

Excerpts from the Memoirs

of

Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”

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Other selections from these memoirs in the original German text can be found
on the website of the German Historical Museum:
http://www.dhm.de/lemo/forum/kollektives_gedaechtnis/

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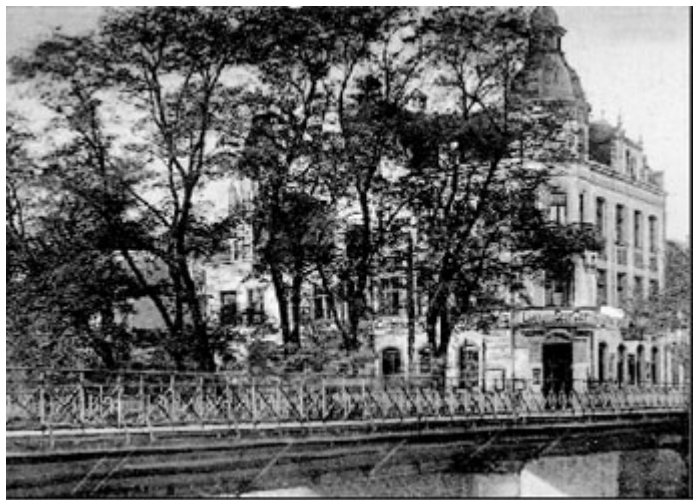
[Translator's Note: Werner Mork had let his emotions get away from him and he openly expressed his opinions about the coming defeat of Germany and the need to use England as a model for a new democracy in post-war Germany. A 'comrade' denounced him for this traitorous talk. Only through the good graces of an officer, who sent him on a dangerous mission to Spremberg, did he escape an immediate drumhead court-marshal that would almost certainly have led to his execution on the spot.]

On the Road in Eastern Germany

With a valid set of marching orders in my pocket, that now had my name on it, I was able to pass freely through MP country. I was able to get through the checkpoints and even obtain rations from the local command posts. It was most important to stop daily at some command post and report to the commander there in order to get a signature and stamp on my orders. Failing to do so could put an untimely end to my travels. I had to take care that my path to my destination took the shortest possible route. When moving through unfamiliar territory it was not always easy to be sure you were on the right path. One could not allow the impression that one was taking an unnecessary detour. That could have very bad consequences at a checkpoint.

I would see and experience such consequences as I came into the town of Cottbus. There I saw the gruesome sight of publicly hung soldiers. It was staged with forethought as a warning to soldiers and civilians in Eastern Germany and bore the hallmarks of a Heinrich Himmler production. We were to be 'shown' what was to be done now with traitors and deserters. On every lamppost on the river bridge hung German soldiers of all ranks, even officers, with placards around their necks saying, "I am a Traitor," or "I am a Deserter." It was a horrifying sight. So this is how far we had come in Germany with our wonderful Wehrmacht. Wasn't this simply a declaration of bankruptcy for the state, the government and the army? Wasn't this the clearest possible sign that we had come to the end of the Reich and to the end of the regime that brought us to this point? This was no longer a "...new, proud and national greatness..." This was our downfall in all realms. What would become of Germany now, what would be left of it? Where was the "Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt?" It was certain that this national anthem would never be heard again in Germany, so I thought at the time.

Now the German soldiers, who were once the best in the world, were being hung from lampposts because they had become cowards. And it wasn't just a few men that the Special Squads [Sonderkommandos] brought up before the Standgerichte [drumhead courts-marshal] and sent to their deaths. For those men the 'Hero's death for the Fatherland' had become the shameful death of a traitor. What would happen to those who were responsible for sending their own men to this supposed hero's death? Would they just walk away if they survived the war, as most likely they would? Would they still talk about the emergency orders that turned them into



The Sandower Bridge in Cottbus

executioners? What about the party big-shots, the military commanders like for example Bloodhound Schörner [See 'The War on the Eastern Front – Part II' on this website.], and the State leaders who had done so well for themselves up to this point? Above all, what would happen to the Führer who had the most responsibility for the party, the country, the army and especially for what was happening now? I thought back again to my dream of a people's tribunal that would bring all of the criminals in to answer for what they had done.

