partially undernourished condition, was anything but heartening. It was December 6th; I remember the date because it was the birthday of Lieutenant Erwin Fleig, who was the first one to take me under his wing at Krasnogorsk.

After unloading we had to arrange ourselves in marching order. An unbelievably fat Soviet major, in magnificent winter equipment, explained to us through his interpreter that we were now in the geographic area under his control. He was guards major and commandant of the two large POW camps in Jelabuga. He was our fatherly friend and was inconsolable that it was currently winter and the Kama was frozen. We would, therefore, have to go the short distance to Jelabuga on foot. At any rate, it would be good exercise for us. Moreover, we had only ourselves to blame, for if we had not attacked the peace-loving Soviet Union then we would not now have to march through the snow and ice. In addition, he commanded us to maintain strict discipline since the guards had been directed to use any and all means to ensure that order was maintained. Should anyone dare to step out of the line of march, this would be considered an escape attempt and would draw results accordingly.

After this speech he sat down, together with his translator, in his large and beautiful sleigh, covered himself with thick furs, cracked his long whip and drove off, while our column slowly got moving under the "*dawai*" cries of the guards.

We had only received a small portion of the usual rations, which furthermore had to last three days. Cigarettes or tobacco had not been distributed. Our equipment, particularly our footgear, was anything but sufficient. And the snow was knee deep.

Arduously, we moved forwards. After the first three kilometers the column started to fall apart. The two pace-setting guards at the point maintained a steady tempo. Though at first we had been marching "*par shetiri*," or four abreast, it soon became a single file column, which snaked its way like a kilometer-long worm on the wind-swept steppe. Since the guards at the end of the column pressed us with dogs, everyone tried with all his strength to stay as far forward as possible.

Now nothing more was heard from the Antifa bigwigs, who had always talked grandly in Camp Oranki and acted like they were in charge. Despite their better equipment and well-fed bodies, they did worse on this march than most of the others. The only explanation for this was that these people had no willpower to hold themselves together, and had no self-discipline. Then when a biting snowstorm started, and the first ones were already starting to break down from exhaustion, even though we had not yet managed a third of the distance, it was clear to everyone that we were headed for a catastrophe if something decisive were not done.

But neither the Antifa camp doctors nor the camp bigwigs felt it their place to undertake anything, since that would have been tantamount to opposing the Soviets. So, once again, they gave convincing proof that their crossing over to the Soviet side, and their entire Antifa movement with the National Committee for a Free Germany, was not the result of any sense of responsibility for the fate of Germany—i.e., a political point of view—but rather was the result of a personal, human failing, namely fear, which, though entirely understandable, should never have been allowed to lead to such weighty consequences.

So we dragged ourselves laboriously forwards, again and again resisting with every bit of willpower the temptation to simply fall down and go to sleep, never to awake again; in any case, the guards at the end of the column, who struck mercilessly with their

gunstocks and dogs, would never allow it. Discarded equipment, such as knapsacks, mess kits, chess sets, blankets and much more, seeded this trail of misery across the endless Russian steppe, over which the snowstorm blew without compassion. This is exactly how the retreat of Napoleon's defeated armies must have looked as they moved—disorganized, starving and freezing, hounded by the enemy—across the Beresina, behind them horror and before them hopelessness.

When it became apparent that none of the barracks leaders appointed by the Soviets was prepared to take any kind of initiative, there was one man whose human and professional sense of responsibility forced him to take on additional burdens in order to help others. This was Dr. Spiegelberg, our medical colonel, who was much respected by all of us, and who made the needs of the entire transport his own concern, despite the fact that typhoid fever and malnourishment had left him virtually a skeleton. With unbelievable energy he showed up wherever someone was about to collapse, gave encouragement and saw to it that stronger men helped out. When one of the guards tried to chase him back into the column and had already raised his rifle butt, there arose such threatening yelling from all of us that the guard backed down and let the doctor do his work, which was, after all, in their interest as well.

Towards evening—it was already dark—the lights of a small village finally appeared in the distance, the goal of our first day's march. With the lights before our eyes holding the promise of warmth and sanctuary, we dragged ourselves on, heartened by the desire to hold out until we reached the salvation of the village. But as with many others, I could not quite make it. About two kilometers before the village I collapsed. The most amazing thing was that I didn't even notice it; I believed, rather, that I was still marching regularly. Two friends from my war college days, first lieutenants E. Klatt and K. Lehrnerr, picked me up, supported me under the shoulders and dragged me on. And my legs moved, although I was no longer conscious. I only came to again when my helpful friends laid me down on the floor of a large room.

We found ourselves in the school building of the village whose lights we had seen for so long. Although the school was unheated,

at least we had a roof over our heads and were sheltered from the fierce snow storm. Everyone simply dropped down where there was still a little free space and remained lying. Only our medical colonel, Dr. Spiegelberg, more than 60 years old, allowed himself no rest. With the holy fixation of his self-assumed responsibility as the most senior German officer, and with uncompromising determination to prevent every death, he confronted the Russians, swore at them, threatened, begged, cursed and tried to make clear to them their responsibility for 700 human lives. He dragged the Russians into the school and showed them some of those who had collapsed, including me, and showed that my pulse could no longer be detected.

He demanded hot tea, bread and sugar to fortify us, and for the next day, horses and sleighs with straw in sufficient number to transport those who could not march, as well as the luggage of the others.

And the miracle happened! The colonel doctor was able to persuade the Russians, and accomplished everything. Apparently, the Russians were so impressed by the brilliance of his personality and by his fearless steadfastness that they respected him and gave in. He organized the distribution of food, examined the sick, gave out cardiac stimulants provided by the Russians, and spread his courage and confidence.

Early the next morning, with much "*dawai*, the Russians gave the order to move out. But Dr. Spiegelberg allowed only those capable of marching to leave. For the others he simply gave the contrary order to remain where they were. The Russians threatened that they would shoot him for mutiny if he did not relent. Dr. Spiegelberg, however, remained calm. And, as always, staunch and absolute steadfastness did not fail to have the corresponding effect on the Russians. Not only was no hair of this extraordinary colonel doctor harmed, but he also obtained the necessary horses and sleighs that the Russians summarily requisitioned in the village.

Finally, the column of sleighs carrying those unable to march and all the baggage began to move. As on the previous day, the number of those who could not make it any further continued to

mount. But Dr. Spiegelberg tirelessly saw to it that nobody was left lying, and was always to be found where he was most needed.

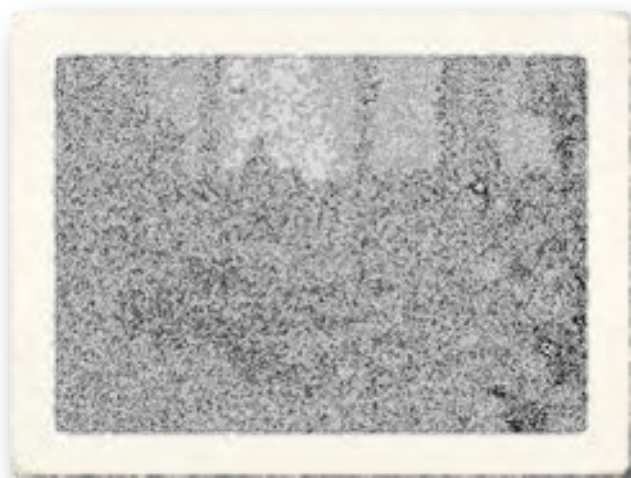
The third and last day of the march was the worst. The temperature sank to below -30°C .⁴⁷ A sharp east wind swept over the wide, empty plains, drove the snow before it, sharply stung one's face, penetrated everything and left us helpless against these forces of nature. Supposedly, Jelabuga lay somewhere up ahead, the cathedral city on the Kama, with the two large camps for German officer POWs. Only there would we find shelter from the merciless winter. Only one thing remained: forwards, onwards, survive, forwards!

In my imagination there surfaced pictures of sun, peace, summer, white towns on blue seas, laughing women in gauzy summer clothes, inviting cafes on open streets, music, life. Do such things really exist in this world? No, impossible. Away with these deceptions, which can only be hallucinations. Snow, ice, hunger, freezing, exhaustion, cursing guards with dogs—that is reality, and the only hope that beckons is the next POW camp with wooden bunks onto which one can let oneself collapse.

Late in the evening lights finally appeared in front of us and eventually a large wooden gate studded with barbed wire, guards, shouting, a path framed by snowdrifts, a large building, a large room, a bucket with hot tea and then the wooden bunks. Just drop down and rest! We were there and alive. Thank god! Colonel Doctor Spiegelberg had succeeded in getting everyone to Jelabuga alive. His prayers had been heard!

47 -22°F

Arrival at Jelabuga



Camp meeting about work

In the course of the next few days the general confusion began to clear up somewhat, and we started to look around the camp to get "the lay of the land." The camp was quite large. Just as in Oranki, here in Jelabuga the stone buildings dated to a time when the church was respected and powerful. Jelabuga lies on the Kama River, which flows into the Volga at Kasan. A broad valley spreads out on both sides of this enormous river, which every spring is completely flooded by snow melt from the Urals and, when the floodwaters recede, is transformed into fruitful farmland.

On the steep slopes of the valley on the right bank rise a number of splendid, large churches, whose gilded domes and crosses shine far into the distance, symbols of the once wealthy cathedral city.

Between the two largest churches, which lie about 600 meters apart, there were a number of stone buildings, earlier the seat of a cloister school and houses of rich families, for which the location of Jelabuga as the start- or end-point of a caravan road to India and China had brought riches and prosperity. Now these

dilapidated houses became our quarters. The majority of all the German officers who were POWs in the Soviet Union had been gathered together here. We also found here the group that, several months earlier, had supposedly been transported from Oranki to Siberia.

As in Oranki, here, too, all the key positions and jobs were in the hands of the Antifa, who unscrupulously augmented their rations at the expense of the regular POWs. Altogether, the rations here were much worse and more meager than in Oranki. Starvation recommenced. And now the "work problem" started to become acute. While in Oranki working outside the camp had been a matter of free choice, here the voluntariness of such work existed only on the banners of the red propaganda.

Since working outside the camp offered extra rations, in the form of 200 grams of bread and a half liter of soup, many pressed for such work in the absurd belief that these few extra rations would fill them up. They would rather march 35 kilometers during the day, hauling sleds or wagons, than watch in the evening as others got more to eat. In this way countless prisoners died, or ruined their health for the rest of their lives.

Those who resisted working for the Soviets during the war and thereby stabbing their country in the back felt the entire wrath of the Soviets and their German servants since they were afraid that our resistance to work might be instructive to others.

So the Russians decided to organize an isolation block, in which, over time, they locked up many of the men from whose views they perceived a danger to their propaganda efforts. After only a few days I also landed in Block 2, the isolation block, where I met again most of my friends from Oranki.

After our arrival at Jelabuga I had met an acquaintance from earlier, Udo Giuliani, the son of an industrialist from Heidelberg. To my great amazement he had already become a member of the BDO and was working as an adjutant for Dr. Janeba, an Antifa member and the senior block officer of Block 4, which housed the staff officers. During hours of conversations I tried to persuade him that his inner independence and purity could not survive if he were a member of the BDO; rather, he would be compelled to go entirely over to the side of Bolshevism and corruption.