I still had that dream even though it was clearly a Utopia. But it was also certain that none of these men would reckon themselves to be criminals, because all of them had only done their duty as good German men and patriots for the Fatherland and for a new Greater German Reich. They would quickly forget the Führer who had now become a liability. A so called 'just punishment' would not be dealt out,

not even for what was happening now on the bridge at Cottbus. For what they did now was in their eyes totally correct. They were dealing out justice to those who deserved it for betraying the German people and the Wehrmacht.



Feldgendarmarie (Military Police) on the Eastern Front

In addition to these gruesome pictures came the harrowing impressions I got of the Volkssturm Battalions [The Civilian Home Guard]. It was a pitiful conglomeration of very old men and very young men, that is to say, children. They had no uniforms, just an armband identifying them as Volkssturm. They were outfitted with discarded carbines and a small amount of ammunition along with Panzerfäusten [anti-tank weapons]. With these scanty armaments they were supposed to halt the Russian army in its tracks and destroy all the Soviet tanks that stumbled into their tank-traps, which in point of fact were only poor jokes. If their outward appearance wasn't upsetting

enough, even worse was the conviction of these old men and boys as to the necessity and importance of the task they were given to do.

The German people were still a long way from being cured of the national delusion. In many people's heads thoughts and opinions were still circulating that actually predated the arrival of the Nazis on the scene. Many were still haunted by ideas that came from the time of the battles against Napoleon that freed the Germanic principalities from his rule. From this line of thought came the *idée fixe* among many of the members of the Volkssturm that they would be the ones to rescue the Eastern Front, and that the Wehrmacht was no longer up to the task of dealing with the Russians. They did not think that the Wehrmacht was willing to make the sacrifices necessary to face down the enemy and that the Volkssturm were the only ones who could truly protect the homeland. Only the local inhabitants had the will to fight for every centimeter of their home ground as opposed to the Wehrmacht which



Volkssturm (Home Guard) in Prussia

was made up of men from all over Germany most of whom did not come from the East. The Volkssturm did not feel themselves merely called to duty, but called above all others to duty as the true defenders of their lands which simply could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Russians. They wanted to save their Homeland from the Soviets and they labored under the fatal misapprehension that their pitiful little weapons and shallow tank traps would suffice. They were heartened by the invocations and proclamations of Goebbels, Himmler and other local party leaders and functionaries.

Other citizens, many women in particular, were similarly influenced to think of German soldiers as slackers and deserters. Himmler's invocations were particularly good at this and I was able to read the effects when I went to a residential neighborhood to be quartered for the night. On every building and door was a flier addressed to 'German women and young ladies' stating that they were not to grant accommodations to any soldier and that any soldier who requested same was to be considered a traitor to the people and deserving of the death penalty. However, such a flier begs the question, since the

soldiers were requesting billeting so that they could better perform their duty to protect the German women and young ladies from the Bolsheviks!



Volkssturm

These fliers made clear the general impression that the army, and by that we mean the regular army, not the Waffen-SS, was no longer trusted and that they would haphazardly show cowardice before the enemy. It was due to this behavior that the German lands in the East were laid wide open to the Russians. So it was little wonder that in these close communities the prevailing sentiment was against the German soldier and the only ones left to rescue them from the Russians would be the Volkssturm. There was also the feeling among many women that the German Landser [Landsers: common soldier; enlisted man] would leave them helpless and defenseless before the marauding Russians. I heard this for myself when I asked a woman to quarter me in her house for the night. She told me she didn't want to have anything more to do with German soldiers because they ran in the face of the Russian troops leaving the country in the lurch. She did not trust them any more. She went on to say that she was not a true German, she was Sorbian [Sorbia: An ethnic group living on the border between Germany and Poland] and wanted to succeed from Germany. She was Slavic, not German, and belonged with

her fellow Slavs. In spite of this she still found it outrageous that the German soldiers that she had put her trust in had let the country fall into such straights. I found this strange, but it was the same

rationale used by the 'real' German women who felt themselves to be at the mercy of the Russians due to the cowardly behavior of the German soldiers. This was abetted by the Nazi propaganda.

Incidentally, I also found myself to be the target of curses from refugees on treks away from the Russian lines. We soldiers were accused of cowardice simply on the basis that the refugees were being forced to flee the enemy.

During my stay in Cottbus I fell into the hands of one of the combined Special Squads who studied my marching orders very closely and thought they detected an error in the date and time found there. They let me go but with a very strong impression that I needed to get out of the town by the most direct route toward my destination. If my presence was made known during the next patrol, then 'other measures' would be taken. What those would be, I could well imagine, so I made tracks in the shortest way out of town without knowing exactly where I was headed. I had truly seen enough of hanged soldiers in Cottbus and was quite ready to move on.

When I finally got to Spremberg in Niederlausitz I discovered that the motor pool I was supposed to find did not exist, or no longer existed and there were no vehicles to be had. That caused me to ask myself if the good Oberleutnant who sent me on this fictitious errand to fetch a vehicle only did so to protect me from the Standgericht. It could be that he prepared these phony marching orders before I came into the room in order to build me a 'bridge' to my survival. From my deepest heart I must thank this man once again for what he did for me.



Checking Documents

Now the marching orders had become a burden for me rather than a rescue for me as they had previously been. It was becoming a dicey situation due to the believability of the orders on the one hand and the length of time on the other hand that I had been using them to travel in this very small geographical area. I had to think about what it would look like to the critical eye of the MP's and the unpleasant consequences that could arise. Thinking about the situation gave me the jitters. I had to figure out what to do. These orders wouldn't be considered valid anymore, it would look like I was wandering about on my own on unauthorized leave from my troop. But I had to make sure that I did not go back to my old troop due to the danger of being denounced again. In the mean time it was becoming unlikely that I could even find the old troop again given the changes in the battle line which was in constant flux.

After thinking it over the idea came to me to act as though I was a straggler who could not find his outfit.

At the troop collection point in Spremberg where they told me that the motor pool no longer existed, I told them that I did not think I could find my old outfit again because they had changed locations several times. Because of that it would be better to take an assignment with another unit right here.

The request sounded good and showed me to be a good soldier who was eager to do his duty. It worked! Now I was a straggler who had to report to a new outfit that was stationed nearby being replenished and re-outfitted.

Panzer Korps Füsilier Regiment 79

The company I landed in was called “Panzer-Korps-Füsilier-Regiment 79.” As soon as I reported to staff I was taken in. At the beginning of my military duty I had wanted to be in the signal corps, and now at the end of the war I would finally get my wish. After originally being designated as such, it only took five years of war before I was accorded the position. The Regimental Staff had a desperate need for someone who could work a portable ten-line telephone switchboard and also run lines to tie the switchboard into the phone connections at HQ.

The task I was given was the one that interested me most during my early training. I had to build out a telephone network that would connect each command post through a network and I had to be ready to repair any disruptions in the system. What I learned in 1940 I was now going to put into practice in 1945. I was a little worried at the beginning, because I wasn't sure I was up to the job. Against my expectations, it actually went very well. I had not forgotten how to work the phone jacking system. I was perfectly placed to use my old skills as much as circumstances would allow.



Ten-line Field Switchboard - Klappenschrank 33

Now I was part of Regimental HQ, and as master of the phone switchboard, it was a very important position, particularly in these times. I was no longer a simple Grenadier, now I was a Fusilier and would no longer be misused as an untrained infantryman, rather I would be a respected signal corpsman. It is interesting to note that in this regiment they called the soldiers 'fusiliers' instead of 'grenadiers' as they did in my previous unit. Why, nobody knew. We figured it went back to the Prussian tradition. For my part, I could care less about what they called us, I just wanted to get out of all this alive, regardless of what name I did it under.

Soon I would have five years of service under my belt, five years with the Prussians and I could only hope to survive into my sixth year.

My initial buoyant mood about my new duties had a little steam let out of it a few days later when I realized that I had landed in a Special Services Unit. This outfit was a 'rapid deployment force' for special battlefield assignments. We were under the direct command of the General of the Panzerkorps, General Nehring, who was also well known for his past service in Africa. Our regiment did not answer to any Division, only the General, and we were deployed at his order to the 'hot spots.' I was not too thrilled to learn this, but there was nothing for it but to stick with the assignment for better or worse. Another 'special trip' westward was just not going to happen.

Our regiment was a self-sufficient combat group with all of the necessary heavy and very heavy weapons. We were equipped in a way that no one would have still thought possible. This was totally opposite from the provisioning of the infantry units I had just served with. This combat unit had all of the things that would make a real soldier's heart beat faster, but not mine. We had real tanks like the new and much-praised "Tiger" which was an absolute rarity elsewhere. There were also new 15 cm. howitzers on self-propelled gun carriages, armored personnel carriers and also rocket-launcher units up to the highest caliber. The ultimate was the Flak cannons, the famous 88's that were not used by us for anti-aircraft protection, but rather for direct fire against advancing enemy tanks. In the military sense, this was a provisioning of equipment that was quite unique, especially at this point in the war.