Eventually, he got so far as to promise me that he would resign from the BDO. But I had not counted on Dr. Janeba, who had seen this coming and promptly arranged for me to be sent to the isolation block. So I had no more influence on Giulini, who, under the influence of Janeba, regrettably could no longer find the strength to restore his inner independence. Does Mr. Giulini, who later became a member of the Bundestag⁴⁸ in Bonn, still get reminded occasionally by the Soviets that at that time he signed a lifelong obligation of obedience?

In the isolation block I felt much better than in the regular camp, for here I was in the best of company and among friends. Lying in the middle of the camp facing the Kama, they had simply surrounded Block 2 at a certain distance with barbed wire. It could not be said that this "isolation" was particularly effective. Those in the regular camp who shared our views maintained fully their connections with us.

In Jelabuga we met the other large group of surviving German officers from Stalingrad. Among them the same rift had opened, though not yet as radically sharp as in Oranki, where a ruthless, communist camp group that had burned behind them the bridges of understanding and considered themselves more or less Soviets, had already arisen.

By contrast, here in Jelabuga the entire process was played out, from the first, free and open ideological discussions up through the absolute Bolshevik dictatorship; and, I might add, with the classic tactics that Lenin had recommended in his books and which have continued to serve so well Stalin and his successors. At first it is: "We respect your opinions and your worldview, and since we ourselves are still seeking clarification, we suggest a little discussion." Through this discussion one notes those on the other side who have strongly-held opinions. These are then so occupied or isolated that they can no longer take part in larger discussions.

So long as the communist side is not yet entirely sure of its superiority and might, it tries to persuade its opponents of the harmlessness and toleration of communism so as to be able to continue to work undisturbed until it is strong enough to strike

48 The German Parliament

the next blow. Here, too, belongs the now famous but not understood concept of "coexistence," which is impossible. And so finally the objective is achieved—absolute Bolshevik dictatorship. In the German POW camps of the Soviet Union, these tactics led to the founding of the National Committee for a Free Germany and the BDO.

At that time in Jelabuga a portion of the BDO members still believed in the goals proclaimed by Moscow. Among these, for example, were assertions that after defeating Hitler, the Soviet Union would respect Germany's borders; that the BDO could then take over the leadership of the German armed forces; and that the German people, through free elections, would themselves determine what form of government they wished to have, which would be recognized by the Soviet Union.

Our warnings that these purported goals were only means to the end of achieving an absolute dictatorship were disbelieved by many, since the BDO adherents were naturally searching for a moral justification for having gone over to the other side—which was, of course, not only treason, but clearly high treason, so long as our comrades at the front were fighting and bleeding. History has, after all, shown the value of such promises by the communists.

Particularly for us younger officers, it was a great disappointment when the first five German generals switched to the Soviet side. These were Generals von Seydlitz, Lattmann, Slömer, Daniels and Korfes. Others soon followed. We, therefore, admired all the more those staff officers whose moral strength and character were and remained a shining example. Among others, Colonel I.G. Crome was a particular thorn in the side of the Soviets and the Antifa. Colonel Crome had been chief of staff of the corps commanded by General von Seydlitz. Before he took over this position, he had been for some time with the German General Command/West in Paris, where he was already on the side of that circle whose anti-Hitler views later led to the controversial action of July 20, 1944.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Crome judged harshly the decision of his former commander. Naturally,

49 I.E., the attempt to assassinate Hitler

he, too, found himself in the isolation block where, as senior officer, he soon assumed leadership of the block.

He knew perfectly how to express, in clear sentences, what we all thought and felt: We are German officers, and remain so even in captivity. We have no right to become politically active during our imprisonment, so we will remain apolitical. The opposition's argument—that we must express ourselves politically since it is certain that the war is lost—does not hold water because the position of an honorable soldier is not dependent upon external circumstances, but on moral and ethical principles that have general validity, regardless of whether we will now win or lose the war. The oath of allegiance is binding. As a result of our imprisonment, all possibility of playing an active role in world events has been taken from us; we must, therefore, persist in that status that was binding upon us on the day of our capture. From the perspective of the prisoner of war, who is dependent entirely upon information selected by the enemy, it is thus impossible to formulate a clear and objective judgment about the current situation and further developments. Similarly, no change of opinion, nor any behavior based thereon, can ever have a foundation sufficient to appear justified, and is—at least outwardly—out of the question.

Moreover, as long as a state of war exists between Germany and the Soviet Union, any action and behavior that is of use to Russia is, therefore, harmful to Germany, and is plainly treason. Consequently, our attitude regarding the question of work is also entirely clear.

The Soviet camp administration demanded various work activities outside the camp, such as cutting and hauling wood, chopping peat and farm work. However, these activities benefited the camp itself to only a vanishingly small degree. We asserted the internationally recognized right, pursuant to which officers who are prisoners of war are not obliged to perform any kind of work. The Soviets argued in response that the Soviet Union had never signed any such treaty. We answered with strict resistance to performing work, which we indeed maintained until the war's end.

In February 1944 there appeared in the camp, accompanied by many Russian political officers, some of the leading people of the BDO and the National Committee from Moscow. Their assignment was to make propaganda for the BDO in the camp. Among them were Generals Lattmann and Simer and Count Einsiedel, who was already known to us. From our contacts we learned that in the camp they were holding one meeting after another in which they were trying—not the least by threats—to motivate as many officers as possible to join this filthy movement. And then one day a special meeting was scheduled just for the isolation block. Since some of our staff officers, such as Colonels Crome and von Hanstein, were personally well acquainted with both generals from earlier times, we were on tenterhooks about this encounter. After we had all taken our places in the mess hall, the colonels up front, Senior Camp Officer Mangold appeared, followed by the generals, Einsiedel and a lot of other well-fed people. In splendid, clean uniforms (albeit without any rank insignia or decorations) and with white fur coats and fur hats, the enormous difference from us was already outwardly visible, as we sat there literally clothed in rags, unshaven, hungry and freezing, starved into skeletal caricatures of ourselves.

Accompanied by scornful laughter and biting remarks from our side, Lattman began to talk. Known formerly for his fluent and polished speaking, he had difficulty bringing forth a few coherent sentences. In his agitation he suffered the misfortune of inadvertently stating the actual reasons for his change of position: He said he was obliged to revise his views because, with the defeat at Stalingrad, Germany had lost the war. In other words, conscious treason. The counter-calls from our side, which were directly on target, caused the Russians quickly to adjourn the meeting (which was, in any case, useless for his purposes).

Also in our block was the well-known Air Major Ewald, who had been Count Einsiedel's group commander. In the evening of this day, Senior Camp Officer Mangold appeared in our block and requested of Major Ewald that he come outside because Count Einsiedel wished to speak with him. Ewald, however, explained that he had forgotten that a Lieutenant Count

Einsiedel had ever existed and had nothing to say to him. Indeed, what could one have to say to such people?

That our so-called isolation block was, in reality, not at all isolated, could, of course, not remain a secret from the Russians, notwithstanding that we took pains to make every line of communication as unnoticeable as possible. The various informers that the Russians had throughout the camp, and of which there were even a few sitting in our block, saw to it that the Antifa and the Russians were fully informed. So it did not take long before the Russians decided somehow to sequester us effectively from the outside world.

Block VI



Political "re-education" play

Towards the west the camp was bounded by a high wall, behind which stood an empty, massive stone building that had probably belonged to a wealthy merchant family before the revolution. Built as a rectangle, it enclosed a courtyard, both entries to which were locked off by massive wooden gates. This house, uninhabited for 20 years, was now selected as our new quarters and was designated Block VI. The problem of security was easily solved since one guard sufficed to observe the narrow passageway from the camp. In the first half of February we were told one bitingly cold morning to move immediately into Block VI.

After the senior block officer, Colonel Crome, had explained the distribution of rooms, we started moving, only to discover rooms in the new Block VI that were just as cold as the outside air. There were, however, double-decker bunks. Together with most of my friends I had been assigned to Room 1. The room, perhaps 4 x 6 meters, was reduced in area by a brick stove right next to the door, in which our reliable handyman Pausch promptly started on getting a fire going. Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Sochatzy, known as "the Duke" and highly valued by

all, was unanimously elected senior room officer. From then until the dissolution of Block VI, he carried out this truly difficult job with unbreakable calm and steadfastness, with patience, skill and kindness. Among his friends, his nickname—"the Duke"—which he had already long held in the air force on account of his nobility of character, has stuck to this day.

As this first day in Block VI drew to a close, 18 men sat in Room 1 on our bunks, still freezing but watching with comforting expectation as the fire, carefully tended by Pausch, slowly drove the cold of decades from out of the walls. After the fire had burned down the stove was dampered so that the heat of the glowing coals would not escape up the chimney. Then we went to sleep.

In the middle of the night I heard a dull thud and woke up. As I looked around I saw Charlie Ribbentrop, a young fusilier lieutenant, sit up two places away from me, crawl to the foot of the bunk and then fall like a dead man into the corridor, where he remained lying. Meanwhile, others awoke, too. On the bunk opposite me two places were empty. Pausch and former First Lieutenant Lohoff (who had been assigned to us as an informer), lay not on their bunks, but unconscious on the floor. What was going on? I struggled to sit up and check out the situation, which proved to be incomprehensibly difficult. But before I had gotten up, "Papa" Eisenreich, who lay next to me, held me fast and called out loudly: "Everyone remain lying quietly—move as little as possible because the room is poisoned with gas; anyone who gets up runs the risk of immediately falling over unconscious."

As a chemist he was presumably best informed, so we followed his instructions, pursuant to which somebody was finally able to get as far as the door and sound the alarm. Then we were all brought out. When we got into the fresh air we all collapsed and vomited for hours, despite our stomachs.

The effects of this poisoning stayed with us a long time. It seemed very funny to us that the informer, Lohoff, of all people, had saved our lives—even if unknowingly. He was the first one during the night to feel the call of nature, and had woken up to visit the latrine. But after sitting up he fainted and fell from his

upper bunk into the corridor. Pausch, whose place was next to him, heard this and saw Lohoff lying in the corridor and wanted to help. But exactly the same thing happened to him as to Lohoff. When Pausch regained consciousness he was also lying in the corridor. He tried to crawl to the door, dragging the heavy Lohoff behind him, but immediately collapsed again. In the meantime, Charlie Ribbentrop woke up, to whom the same thing happened, until at last Eisenreich recognized the deadly danger. Had not Lohoff needed to go outside so early, none of us 18 men would have awakened again. It was a close call.

First thing next day the stoves were thoroughly inspected, and it turned out that our stove had a supplementary air heating system which, due to deterioration, had a connection to the chimney. After that was repaired the stove heated perfectly when it had something to burn. Regrettably, things were usually pretty meager in that regard.

Our Block VI lay with its front—that is, one of the narrow sides of the rectangle—facing the street, from which it was separated merely by a barbed wire zone some three meters wide. Towards the back—the other narrow side—an outer courtyard was attached to the inner one, similarly surrounded by high walls, inside one of which was the passageway to the remainder of the camp, guarded by a single Russian sentry. In arranging Block VI the Soviets had made a tactical error that they later much regretted.