One should have been proud to belong to such a distinguished unit, but I was not proud of these weapons of death. I couldn't do anything about it so I just did my duty the best I could. The regiment was fully mechanized, there would be no foot-soldiers. This unit also had plenty of fuel, and that in spite of the barely functioning supply lines. Nevertheless, we had it and were able to keep on the move the whole time in field. Though General Nehring was our immediate commander, he reported to Bloodhound Schörner and that was not at all a good thing.



15 cm Self-Propelled Howitzer (The Hummel)

The Regiment was a closed, independent unit of its own. It had been in existence since the beginning of the war against Russia and always in combat under the same commander and many of the troops had been together from the beginning. These 'Old Comrades' were a tight, loyal clique who felt themselves as one with their chief whom they adored as a god. They were with him through good and bad. Their entire military career had unfolded under his leadership and they were staunchly committed to him. They remained steady, because they functioned like a group pledged to one another, and that held them together in spite of the hardships and losses during the difficult battles they endured. They were similar to the Landsknecht regiments [Mercenary regiments of the European Renaissance] of the olden times, as though reborn in the new age of technical warfare, but in principal they were the same as the close bands of soldiers from the old days. Naturally, there were constant replacements coming into the unit to make up for the killed and wounded, but there was always this tight core of 'old timers,' who were totally dedicated to their chief, that formed the backbone of the unit. The commander could depend upon them to do their duty without question. They were proud of their victories even though more and more of their own were sacrificed in the struggles. And this was the regiment I had landed in!

The Regiment commander had a very good relationship with General Nehring that went back to the old Reichswehr [1919 – 1935]. This relationship would prove very useful on the 8th and 9th of May. This commander was an Oberstleutnant from Westphalia named Fondermann. He was a highly decorated combat officer, awarded the highest honors by the Führer. Of course he had the Iron Cross to which he



Oberstleutnant Otto Fondermann

added just about every other medal the Wehrmacht had to offer.

Oberstleutnant Fondermann was not only well known to his own corps, he was also very well known to the Russians. I learned this for myself from the Russian loudspeakers that were manned by German deserters. These members of "The National Committee for a Free Germany" gave us news and also invited us to desert and join them. The Russians were always well informed as to which German units were facing them on the front lines. They used this information to precisely target their propaganda to the exact unit across from them, often giving us news and details that surprised us. We heard on the loudspeakers the Oberstleutnant Fondermann had a price on his head of 100,000 Rubles and that was quite a sum in those days. The prize would be awarded to anyone who brought them Fondermann dead or alive. These friendly announcements would be followed up with the firing of leaflet rounds over our heads. With this tactic the Russians wanted to eliminate the man who had become such a fierce enemy to them, because wherever Fondermann was the Russians knew they would not be able to break through. All of the 'old comrades' assured us that was always the case.

They were extremely proud of 'their' regiment and above all of 'their' great commander who was so feared by the Russians. Even in 1945 they viewed themselves as elite soldiers in an elite unit serving under an elite commander and they naturally thought themselves superior to the newcomers in the regiment. I experienced that myself. Above all they thought themselves superior to the regiments that buckled under the Russian onslaught and had to call on us to reestablish the line. I was very surprised by all of this and would rather have not served in such a unit. I had never really served in a true front line combat infantry unit. I never experienced the real esprit de corps as it existed in combat outfits. However, in my current deployment I had the doubtful 'honor' to serve in such a company. I had to take things as they were, I had no choice as to when and where my final military duty in this war would be fulfilled.

The month of February 1945 had come to an end, but not before the Führer's speech that was so well known to all of the soldiers. As part of the day marking the founding of the Party, February 24th, which was still being observed even in this calamitous year, he proclaimed that this year marked an historic turning point in the war. Looking back, it seems that he was telling the absolute truth, but not in the sense he meant it. By the words 'turning point' he was not referring to his end and to the end of the Reich, but that is the way it turned out. For my part I could not comprehend how, during the obvious fall of the 3rd Reich, they could take time out to celebrate the birth of the Party and talk of a 'turning point' at a time when most of the territory of our country was occupied by enemy armies.