The purpose, after all, had been to isolate here all those officers who not only rejected the general propaganda tumult of the Soviets and the Antifa, but indeed often took open positions against it. As it turned out, throwing together so many officers (at that time 180 men) with similar views led to a moral strengthening of each individual, and thus gave rise to a steadfast brotherhood that—now well equipped and with excellent leadership—could no longer be shattered, and the cohesiveness of which has been proven by mutual support to the present day.

Communal life with so many people, over a longer period, in rooms too small and with too little to eat, without exercise or meaningful ways to keep occupied, can easily turn into a chaotic

misery in which one bedevils the other. Little by little, naked self-preservation destroys—even in otherwise decent people—the inhibitions without which tolerable, communal life is not possible.

Already in Oranki and Krasnogorsk we had experienced how skillfully the Russian, with his German communist accomplices, understood how to systematically break the POWs' moral resistance by breaking down inhibitions through hunger and extra rations, threats and coddling, abuse and comfort; and how consistently and successfully this work was carried out in Jelabuga as well. Thus the problem of work became ever more contentious and political.

Many in the main camp could no longer resist the hunger, the constant tension of being spied upon, the endless accusations that one was retrograde and an enemy of the people, the irksome lack of space, the idleness, the frictions and enmities and the hopelessness. In the foolish belief that by getting the extra work rations they would feel the hunger a bit less, and that by working they could for at least a while get away from the misery in the camp, they volunteered for work, only to discover soon that they could no longer escape from the vicious circle of hunger, work, insufficient additional rations, more hunger, more work, still insufficient additional rations, and so on. Thus more and more "signed" in order to receive as their reward better jobs, better rations or even good positions of power in the camp. Theft from comrades, informing and betrayal—anything goes once the fundamental inhibitions are broken.

In Block VI we observed this vicious circle with great concern, and resolved not to permit such a development. Consequently, the first order of business was to regulate our communal life through clear and proven military rules. Military discipline and hierarchical authority had to be maintained, although there were no disciplinary means of enforcing this.

Every single person recognized that Block VI could only be strong through self-discipline and voluntary cohesion, and that the block's strength would bring, for each individual, shelter and strength.

Despite many personal frictions and differing temperaments, Block VI remained what it was: a resolute group of people who

countered the collapse of interpersonal relations through maintenance of soldierly self-discipline with good and proven rules of conduct, and who answered with unbowed steadfastness the moral undermining of the Soviet propaganda.

While in the other POW camps almost everyone had switched over to the mutual use of "*Du*"⁵⁰ as a symbol of equality, we remained with "*Sie*," or even, in the case of older and more senior officers, the third person, without thereby damaging our mutual friendship and respect. Only back at home, without the pressures of imprisonment, were many friendships made manifest by the more intimate "*Du*."

Some time after we moved into Block VI the amount of wood we received from the Russians started being significantly reduced. In response to our protests the Russians merely answered that we should organize work commandos for ourselves, march to the forest, cut wood and haul it back to the block. But it was precisely the problem of work on which there was a fundamental disagreement. We refused to work outside the camp because we did not want to betray our comrades fighting at the front. The Russians tried it with pleas, threats and cunning. But we remained firm, so that eventually the Russians had to forgo the effort. This was a great success because the rest of the camp was groaning under the excessively heavy burden of drudge work assigned to it, which was performed without opposition because—supposedly—resistance to work would result in the most severe sanctions. But nothing happened to us. Our rations, as meager as they were, remained the same, and in fact the Russians took great pains to ensure that we daily received our allocation.

Only the distribution of wood remained insufficient. Thus something had to happen, since we did not wish to freeze. So the engineers among us undertook a careful inspection of the roof construction in our building, and concluded that at least a third of the enormous, built-in oak beams could be removed without posing any risk whatsoever to the strength of the roof construction.

50 The German familiar form for "you," as distinguished from "*sie*," the formal term for "you"

The problem of tools was solved initially by the Russians themselves, although without knowing or wishing it. Each time that a little wood was delivered for the block we received for a short time a saw and an axe. And then we worked like the devil. Sentries were posted in order to sound the alarm, lest a Russian should let himself be seen in the outer courtyard entryway. Then a few of the enormous rafter beams were sawed through, then tied off with suspenders, belts and the like, sawed into pieces, chopped up, distributed, and the remainder buried in the clay cellar floor. Heating was done only with the greatest care and only at night. But since the command post of the NKWD was directly across the street, it could not long remain a secret from the Russians that we were burning far more wood than had been delivered, since our rooms were always somewhat warm.

So the Russians began round-the-clock observations. Among the Russian guard officers was one, named Schug, who exceeded anything we had yet encountered in his resourcefulness, finesse and brutal strictness in handling prisoners. Having worked for many years as a prison guard, he knew every trick and subterfuge with which prisoners try to make their miserable existence a little more bearable.

Schug appeared day and night, searched and sniffed, but initially found nothing. But one evening, when he had once again rummaged through Room 1 without finding any wood, and was just about to leave, he accidentally bumped into our table. It stayed standing, however, as if nailed to the floor. Schug stared at the table in surprise and tried to lift it. But it was impossible as the table was too heavy because under its top we had secured the thickest, heaviest oak wood halfway down to the floor. Now, at last, Schug had found some wood. His curses at us sounded almost a little respectful. But where did the wood come from? It was months before the Russians solved that riddle.

Meanwhile, the war of nerves between the Russians and ourselves continued in other ways. A choir was established, under the direction of First Lieutenant Gerhard Fromlowitz, whose many talents and never-flagging humor helped us greatly during our imprisonment. The choir gave us great joy but the Russians and the Antifa much irritation, inasmuch as we sang our beautiful

German songs across the walls and into the remainder of the camp. To this day I cannot hear the "*Wach Auf*"⁵¹ chorus without that Easter Sunday of 1944 appearing before my mind's eye, when our choir, with Maestro Fromlowitz, stood at the point of a corner of Block VI, with the rest of the Block VI-ers on the opposite side, and we sang the "*Wach Auf*" in thanks for having survived a winter, as a prayer for the future, as a greeting to our friends in the rest of the camp, as an exhortation to the disloyal and as a sign of our unbroken stance towards the Soviets.

51 "Wake up"

Hunger Strike



Hauling wood

One day there appeared before the two narrow windows of Room 1—which had long been a thorn in the side of the Soviets because of the view it afforded of the NKWD command post—a work unit of German POWs who installed shutters in front of the windows so that by day as well we were literally in the dark. Our protests were answered by Schug with the explanation that this was required to protect the command post from our prying eyes, had been ordered by higher authority and was well deserved.

We conferred and arrived at the conclusion that enough was enough. Under the miserable conditions in which, as it was, we had to vegetate, now also to be day and night in the dark would destroy us physically and psychologically. We were German officer prisoners of war, not Russian criminals. So we decided to embark resolutely on a hunger strike. Better a horrible end than a horror without end. Only one of us—Captain Van Volxem—would not participate in the hunger strike, in order to watch over

us, to provide us with drinking water and to maintain contact with the rest of the block. Since shutters, albeit smaller than the ones on our windows, had also been installed on the windows of Room 2 next to us, and Rooms 10 and 11 above us, a number of our comrades there also decided to undertake the hunger strike.

When the next distribution of food occurred, the hunger strike began for us 17 men from Room 1 and a further dozen from the other rooms. News of this exploded like a bomb in the rest of the camp and among the Antifa and the Russians. But at first nothing happened. Apparently, the Soviets, who thoroughly feared the hunger strike—the prisoner's only effective weapon—first wanted to see whether we were really in earnest before they took any steps.

So we starved. To our astonishment we discovered that the otherwise troublesome feeling of hunger disappeared, which was presumably because the stomach was after all now receiving nothing further so that no digestive juices were produced, and because, given our serious determination to starve ourselves to death if necessary, our thoughts were diverted away from food and towards other more important thoughts. In fact, the thought that our hunger strike might in a few days deliver us from the misery of this prison existence was somewhat comforting and became, in the condition into which we were slipping, almost a temptation.

On the third day of the hunger strike the Russian camp doctor appeared. When she realized how bad our condition had already become she became visibly frightened. She exhorted us to give up and eat, otherwise we would all die, and that could not happen. The human sympathy and the medical concern that this woman showed us was in stark contrast to the brutality of the NKWD functionaries who arrived the next morning and pulled out one or two men at random from each of the rooms on strike. After quite some time our two comrades were returned with bloody faces, wet and dirty. When wild threats had not gotten them to eat, they had tried force-feeding them, despite their distressed resistance, by pushing a tube down into their stomachs and then pouring in liquid porridge. As soon as the tube was removed, the two vomited onto the Russians' feet everything that had been poured

into them. After a number of unsuccessful attempts the Russians abandoned these actions.

Instead, the infamous camp commandant, Guard Major Kudriaschow, came and cursed and threatened us and ordered us through his translator to immediately end the hunger strike. We did not react, and the guard major had to leave without results. In the meantime, we had grown so weak that we could only lie flat. Talking, and even thinking, became harder and harder. The doctor appeared again. With an almost tender gesture she stroked the hair of our Wastl Dietz and said: "Such a beautiful, young man, and he wants to die already!" "Yes," answered Dietz, "I want to die because this is no life here." The doctor, who had noticed that it already smelled of acetone in our room, a sign of approaching death by starvation, implored the two NKWD functionaries to have the shutters removed, otherwise we would all shortly be dead. But nothing happened.

On the fifth day the guard major returned and repeated his threats, but noticed himself that threats could no longer reach us. The doctor, who had accompanied him, pleaded with him to relent. Undecided, the two left the room, but soon came back. This time the guard major explained through his interpreter that he was our fatherly friend and had decided, in the interest of our health, to have the shutters removed from the windows so that we would eat again. And indeed, he had already ordered the necessary food. At this he made a grand gesture towards the door, in which two Russian girls stood with trays on which bowls of *kascha* could be seen.

But our senior room officer Sochatzy—"the Duke"—who lay up front in the first bunk, said with a quiet but firm voice to the guard major standing beside him: "We cannot yet eat, the shutters are still up." To this the guard major replied: "I have promised you that the shutters will be taken down, so you can go ahead and eat."

Then Sochatzy said, completely unmoved: "*Herr Gardemajor*,⁵² you have made us many promises, but have never kept one. As long as the shutters are up, we will not eat." And to show him that

52 Mr. Guard Major

any further discussion was useless, he turned slowly onto his side, his back to the guard major.

I could barely breathe, since I considered Sochatzy's behavior so provocative that I feared the guard major would not take this insult. But Sochatzy had judged the guard major more accurately than I, because—apparently not insulted—he turned to one of the accompanying guard officers and ordered him immediately to bring a work unit and remove the shutters without delay. The guard officer hurried away. Again Kudriaschow prodded us to eat, but Sochatzy merely said, curtly: "As long as the shutters are up, we will not eat." Kudriaschow, by now pale with anger, stayed until the shutters were finally removed from both windows. Then Sochatzy said: "Now we can eat." And so our hunger strike ended as a complete success.

No sooner had we eaten a little of the *kascha* than we all got sharp stomach pains and vomited everything. Our condition was critical. Therefore, the doctor ordered us to be transported to the camp hospital. Soon a caravan of stretchers, carried by POW officers from the camp who had been forced to work, was moving with us from Block VI through the single entryway and the entire camp to the so-called hospital. The procession resembled a triumphal procession. Despite it being forbidden, many POWs lined our way in order to see who were the hunger strikers that had possessed the courage to stand up to the Russians, and to exchange a few hurried sentences.

In the hospital, in which all the important jobs were held by the Antifa, it was explained to us that we all must first go to the *banja*, where our hair had to be sheared off, because under Russian rules nobody with hair on the head (or anywhere else) was permitted to lie in a hospital room. Outraged, we demanded to be brought back immediately to Block VI, that under no circumstances would we allow our head hair to be cut off. If necessary we would resume our hunger strike, inasmuch as we already were experienced at starving. To the great anger of the Antifa, the Soviets, who knew that we would not relent, decided that we could keep our hair. So, fully jeweled with hair, we lay in the beds while other prisoners who arrived at the same time had their hair ruthlessly shorn off. The effect of our hunger strike, and our

successful resistance against having our hair sheared, was considerable in the camp and showed many that, contrary to the threats and the statements of the Antifa, the Russians had no intention of physically exterminating us, but rather took care that we were treated in accordance with the rules.

After a few days we were ready to return to Block VI, which was also in the interests of the Antifa and the Russians, who wanted to have us back in isolation and out of the way, as well as in our own, because we wanted to be reunited with our like-minded friends as soon as possible. Nevertheless, it took a long time before we had more or less regained our condition before the start of the hunger strike. Some of us even suffered lasting damage.

Many have often asked themselves why the Russians did not simply let us starve to death. The answer is simple: fear of Moscow. Since, under the czar, the communists had become stronger and stronger by means of the hunger strike, they made very sure after the revolution that no counter-revolutionaries could be successful using hunger strikes. Therefore, every hunger strike of more than three or four people had to be reported by the local authorities within a specified time to the Interior Ministry (NKWD), which immediately sent a commission of inquiry. And nothing would be more disagreeable for the local authorities, since the commission could easily discover corruption or noncompliance with the rules, with mostly very unpleasant consequences for senior local officials.

In June 1944 Colonels Crome and von Hanstein and several other officers were suddenly transported away from Block VI. It was said they were being sent to Siberia. Later we learned that they were brought instead to Lubjanka in Moscow, where things were particularly bad for them. Nevertheless, all of them came home alive, albeit after many hard years.

Church March of Jelabuga

As successor to Colonel Crome as senior block officer we immediately elected Colonel Wolff, likewise highly respected by us all, a resolute Westfalian and an imposing figure, solidly steadfast and of absolute integrity. Under his unclouded leadership Block VI became more and more the symbol of resistance against the powers of our captors and the associated National Committee. Time and again Kudriaschow, by now promoted to lieutenant colonel of guards, tried—by threats or deception—to force us to work and gain a decisive victory over us. Each time he was defeated he arrested Colonel Wolff to place pressure on him alone. And each time we responded with the tactic of "organized disorganization". The entire Block fell into hopeless confusion. Nobody turned out for roll call. Food was no longer accepted. When the Russian officer of the day gave someone an order to call everyone to fall in, he naturally did not understand a word of Russian and everyone ran around in wild confusion. In the meantime, we called for Colonel Wolff, without whom nothing could function here anymore, since he had been named by the Russian camp administration to be our senior block officer and we would follow only his orders. So the Russians had no choice but to let Colonel Wolff back into the block, where each time he was greeted with a great "*Halloo.*" Immediately, there was perfect order again. It is almost unbelievable what trouble and torment this magnificent man took upon himself for us because of his sense of responsibility, despite his heart and kidney ailments. I will never forget him.

One day the officer of the day brought into the block an officer, unknown to us, wearing the *Ritterkreuz*. His answers to our questions, as well as his entire demeanor, seemed somehow false. Although we concluded he was a Russian spy, we could not prove it. But when our comrade Wissebach, blinded in the war, heard him speak, he recognized the voice as that of Private First Class Nissen, whom he had once met in another camp. Before the assembled Block VI, Colonel Wolff tore from this scoundrel and spy his assumed shoulderboards and decorations and transferred

him to a small room at the end of the block, where he had to spend his miserable existence. So, once again, an attempt by the Russians to spy on us had been thwarted.

When the temperature started to drop with the onset of winter we resumed our previously described wood acquisition, which worked well thanks to the most precise organization. Though our chimneys smoked only at night, it could nevertheless not remain a secret from the Russians that we were burning more wood than the little bit given us. During a thorough inspection of the block there was found not only a great deal of wood, but also its source. Kudriaschow foamed in anger. Since up to then all of his attacks on us had resulted in failures, and he feared that our successful resistance could be instructive for the remainder of the camp, he decided to start an action which, in his opinion, would surely bring us to our knees.

On the morning of December 9, 1944 there appeared suddenly a large detachment of NKWD guards who, with much "*dawai, dawai,*" chased us, complete with our possessions, out of the Block and into a large, old, empty church at the edge of the camp. It was explained to us that from now on this was to be our quarters because, as a result of our destructive wood gathering, Block VI had become so insecure that nobody could be safe there anymore.

In the church, which was surrounded by a double row of barbed wire, it was nearly the same temperature as outside, about -35°C ⁵³. Any number of the dark windows were broken. Above the altar area, to which a few steps led up, there hung from a wire a single, dim bulb, whose light could barely illuminate the area, and served only to emphasize the darkness in the rest of the church. Although there was a fire in the single stove at the entrance, it could not warm up this large interior. The walls remained covered with frost, as before. Those of us from Room 1 moved into a side aisle and tried, with everything we had, to stay as warm as possible. It was impossible to think of sleep. It was obvious to us that an extended stay in this church under these conditions would mean death. Therefore, we decided during this

53 -31°F

night resolutely to enter again into a hunger strike. Then Maestro Fromlowitz called the choir together to conclude with a few holiday songs this memorable Second Advent. So our wonderful German songs, which sounded marvelous in this large church, rang into the oppressive silence and gave many back some courage and inner peace.

The next morning when the food was brought, the Russians learned that we had started a hunger strike. Only PFC Nissen dived into his food amidst our derisive laughter and stuffed his cheeks. The Russians called for the senior block officer, but Colonel Wolff explained that he had resigned his post and all senior room officers had done the same. Since the officer of the day could persuade us neither to eat nor fall in, he disappeared. A short time later Kudriaschow arrived, the "guard bull" as we called him, accompanied by an entire unit of heavily armed soldiers, the NKWD and political officers, the German Camp Commandant Mangold and other leading Antifa people. With an obscene cannonade of cursing he threatened us, ordered us to eat and said at the end: "And if you all damn well die, I couldn't care less, but you will never return to Block VI."

At this, First Lieutenant Novak, a lawyer from Konigsberg, stepped forward and explained: "Lieutenant colonel, sir, though you have frequently threatened to physically exterminate us, this time it appears you really are serious. I do not wish to die slowly; as a German officer I have the right to end my life in my own way, and that is this hunger strike." He had barely finished when little Captain Holl stepped up and said to Kudriaschow: "I don't want to starve slowly. As an officer I have the right to a speedy, honorable death. I ask to be shot." The Russians were unable to speak. Uncertainly, they first withdrew to confer. After a while guard soldiers came and took Colonel Wolff and some other officers out and brought them to the command post. After hours of threats, cajoling, threats again and then promises, which none of our side accepted, they were all brought back to the church, only to be taken out again shortly thereafter. So it went the whole day and the next night while, full of suspense, we waited and waited and froze and starved. Meanwhile, the Russian work detail, which quickly covered the broken windows in the church

with plywood, brought wood for fuel and even the bedding was improved. To prevent the tension from becoming unbearable, Maestro Fromlowitz called the choir together again, and soon the tones of our most beautiful choruses and Advent songs again filled the large church, and provided much strength and faith.

Towards midnight Colonel Wolff came back once more from negotiations with Kudriaschow, stepped under the single, weak light bulb in the middle of the church and reported: "Gentlemen, I ask that you not break out in shouts of joy nor make any other unwise remarks. Take your things, we are returning to Block VI." A few minutes later, quietly and in orderly fashion, we commenced the return march to Block VI. Of the Russian guard units nothing more was seen. Only Schug and another Russian remained. Arriving in the block we immediately started heating again. All the wood that we had cut was still there, untouched. And as soon as some warmth could be felt in our room, we fell—totally exhausted—into a longed-for sleep. So ended what was soon known throughout all POW camps and entered into POW history as the "Church March of Jelabuga," a complete success for Block VI and proof that a clear, impenetrable and steadfast posture is always preferable to cowardly subjugation.

After the "Church March of Jelabuga" it became clear to the Soviets that in establishing Block VI as an isolation block they had made a major tactical error and the results were the opposite of their intentions. It was also clear that Moscow would not much longer sit by and watch as we dealt one blow after another to the political propaganda of the Antifa and camp administration. Therefore, we were not particularly surprised when, on April 7, 1945, we were suddenly ordered to assemble in the courtyard with all our things. There we were called by name, subjected to the usual frisking, and then distributed in groups of two or three to various lodgings in different camps so that we no longer represented a unified group. That was the end of Block VI, but by no means the end of the effect we had. Wherever we landed as individuals in subsequent years we were identified by the Antifa and camp administration as "evil fascists" with whom nobody should have any relations. Yet despite this, time and again many other POWs paid us respect and often asked our opinions.

Interlude

Thus far is my account as I wrote it in 1954 during a period of rest necessitated by illness.

It had been my intention to describe, similarly, my continued imprisonment, with the events in Viatka Poljana, the years in Selenodolsk with the first transports home, the time in Wolsk and my return home, which arose under such unusual circumstances.

But somehow I never got to it. Maybe knowledge that our time in Block VI, in particular, would be described in greater detail by others more gifted contributed to my negligence. In any event, the years went by, filled and over-filled with work, learning, building and responsibility.

When, after my retirement, I finally found some time again to read through what I had written earlier, and to try to continue writing, I was astonished to discover that I had forgotten experiences, events and names of people and places, and above all, that the capacity to relive through memory could no longer be summoned.

So, other than some minor corrections, I had left it with the little that I had timely been able to commit to paper.

When my son, Jürgen, got the manuscript in 1983, he had several copies made into a little booklet that I gave to some of my friends.

The result was that, urged on from all sides, I had to continue to occupy myself with this subject. In the meantime, many more years have passed. Many of my comrades from the war and my imprisonment are no longer alive. Soon there will be no more living witnesses to this time. I will thus try to bring my unfinished account to a kind of conclusion, for which I will sketch with large strokes the aforementioned stations of my subsequent imprisonment in an effort to enlarge the understanding of our passage through Soviet imprisonment.

War's End: Working My Way Home

After the dissolution of Block VI, I was transferred, along with our battle-blinded comrade, Hans Wissebach, into the so-called Germany Hall, which consisted of a single, enormous room in which over 150 POW officers had to live packed together. The atmosphere in this lodging, as in the rest of the camp, was miserable.

Antifa, or National Committee members, ruled camp life with their pro-Soviet propaganda and diatribes against everything German. It had, of course, long been clear to everyone that the war was lost. Thus the National Committee and the so-called Bund Deutscher Offiziere (BDO) had fulfilled their purpose as war support for the Soviets, and were of any further use to the Russians only to the extent that now they were to generate undisguised communist propaganda and to function as slave-drivers in order to wring from the prisoners as much work as possible.

On May 9, 1945 we were all required to assemble in the camp square. The lieutenant colonel of guards, Kudriaschow, appeared with a large retinue, including the Antifa leaders, and announced in a triumphant voice: "Woyna konsche," the war is over. At that, the Antifa members as well as most of the assembled POWs broke out in frenetic cheering and cried: "Hail to the victorious Red Army and to the glorious Stalin, who has freed Germany from the dictatorship of Hitler!" Only a few still stood, like me, quietly and with a stony countenance, full of shame and despair over the dishonorable, humiliating and repulsive subservience to which I had just been witness. Deeply depressed, cursed and spurned as a wicked fascist by the majority, I returned to the barracks after this tragic performance. Of course, we were also glad that this terrible war was now over. But is that any reason to praise the victor, and particularly the Bolshevist Soviet Union under Stalin, whose reign of terror and atrocities overshadowed anything else that ever existed? Had they all forgotten what the

Wehrmacht⁵⁴ had given in the way of sacrifice and heroism? Had they all forgotten our good comrades who gave their lives in a subjective, good-faith belief that they were serving a just cause? Indeed, this dishonorable attitude had not the slightest to do with "the fight against Hitler" or "concern about Germany"; rather, it was nothing but cowardly submissiveness in the hope perhaps to make one's own lot a bit better at, naturally, the expense of others.

What lies ahead of us? When will our imprisonment end? Or will they never let my friends and me go home? But whatever happens I will withstand, and would rather die than let my soul be sold or destroyed.

With the end of the war the Soviets promptly converted their propaganda. The black-white-red colors of the National Committee disappeared and there was no more talk of cooperation with Germans. Instead, now it was: "Work, work, work for reparations; who doesn't work shall not eat, and will not be sent home." Work brigades were set up, and a trusted Antifa man was assigned as "brigadier," of whom the Soviets could expect that he would ruthlessly drive his brigade to maximum productivity. That hundreds of thousands of POWs died miserably after the war is attributable not least to German henchman of the Soviet terror system—precisely those people who justified their traitorous switch during the war to the side of the enemy as concern about Germany or the fight against Hitler. No wonder that my friends and I have never forgotten this, and to this day react most intensely to every piece of "socialist communistic" propaganda, especially when issued by Germans.

Every month in the camp there were examinations to assign POWs into one of four groups based on their capacity to work. Group 1 was fully capable of working and assigned to the heaviest tasks. Group 2 consisted of "weaker" prisoners and was supposed to be assigned easier tasks. Those unsuited for work were assigned to Group 3, and were only obliged to perform tasks within the camp; and those who were more dead than alive were designated the "Sick Group." Examinations were carried out in

54 The German army

the following manner: POWs, stark naked in long rows, had to pass by Russian female doctors, who would grab one on the buttocks to determine how strong the subcutaneous musculature still was. That was the entire examination. In addition, a commissar or political instructor generally sat by to ensure that as many as possible were designated as "healthy."

Despite my miserable condition I was initially designated for Group 2, members of which were assigned primarily to agricultural work. This presented the opportunity to occasionally filch, unobserved by guards, vegetables like beets or potatoes, which represented a welcome improvement to the rations. Agricultural management in the Soviet Union is, as far as I could observe, incomprehensibly bad. For example, if we had to harvest potatoes we were not given a particular number of potatoes, but a specified number of rows. As a result we picked at most one or two potatoes from each plant, stamped the rest into the ground and went on to the next plant in order to quickly fulfill our quota. Since most farming in the Soviet Union is conducted after the same pattern, it is no wonder that Russia is constantly starving.

As a result of years of continuous malnutrition I had developed a weakening of the veins that had led to severe hemorrhoids, which bled at each bowel movement, weakening me further. At the next examination I thus ended up in Group 3 and now had to work in the camp, which was by no means easier than in the fields, in addition to which I was, in the camp, far more exposed to the chicaneries of the camp leaders.

One day I was picked up with all my things and, for no particular reason, brought to the so-called Criminal Unit.⁵⁵ The large barracks room was divided into halves. On the one side were the thieves, violent criminals, etc.; on the other were the so-called political prisoners, among whom I was quartered. The rations were still sparser than in the rest of the camp, and the work day was 12 hours long. This Criminal Unit was led by Rittmeister⁵⁶ Eichborn, who particularly distinguished himself in

55 *Strafkompanie*; literally, punishment company

56 Cavalry captain

the slave-driving of his comrades. So it was no surprise that within about two weeks I fainted while working and had to be brought to the camp hospital. After a few days I was returned to my former lodging, to which the Sick Group was now assigned. Although it was said that my transfer to the Criminal Unit had been a mistake, nevertheless I was told from various sources that I should not express my opinions so openly and resist signing resolutions. But since I was still of the opinion that during imprisonment the hand is not there to sign anything, rather only to "move the spoon," I never did sign any of these so-called Resolutions, which after all were nothing more than evidence of submission to Soviet might.

My physical condition was such that I feared I would not be alive much longer. It was evident that I had to undertake something in order to obtain additional food. Others with artistic talent carved wooden figures or made useful things out of old cookware, which they then traded for bread. But I am neither artistically nor manually skilled, so this kind of occupation was not possible for me.

Then I met Erich Hoffmann again, with whom I had been together in the same class in war school in Berlin. He hobbled in on two crutches since his legs were both entirely crippled. Hoffmann had been shot down as a bomber pilot. He succeeded in making a smooth belly landing, so that he and his crew came uninjured into imprisonment. During interrogation a commissar kicked him so hard in the back that one vertebra was destroyed and Hoffmann was paralyzed below the waist. Slowly, he learned how to move with crutches. Condemned to incapacitation he had a Rumanian shepherd who was also a prisoner in the camp teach him how to knit, and now he knitted socks, sweaters, etc. Undoubtedly, that helped him survive imprisonment.

When he saw me he was visibly shocked at my condition and asked if I was doing anything to earn myself extra bread. He suggested that I also learn how to knit, that it was worthwhile. So I learned from him how to knit, which undoubtedly helped me survive imprisonment. Although we made knitting needles out of barbed wire, procuring wool was quite difficult. I pulled thin wool threads from the tatters of army sweaters, sometimes only

centimeters long, tied them together and rolled them together into string. Then I twisted together several such rolled strings into a thicker wool thread, which I then knitted into socks or mittens, which were much in demand. For one sock I received a piece of bread. A piece of bread weighing 300 grams was the common currency for every trade in the camp. At first I took quite some time to knit a pair of socks, but with practice I got faster. Sometimes I could knit one sock per day, so I regularly had more bread to eat.

I no longer remember exactly when it was—it must have been in the summer of 1946—but one day a transport was assembled for Viatka Poljana. Maestro Fromlowitz, Charlie Ribbentrop and I were included. The Viatka is a northerly tributary of the Kama, into which it flows not far west of Jelabuga. The little camp into which we were brought was still being built; we were the first prisoners and had first to make the camp inhabitable. The conditions were extraordinarily primitive. But since we were the first prisoners there, and the Russian commandant was concerned with making the camp operational, we succeeded in organizing for ourselves a more or less tolerable camp life, one in which the Antifa people were not the only ones with any say. However, I was no longer able to do any knitting there because I had been once more designated as work-capable. Together with Charlie Ribbentrop I came into a brick factory where we had to split the wood needed for the kilns. The work was very hard and the rations too meager. So we started to gather stinging nettles, out of which we cooked soup at our workplace, a welcome addition to our meager rations.

Near our workplace there was a country road, along which, on foot, traveled many people, who took little notice of the fact that POWs were working nearby. The guards also took care that no contact occurred between us and the residents. Among others, a young woman came by every morning on the road and each time looked over at me with sympathetic eyes. One morning, when for once there was no guard in between, she suddenly ran over to me, handed me something, stroked me briefly on the cheek, and hurried back to the road while being yelled at by a guard who had hurried over. I immediately hid the little package in among the

wood because the guard was already coming towards me; he searched me and wanted to know why this young woman had approached me. Since he found nothing and I knew nothing, he left it at that and disappeared again. Immediately, I brought out the package and unwrapped it. It was a large piece of bread. Even today I think back with great emotion on this gesture of human sympathy. Thereafter, I never again saw this young woman on the road and feared that her sympathy landed her in the clutches of the NKWD.

Once when we had to cut wood in the forest we met a larger number of imprisoned Russian soldiers who, when they saw us, started to curse wildly, denouncing German junkers⁵⁷ and capitalists, and virtually threatening us. But when the guards were out of earshot they explained in broken German that they had been POWs in Germany. They had all worked for farmers in the eastern part of the country, where the conditions were good. After the war Stalin had decreed that no Russian POW from Germany would ever be allowed to return home before he had been "re-educated" by working in a labor camp and had proven that he was once again a true-blue Bolshevik. Therefore, they would continue to curse us whenever guards or overseers were nearby. They proved themselves to be good comrades and showed us many tricks regarding how one could best cheat at quota filling. Few ever saw their families again; most of them died in the Soviet labor camps.

While marching back from work one day someone suddenly started tottering and swaying and finally fell unconscious. When he didn't come to even back in the camp, we had no idea what to do. Two days later he died. The next day the same thing happened to somebody else. The camp administration was clueless. Since the camp had no clinic the man was immediately brought to Selenodolsk, where there was a large POW camp in which there was a so-called *Spezhospital*.⁵⁸ But this man died as well. The next day, when Charlie Ribbentrop started swaying he

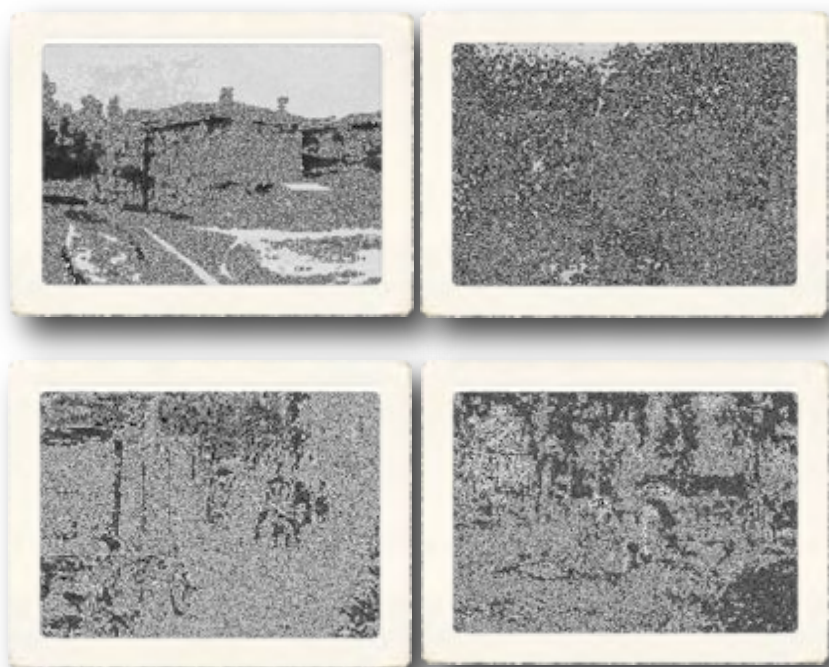
57 Prussian landed gentry

58 A contracted form of "special hospital"

was brought immediately to Selenodolsk, where fortunately he recovered. More and more POWs fell over and died, and nobody knew why. Fear spread among us.

One day it started with me, too. Luckily, I was taken the same day, with others, on a truck to Selenodolsk and admitted to the *Spezhospital*, where I spent many days hovering between life and death. Despite all efforts, the cause of these strange illnesses were never determined. Many theorized that the cause lay with the nettle soup, but there was no proof of this. Shortly, out of Moscow, there appeared in Viatka Poljana a medical commission, which looked around, asked questions and searched for explanations that did not exist. So the camp was ultimately dissolved and the POWs were distributed to other camps.

Shuttled to Selenedolsk



Top left: Special hospital at Selenedolsk; Top right: Dying room, with corpse cart at back; Bottom left: Corpse cart; Bottom right: Digging a grave

The hospital in Camp Selenodolsk consisted of a three-story wooden structure and was, by Russian standards, relatively well equipped. Rations for the POW patients, however, were, if anything, even more limited than in the rest of the camp. The chief doctor was an amazing woman, Dr. Kutschuigana, or something like that. She had worked as a doctor in a Ukrainian hospital when the German advance began. Before she knew it, the city had been captured by our troops. She did the only sensible thing in this situation: she stayed where she was and continued working in the hospital, where she was urgently needed. After about three years her city was seized again, this time by advancing Russian troops. Dr. Kutschuigana was

immediately arrested, convicted of collaboration and spying for Germany, and condemned to forced labor. She was forced to work in exile in the area where our camp was located, and was eventually made camp doctor in Selenodolsk. She came from near the Iranian border and embodied the beauty of the women of that region: black hair, combed straight back and held together in a knot, black eyes in an almond shape, a narrow face, sharply cut but tender, which always seemed serious and distant, a medium-sized, slim figure with a proud bearing; the effect she made in her fur coat in the shabby surroundings of a POW camp was like a rose on a dung heap. All the Russian officers from the camp administration courted and fussed over her, but she yielded to none and remained uniformly reserved. She worked unshakably for the patients and did all she could to prevent the usual corruption in the hospital. Without conceding any of her authority she listened to the suggestions of those German doctors whose professional qualifications she trusted.

Although I was soon out of acute danger, I nevertheless had to remain in this hospital a long time. Because of my earlier, overly strenuous work, my hemorrhoids had become so severe that I was constantly losing blood and Dr. Kutschuigana consistently designated me as sick and unable to work.

One day, to my great joy, there appeared in camp, among others, "the Duke," Kurt Sochatzy. He reported that at the last camp he was in he was suddenly classified as "Austrian," *i.e.*, not German. Since Austria had been annexed by Germany, all Austrians were victims of Hitler's aggression. Therefore, Austrians, with the exception of war criminals, were being released from imprisonment earlier than Germans, for which purpose he had been brought to Selenodolsk. And in fact, just a few weeks later in the fall of 1947, after a moving farewell from me, Sochatzy was able to start his homeward journey as one of the first "*normalplennies*"⁵⁹; before that only numerous Antifa bigwigs and those with severe war injuries had been set free. When our comrade Wissebach, blinded in the war, was also supposed to be sent home, a number of Antifa bigwigs, in order

59 Regular POW soldiers

to ingratiate themselves with the Russians, objected because Wissebach had been an officer in the *Waffen SS*.⁶⁰ So this blind man had to languish in prison a further seven years before finally returning home alive thanks to Adenauer's⁶¹ efforts in 1955.

While still in hospital I had started busily knitting again, the results of which I could again exchange for extra food. Eventually, I was discharged from hospital and sent to a smaller, external camp in the vicinity of a plywood factory near Selenodolsk. To my joy I found many of my Block VI comrades, who assured me that this camp was the best they had so far experienced. And so it was. The Russian camp commandant was a cultured, sensible man who treated us prisoners as well as possible so that greater work productivity could be achieved. Since he tolerated no corruption, the food was incomparably better than in any other camp. Most worked in the plywood factory, while I remained in the camp and knitted. On the factory grounds there were several well-maintained buildings from the time of the czars, with beautifully carved double doors of oak, which would surely have long since been destroyed if the grounds had not been surrounded by barbed wire and watched by guards (as with all factories in the Soviet Union).

Among other things our work units had, on the side (not as official work), built the camp commandant a fine house. Only the front door was not to the commandant's taste. Measurements revealed that one of the massive oak double doors from one of the old buildings in the manufacturing facility would fit exactly into the Russian's house. So the commandant called together the work units and explained that they would all receive two days off with double rations if they could manage to remove the door, undamaged and unnoticed, from the heavily guarded manufacturing facility, and build it into his house. This was an offer that could not be refused.

On the following day, while at work in the factory, a few skillful prisoners slipped out, ambled over to the old building, removed

60 The weapons SS, the arm of the SS engaged in active combat in the war

61 Konrad Adenauer, chancellor of Germany

the door and laid both heavy pieces into the high grass near the guard station at the exit, and returned to work. When the whistle sounded for the end of work and assembly for the return march, most gathered immediately, as usual, at the guard station. But when the guards got through counting, several were missing. They called and whistled, but there were still a few missing. Then some of those who had already been assembled a long time started to curse and call out, "We can't stand here much longer after the hard work." And finally one fell over unconscious. An unholy chaos ensued, and our guards didn't know what to do. Then someone yelled, "We need a stretcher." Immediately, four strong figures dashed over to the doors lying nearby in the grass, threw their coats across so that one could not see what the stretcher was made of, laid the unconscious man on it and promptly the column—which suddenly had a full count—was in motion toward the gate. The guards merely looked sympathetically at the poor *plenny* and let the column march past. The camp commandant, who had watched the entire procedure, stood outside shaking his head and swore admiringly to himself what could roughly be translated as: "By thunder, these damned German officers; unbelievable!" Just barely beyond the guard station, promptly recuperated, the "unconscious" man jumped down from the stretcher, and four others took up one of the two doors for further transport.

Of course, the factory guards and our guards saw all this, but it did not interest them. They had, after all, done their duty. They had no authority outside the factory, and reporting to higher-ups would only get them into trouble or worse. So our camp commandant got his door, the camp got two free days with double rations and everyone was satisfied.

It was in this camp that I received, for the first time, mail from home, an emotional event after more than five years of imprisonment. All news from home was, of course, shared fully among all friends because we wanted to form for ourselves a picture of how our destroyed homeland looked two years after war's end, since the Soviets put only propaganda before us with no real news from Germany.

As always in the Soviet Union, prisoners are never left for any length of time in one place. So we were put in motion again. I came to the main camp in Selenodolsk, where I had already been in the camp hospital. In the meantime, this camp had eventually developed into a "regime camp" in which work played only a secondary role as the primary purpose was the political enlightenment and coercion of, and judgment upon, those POWs who, for whatever reason, did not suit the Soviets. Thus a whole group of German generals had also been transferred to this camp, in which the Antifa bigwigs continued to carry out their reign of terror. Regrettably, even some of the generals were not up to the political coercion and allowed themselves to be politically misused through their signature on supposedly harmless resolutions. By contrast, all the more gratifying was the stance of the aging Admiral von Fischel, Colonel General Pflugbeil and General Hajo Hermann, who was well known and highly respected by friend and foe alike as a fighter pilot, a night fighter (Knight's Cross, Oak Cluster, *Schwerter* and *Brillanten*⁶²) and as organizer of the night battle-force "Wild Sow." When we sat together playing chess and an Antifa bigwig came into the Generals' Room with a resolution to be signed, Hermann would stand up and say: "I am leaving this room so that I will not bear witness when a German general forgets his responsibility. Come along, Pütter, we're going." And Admiral von Fischel and Colonel General Pflugbeil did likewise.

In 1939 Hermann had entered the war as a squadron captain and considered this to be his own unit for which he always felt responsible even when, as a general, he had completely different responsibilities. Shortly before the surrender he took a plane and flew to his old squadron, which at that time was stationed at the Wiener Neustadt airport, because he felt he could not allow his old squadron to go alone into Soviet imprisonment. Thus he went loyally into Soviet imprisonment as the leader of his old squadron.

62 "Swords" and "Diamonds;" these are military decorations

While Hajo Hermann was able to return alive to Germany in 1955, Admiral Fischel and Colonel General Pflugbeil did not survive imprisonment.

Also to be found in the Generals' Room was General Schmidt, who had been chief of staff of the 6th Army under Paulus in Stalingrad. From him, as well as from others, I was able to hear detailed accounts of the fate of the 6th Army. And from Colonel General Pflugbeil I heard that at the end of the 1920s he had been in Russia on behalf of the *Reichswehr*⁶³ in order to prepare, with the help of the Red Army, for development of the German *Luftwaffe*⁶⁴

Conditions in the camp were quite unpleasant. Everyone was spied on, and one never knew by whom. Almost nobody could be trusted. The political propaganda was once again nearly as brutal, primitive and Bolshevistic as in 1941 and 1942. More and more officers were accused of having committed war crimes. Furthermore, many came to fear that they might be removed from the next transport home, or indeed prevented from going home altogether. Thus did the Soviets play, as a virtuoso, the instrument of fear. Often names were placed on the list for the next homeward transport, only to be stricken off a few hours before departure. Some were already on the homeward journey and then were pulled off the train *en route* and brought back again. My name, too, had been twice on the returnee list, but was stricken each time.

Many could not tolerate this stress and placed themselves at the Soviets' disposal as spies or accusers of others in order to secure for themselves better living or repatriation conditions. Many an officer who had fought bravely in the war became afraid for his life when it became known that Lieutenant Colonel von Sass—whom we much respected, and who in fall/winter of 1942/43 in Weliki-Luki had held out for weeks against an immense, superior Russian force—had been summarily hanged by the Soviets shortly after the end of the war. But it was, of course, precisely

63 The German military

64 Air force

the Soviet's intention to propagate fear and despair. So the number of those who, like my friends and me, did not allow themselves to be swayed, became ever smaller.

Although I was constantly classified as sick, and earned extra bread by knitting socks, the constant loss of blood brought me to a most threatening physical low point. After the next general examination, Dr. Kutschuigana ordered a more detailed examination, after which she determined that I would have to be operated on. Since Professor Gross, the well-known surgeon from Stuttgart, was also in the camp, he was drafted for this purpose. A few days later the operation on my prolapsed rectum took place, with Dr. Gross assisted by Dr. Schuster, who had during the war busied himself as a tool of the Russians in that he had, as a camp doctor, categorized as capable of working anyone who had been a thorn in the side of the Antifa. Now, however, he had no choice but to prove that he was an experienced doctor. Dr. Kutschuigana had also brought in four young female Russian doctors so they could learn how such an operation was done. After I was strapped onto the operating table on my back with my legs over my head, I received an injection of a local anesthetic and the operation started. But midway through the electricity went out and it got dark. Considerable confusion followed. Finally candles were brought in and the operation continued, albeit much more slowly. Unfortunately, I could feel the effect of the local anesthetic wearing off. As no further anesthetic was available, the operation simply had to be concluded without. It is not surprising that I had bad memories of this operation, which in professional hindsight was first rate and successful.

After the operation I was placed in a hospital room in which there were already two other patients, who were, however, released within two days. So I was alone in a large room, a luxury that I could almost not imagine after more than six years in excessively tight group quarters or prison cells. One evening—it was already dark—the door opened quietly and Dr. Kutschuigana came into the room and sat down at the foot of my bed. She looked at me with a serious countenance and said: "Forget that I was here, forget that I can speak German, and forget what I will now say to you. You are in this camp because it is a regime camp,

and you will never get onto a transport home from here. If you ever get the chance, you must get out of this camp. Under my supervision as camp doctor there are two other small work camps farther north. I will try to have you transferred to one of these satellite camps. But you must keep quiet." She gazed at me with a sad smile, gave me her hand and was gone from the room before I could collect myself.

As the operation had been a complete success, my health soon showed improvement. So I knitted socks and waited. During a conversation, Hajo Hermann indicated that he did not believe he would ever be allowed to return home. Therefore, he wanted to prepare an escape. Since he spoke fluent Russian and had rubles, it would have to be by train that he escaped to the West. So he started to hoard food such as sugar and cracker bread. Though I myself did not wish to take part in the escape, I was able to help by hiding some of the hoarded items and safeguarding them. But one night a number of NKWD officers stormed suddenly into our quarters and into the Generals' Room and searched us and our things and found the hoarded items. Obviously, a stool pigeon had noticed something and ratted on us.

I was immediately brought to a hearing at headquarters, which dragged on until the next morning. Why were you hoarding food? Do you want to escape? What do you know of General Hermann? You are friends with him, aren't you? The questions rained down on me. But I answered calmly and with surprise. I had no idea what they were after.

Since I had finally been operated on and could once again get well, I am saving a few things so I can throw myself a real feast, I said. Of course I am friends with General Hermann. But he doesn't know that I am planning a binge, since I wanted to surprise him.

Nothing could be proved against me, but of course they didn't believe me, not even that I had only recently been operated on. Only when, in the morning, Dr. Kutschuigana was called and confirmed that I had not only just recently been operated on, but also that I was still entirely incapable of working and unable to handle any stress, did they leave me alone and shove me into the

detention cell, where I froze terribly and waited. But I couldn't find out anything.

The next day I was brought out early, handed my things and pushed onto the canvas-covered bed of a truck. Then the rear gate was closed and we were off. I rolled myself into my heavy coat, which more or less protected me from the cold, and tried not to let myself get too tense. Where might this journey be headed? What will become of me?

After several hours of driving, the truck stopped. The sound of voices, a squeaky gate, starting and stopping again. Then the rear gate opened and I climbed out to find myself in what was obviously another camp. Before me stood a relatively young commissar, who immediately dragged me into his office. He shouted at me that I was a bandit, a miserable fascist and similar things. He was the ruler of this Camp Wolsk and was warning me not to try to spread any fascist propaganda. In his hand he held my rather thick dossier, which had been delivered to him by the transport unit.

He was obviously putting on a show. Actually, he looked quite nice. So I called his bluff and said: "If you had read my dossier first, you could have spared yourself this performance." He looked at me in astonishment, thought for a moment, and then calmly said: "Come along, I will bring you to your quarters." He brought me to a barracks. When he stepped in, "Attention" was called and all the inmates stood up straight. The commissar walked down the aisle with a glowering GPU-expression, looked left and right to see if he could find anything to complain about, and only stopped at the end of the barracks. Into the silence he said: "Here is a miserable fascist, who has been sent to our camp. Do not let yourselves be influenced by him, and inform me immediately of any fascist statements he makes." He turned and left the barracks.

Immediately I was surrounded and asked who I was. But before I could say anything I discovered before me a Block VI friend, Dr. Jan Dehling, who immediately took me to his corner and informed me about the situation here. We were in a hard-labor work camp of fewer than 600 men. Besides Dehling and myself there were only five other officers in the camp, who were

also forced to work. Dr. Dehling—his insignia showing him to be a dentist—had been detailed to the Russian medic as assistant doctor and therefore stayed in the camp, which during the day was as empty as a ghost town. Though the commissar always acted wildly, he was fundamentally harmless. On the whole it wasn't bad here. An Antifa, as we had known it in every other camp, did not exist here. Nevertheless, there were naturally so-called activists, who held all the lucrative jobs and saw to it that the troops were kept in fear. In fact, it was astonishing how much fear and uncertainty the commissar was able to spread with his GPU-stare and harsh performance.

The next afternoon I was suddenly summoned before the commissar who, no sooner had I stepped into his office, started to rebuke me in the strongest manner. He knew everything, I should simply confess that I had helped prepare General Hermann's escape. Only when I didn't react at all but merely looked at him inquiringly, did he calm down. Thus I learned that during the previous night General Hermann had disappeared from Camp Selenodolsk. But since at that time I had already been in Camp Wolsk, the commissar recognized that I could not have had anything to do with it and let me go.

Hermann's escape was the camp's main topic of conversation. We prayed that his escape would succeed. Since a few activists worked in administration the camp learned pretty much everything that was going on. On the evening of the third day it became known that General Hermann had been caught. He had escaped from the camp in the middle of the night by climbing over the guardhouse at the entrance, in which the guards were sitting beneath him. This was the only way to get over the barbed wire fence, which was otherwise too high. From the guardhouse he jumped into a snow bank on the street side and got out without being seen or heard. On the third day he came to a train station and bought a ticket. In order to pay he took off his left glove, took money out of his left pocket and handed it to the clerk, who saw on Hermann's hand a ring with crossed swords and diamonds. Hermann didn't notice this, and the clerk, of course, said nothing. As soon as Hermann left the ticket window the clerk called the NKWD, who immediately came and arrested

him. So the ring, which Goring had once given to the general as a present, brought him misfortune.

Since I did not have to work, my time in the camp was tolerable. Nobody bothered me and I could busily knit socks. One evening a mandatory meeting was scheduled. Shortly before it started a few activists ran through all the quarters to chase the last stragglers into the meeting. They came to me, too. Since I did not move and calmly continued my knitting, they didn't know what to do and eventually left without me. The next day the commissar had me summoned and asked why I had not attended the meeting. I assured him that I was more than familiar with the content of such meetings, and it was best for the political instructor that I had not attended, since I would surely have posed a number of awkward questions. The commissar swallowed, but said nothing and left. Thereafter, I enjoyed in the camp the freedom to do more or less as I pleased, which gave me a particularly good reputation among the men.

At the next general examination Dr. Kutschigana appeared personally. To my pleasant surprise she once more categorized me as chronically sick and unable to work. The risks that this outstanding woman undertook for me can only be fathomed by someone who knew first-hand the situation in the Soviet Union.

One evening there was again a mandatory meeting, the topic of which was, as I later learned, "class war." The next morning I watched with Dehling as the work units moved out. When it was our barracks' turn I called out to them that when they were working outside they should not forget the class war. A few minutes later I was brought before the commissar, who promptly cursed me as a fascist because of my comment. When I said I could not understand him, since after all I had only underscored for the men that which the political instructor had said, he threw me out and had me tossed into the detention cell.

That was unpleasant. The cell was an unheated, damp hole with a small barred window high up on the side, walls covered with ice, wet dirt floor and, aside from a table on which one could crouch, had no furniture other than the obligatory bucket. Luckily, I had my heavy coat, in which I could wrap myself. Late in the afternoon, when it was already dark, something scratched

on the pane. When I opened the window a number of chunks of bread were handed in to me and a voice said: "We'll take good care of you." It was some privates from my barracks, who also the next day brought me more food than I could even eat.

After the second night the commissar, from whom these activities had of course not remained a secret, came and let me out, since he wanted no protest action on behalf of a fascist officer.

Westward Bound

For some time the rumor mill had been very active. Supposedly, 1949 was the year for most prisoners to return home. *Skoro domoi!*⁶⁵ How often had we heard that since the end of the war? But this time there seemed to be something to it. We learned that numerous returnee transports had already rolled by, towards the west, on the Trans-Siberian stretch through Kasan. But at the same time a huge wave of sentencing of German POWs dampened hopes again. The sentences were often handed down without any participation by the affected individual: 25 years! Done! Justification? None needed! After all, Stalin had been able to succeed in his demand at the Yalta Conference that after the end of the war a further 50,000 German officers would be handed over to him for extermination. In Selenodolsk many such sentences had already been passed. Many of my friends had already been given their fate.

One morning I was brought before the commissar, who informed me in a triumphant voice that I had been sentenced by the military tribunal to 25 years on account of anti-Soviet propaganda and destruction of Soviet property. I felt like I had been hit on the head with a hammer. It seemed as if the floor had been pulled from under me, since it was clear to me that I could never survive 25 years in Siberia. The commissar tapped my dossier and said he needed only the signature of the Interior Ministry in Kasan, then I would roll eastward with one of the usual Soviet prisoner trains. With that he dismissed me.

Completely dazed and equally empty inside I returned to my barracks and consulted first with Dr. Dehling, who was equally shocked by the news. But what could I do? After all, I had for some time been reconciling myself with the thought that I would never get home. To that extent nothing had changed. After six and a half years of imprisonment I thought nothing more could upset me. We had so far held ourselves upright and I wanted to do the same in the future. When I had gotten that far in my

⁶⁵ Russian for: "Soon it's off for home!"

thinking I grew calm again in the knowledge that I was not in control of my own fate, and that I must learn to accept any outcome. So I allowed events to unfurl and waited.

One morning in the first week of May 1949 an NKWD colonel from the Interior Ministry in Moscow appeared at the gate. Accompanied by a retinue of junior officers, he summoned the camp commissar and ordered him to have the entire camp assembled, and then check in with him again. We fell in, full of anticipation. Then the colonel entered the camp at a dignified pace, walked to the front of the assembled prisoners and said he was our fatherly friend and brought us greetings from the wise leader of the Soviet Union, Papa Stalin. He had been working for us for years and could now share with us the happy news that we would be allowed to go home, with the exception, of course, of those against whom there were charges pending. The camp would then be closed down. The transport would leave in just a few days.

The joyful screaming that broke out was indescribable. Only I had very different feelings. Quietly I returned to my barracks and lay on my bunk.

Unimaginable activity now unfolded in the camp. Lists were drawn up and new underwear, foot wrappings and shoes were given out to everyone. In the administration office a schedule was typed up, the contents of which we immediately learned from the prisoners who worked there. According to the schedule the transport from Wolsk to Brest-Litowsk was to take 22 days, and from Brest to Frankfurt/Oder five more. The long duration of the journey is explained by the operating system of the Soviet railway, in which returnee transports have the lowest priority, and constantly must allow other trains, freight as well as passenger, to pass. Dr. Dehling and I found ourselves assigned to Car No. 7.

But on the next day, after the departure of the delegation, I was brought to the commissar who showed me my dossier and said I was not to be sent home, but to Siberia. The following day he would drive to Kasan with my dossier to get the necessary signatures. The next day I saw him depart in his official vehicle. In the afternoon a new, younger commissar, who came to represent the absent commissar, appeared in the camp.

Then events began to tumble over each other. The next morning we suddenly heard honking outside the gate, which was quickly opened, and an enormous official limousine rolled into the camp. Out climbed a senior NKWD general. As it transpired, he was the Interior Ministry official in charge of POWs. The young commissar and the camp administration had no idea what this senior visitor was doing here. The general ordered the camp assembled. Then he gave a speech in which he urged us all to tell the truth after we returned home, how well we had been treated as POWs, which with great jubilation we promised to do so. Then he said he would now go through the list and decide who would be allowed to go home and who would not.

Next, he went into the office, into which were called, one after another, those on the list with remarks by their names. Eventually I, too, was summoned. The general looked at me and asked the young commissar what was the matter with me, and to show him my dossier. He could not find my dossier, however—he did not know, after all, that the camp commissar had taken it along with him to Kasan—but found only my personal information card in the card index. This he handed to the general. He looked at it briefly and asked what was the matter with me. The young commissar didn't know anything, and said so. It is an old, established rule in the Soviet Union that a person for whom no extensive dossier exists is harmless and uninteresting. The general crossed out the remark next to my name and initialed it. With this I was on the returnee list, true, but what would happen when the camp commissar came back?

In the meantime—it was already later in the afternoon—the general had completed his review of the list, returned to his official car and drove off, without saying why he had really come and where he was going next. Signing off on the list was obviously a pretext, since, after all, the local NKWD officials were responsible for that. But because he was the top boss, no subordinate official could casually make changes to the list on which he had signed off.

The next morning the camp commissar returned, heard what had happened, and fumed with anger. Where had the general gone? Everyone guessed he had driven to Kasan. So the camp

commissar threw all the files back into his car and roared off towards Kasan, to brief the general and persuade him to strike me off the list again.

But the general had not driven to Kasan. It turned out that he had driven in the opposite direction to a small village where his mistress lived. He had used the visit to our prison camp as a pretext so that, thereafter, he could see his mistress. Of course he had avoided telling anybody this. So our camp commissar drove again to Kasan, a journey of at least eight to 10 hours. Presumably, he would only arrive in Kasan on the following day, where he would not, however, be able to find the general.

That morning there appeared an officer with 15 men of the transport unit. Within a few minutes the great search of each individual started with names being called, counting them off as they came out of the camp and, outside, assembling those called into marching columns. When my name was called and I got through the personal search, the young commissar stood at the camp gate and called to me, "*Stoj, nasad!*" which means: "Stop, go back!" I took a few steps back, turned over my haversack so that everything I had fell on the ground, and crouched down to gather my things as slowly as possible.

Meanwhile, all the others were outside, and the commissar went back to the office. The transport officer counted 574 men, but had 575 men on his list. He counted again, with the same result. Then he turned and looked towards the camp and saw one prisoner still crouching in the gate, who obviously belonged to the group, gathering up his belongings. He came running over furiously, kicked me in the rear and screamed: "*dawai, dawai, idi su da,*"⁶⁶ and chased me out of the camp. Instantly, I had my things and was outside. The count was correct, and the march began.

After about 500 meters we came to the track of our transport train. Since everyone knew his car number, we were all aboard in a few minutes, including the medic and transport unit, and the train departed.

Double-decker bunks had been installed in the cattle cars, as well as the usual tin gutter next to the sliding door and the bucket.

66 Russian: "Move it, move it, get over here!"

Although there were 46 men in our car, the crowding did not bother us. As the train rolled along I began to think through my situation and discuss it with Dr. Dehling. After all, the schedule for the returnee transport was firmly established. When the commissar accomplished his goal of having me stricken from the list, he would merely have to notify the nearest NKWD office in the area where the transport would then be, and I would promptly be hauled out of Car No. 7 and brought back to Selenodolsk. It had happened often enough that even in Brest-Litovsk men going home had been arrested again and returned to the camp. Having gotten onto a moving, homeward-bound transport through a sequence of so many extraordinary events I was firmly committed to not getting caught again.

The train consisted of 18 cars. The cars for the guards, train personnel and the medic, as well as the provisions car, were in the middle of the train. In the back of the last car was a little brake house.⁶⁷ I decided to hide myself at the next stop in the brake house, from which I had a good view of the entire train. If, during a stop, NKWD men went to Car No. 7, I would immediately jump off and try to go on alone. Better to be shot while escaping than to spend 25 years in Siberia.

Many hours later our train arrived at the large shunting yard in Kasan. We were allowed to open the doors; we were no longer guarded—to what end, since we were going home? The officer and his 15 men grinned happily and were very nice to us. They were particularly looking forward to Germany, which exercised an almost magical attraction for all Russians. If we used to say, "We're living like gods in France," the Russian equivalent was ". . . like gods in Germany." Since our locomotive had been uncoupled we were permitted to stretch our legs alongside the track. Without any difficulty I was able to go the end of the train and see how I could get in and out of my planned hiding spot.

While passing the time and talking with the Russians, a short freight train with an enormous locomotive rolled in one track over and stopped alongside us. We started talking with the crew of

67 A small construction in which there was a manual brake wheel; it extended above the roof of the last car, so that the rest of the train ahead could be seen from it.

what turned out to be a special express freight train which, in Russia, carry the same priority as express passenger trains since they must carry important or perishable goods quickly across vast distances. This train came from Siberia and was headed for Brest-Litowsk. When the train crew saw our mess car and learned we were a returnee transport they made some suggestions. If we would give them 2000 rubles, butter, sugar, etc., they would position their train ahead of us and get us to Brest-Litowsk in four days.

Naturally, we were all for this, including our accompanying guards for whom this could mean two extra weeks in Germany. So the rubles were gathered. When the collection fell short of the necessary 2000, even the medic and soldiers chipped in until the sum was reached. Next, numerous ration boxes changed hands, and promptly the freight express train positioned itself in front of ours. And then we were off at a speed that I had yet to experience in Russia.

Since we were now running far ahead of schedule I had no need to hide in the brake house and, for the time being, stayed in Car No. 7. The train only stopped intermittently to take on water for the engine or change locomotives. On the second day the axles of one of our cars started to smoke, and finally to burn. The train stopped on an open stretch and the crew decided that the car had to be thrown out. So the occupants were distributed throughout the rest of our train, and with collective effort the uncoupled car was simply tipped off the track over the embankment. Then the rest of the train was coupled up again and on we went.

During a stop shortly before Brest-Litowsk I went into the little brake house in the last car. It was known that in Brest the transport officer had to hand over the list to the NKWD, which would once again carefully evaluate each prisoner. I did not want to take this risk. We had, therefore, arranged that Dr. Dehling would go through on his own name, and then with the assistance of the medic he would go back and go through again on my name. If something was the matter with my name, then the medic would identify Dr. Dehling, who had responded to the wrong name out of excitement. If everything was OK he would

stand in the open doorway of the other train (on the European track⁶⁸) and thereby indicate that everything was alright. Meanwhile, I would make a wide circle through the train yard and work my way up to the European side.

And that is how it happened. When on the fourth day we came to a stop in Brest, I disappeared from the back of the train and worked my way under other trains, through the underbrush, over fences and barbed wire, etc., with painstaking effort which took a rather long time. At one point I emerged from some bushes when suddenly a Russian in uniform showed up directly in front of me. When I saw that he was just as surprised as I was, I mumbled briefly in Russian: "Good day," and hastily disappeared. When I turned around again I saw the Russian disappearing likewise into the bushes. I could still feel the shock in my limbs when I finally saw Dr. Dehling standing in the open door of a car. Carefully, I crawled forward and climbed in. Everything had worked. As planned, Dr. Dehling had gone back through the barrier with the medic under the pretext that he had to accompany a sick prisoner, and then had passed through the checkpoint again on my name. Everything had gone smoothly. Only the medic had noticed something. But since this was not her responsibility, she didn't do anything. The risk that my friend Dr. Dehling took for me is indescribable and superhuman. That was true friendship!

Though another returnee transport was also in Brest, we were kept strictly apart. When all checks were completed the new train was assembled and we were given rations (bread and sugar) for two days. Dr. Dehling had gotten rations for me as well. With a sigh of relief and thoroughly exhausted, I had something to eat and then lay down for a while. After a considerable time the doors were closed and the train started to move.

We had not yet been underway five minutes when suddenly the brakes squealed and the train jolted to a stop. We heard voices outside, then the door was slid open and guards with flashlights looked into the car. My heart nearly stopped. Now they've caught me. But that wasn't the reason for the excitement; we were at the

68 The track gauge in Europe is different from that in Russia, so it is necessary to change trains when crossing the border.

Polish border and were being handed over to Polish authorities. During the trip through Poland no Soviet guard was allowed to be seen. The doors of their car were sealed and would be opened again only at the German border at Frankfurt/Oder. After the Poles had assured themselves that the number of prisoners in the car was correct, the door was closed again and we soon rolled on.

Fear remained in my bones, but the closer we got to Frankfurt/Oder, the more confident I became. Nevertheless, I remained cautious. Frankfurt/Oder and our first German signs, words and sounds in ages warmed the heart.

In Frankfurt/Oder we left the train and had to march to a barracks where we were housed the next night. One was allowed to leave or return to the barracks with no difficulty. We were, so to speak, already almost free.

Immediately, Dr. Dehling and I went off and looked for the nearest German post office where we telegraphed home that we had just arrived in Frankfurt/Oder. Since, of course, we had no money we were most pleased that the German post accepted telegrams from late returnees free of charge.

The next morning the discharge papers were handed out. Since I was still worried that I would be arrested again, Dr. Dehling once again responded when my name was called and received my discharge papers. This time, too, everything went smoothly because we had after all arrived in Frankfurt/Oder more than two weeks earlier than anticipated in our schedule.

As soon as we had our discharge papers we hurried to the train station and boarded the next train heading west. Everywhere there were instructions for returnees. Returnees to the western zones⁶⁹ should first travel to Leipzig. When we arrived at the Leipzig main station we saw on the platform a huge mass of people hoping that among the returnees they would find a loved one, a compelling situation more than four years after the end of the war.

69 At that time Germany was divided into four occupied zones. The British, French and Americans occupied the Western zones, while the Soviets occupied the Eastern zone (which later became the so-called DDR, known to us as East Germany).

We followed the signs for returnees to the West and boarded a train that was headed to a small town at the zone border, from where we would get to Friedland. In that town, arriving with many other returnees to the West, we were taken to a school in which we could pass the night.

The next morning—May 24, 1949—we were organized into columns of 100 men and led the short distance to the zone border. Finally, I could see the barrier on a hill. I could hardly bear the excitement. Fear still pervaded my entire being since I was still in the shadow of the NKWD, which could possibly still catch someone at the zone border. In front of the barrier stood two Soviet guards, between whom the returnees had to march in rows of 10. On the other side of the barrier stood English soldiers. Slowly our group of 100 pushed its way towards the barrier. And then we were through.

Before us were Germans, who greeted us: “Welcome home!” Yes, we were home! Russia, war, imprisonment, death and misery and fear lay behind us. Suddenly, we were overcome with the realization that, with the help of god, we had made it. We fell into each other's arms and Dr. Dehling said: "So many years we have said 'Sie' to one another. Now we will finally say 'Du!'" And we were unashamed of our tears.

A little further on stood a quonset hut in which food was given out. We had them give us a good portion, sat down somewhat apart on the curb, and ate with deliberation and enjoyment. Then we boarded one of the waiting buses, which would bring us—as free people—to Camp Friedland, from which we could take our first steps into civilian life.

Seven years of imprisonment lay behind me. With emotion, wonder and thankfulness I thought of the many people without whose help I would never have survived, and I was conscious that divine providence had guided me.

The End