In order to celebrate the euphoric 'turning point' in the East, the leadership sent Minister Goebbels in person to visit the front and share the euphoria with the soldiers in his own spectacular way.

From the 1st to the 5th of March 1945 Nehring's Panzer Division along with other units launched a counter attack on the orders of Schörner. The attack was successful and we recaptured the city of Lauban. A Soviet guard corps was almost totally wiped out. The Panzer Korps Füsilier Regiment 79 and Oberstleutnant Fondermann were there.

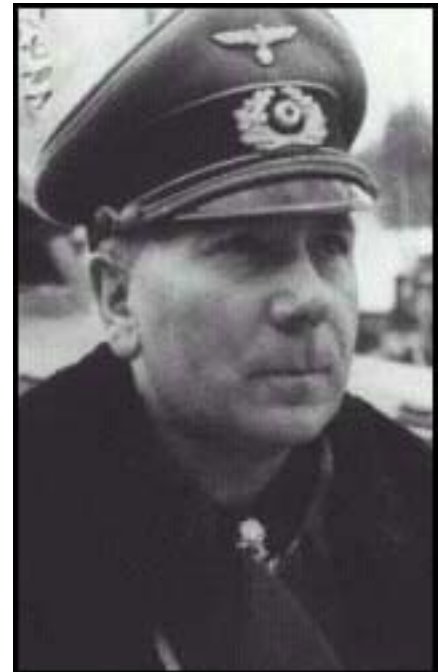
This success was held forth as an example of the brilliance of German strategy, and evidence of the ingenuity of General Feldmarschal Schörner. But it was also evidence that the German army was far from beaten, and that their fighting spirit was still intact. It only took a little time until now in the beginning of March to get experienced troops to the fore to push the Russians back. Eastern Germany would soon be freed from these sub-humans, the Silesian refugees would go back to their homelands and the war would turn the corner just as the Führer predicted. The pessimists were discredited, the true-believer optimists were vindicated. Everything would be different now thanks to Schörner and also thanks to Himmler. Ivan would be chased deep back into the Russian Steppes where he belonged! This was really going to be great!

This sensation was the reason that Reichsminister Goebbels made the trip to the front from Berlin, a trip that was still possible at the time. Together with Schörner and other commanders Himmler made a beautiful, stirring speech to the soldiers in Lauban who were assembled there for that purpose.

Purely, by 'chance,' nearly all of the assembled troops belonged to the Propaganda Companies that were already stationed near the Eastern front. They filmed the dramatic event for showing in the weekly newsreels at the movies. Everyone at home who could still get to a movie would see what the German soldiers had accomplished. Copies would be sent to neutral nations where the Allies could get a copy and see for themselves what the Wehrmacht was still capable of. [Click here to see the German Newsreel of Lauban](#)

All in all the joy and jubilation over the great counter attack was of short duration. It was a flash in the pan and only a few days later everything was back to being as bad as it used to be. The momentary success was not a decisive factor in the course of the war as Goebbels had screamed at the top of his voice to the resounding 'Heils' and applause of the audience. One can still see and hear the excitement in the films that were shot then and shown on television now. They were still celebrating and the excitement was still in the air when we arrived in Lauban the day after.

The Regimental HQ was established in the city. I was given the job of setting up communication lines between our various companies and a primary line to General Nehring. I needed a place to install the switchboard so I went looking for houses that had not been totally destroyed in hopes of finding a protected cellar for the equipment. If possible I needed to find a place that would keep the communications equipment safe from air or artillery attack. I took two men with me to look for a suitable place. On our travels through the rubble of the city we saw terrible scenes of destroyed vehicles of all sorts, Panjewagons with dead horses and many dead Russian soldiers. Only in Marketplatz were things well cleaned up. That is where the day before Goebbels had held his rally.



General Walther Nehring

We also saw some American trucks. They were Studebaker trucks that the Americans had furnished to the Russians. In comparison they made our German trucks look pathetic.

There was an elevation in the level of horror and terror toward the end of the war and we three Landser witnessed it for ourselves when we entered a house that looked like a good candidate for our communications center. When we descended into the cellar to check it out, we were greeted with a morbid and horrifying shock. In the cellar were the bodies of five naked German women. They had been slit open from their crotch to their chest. Almost certainly a bayonet was used. This sight not only filled us with horror, but also with anger and rage at the humiliating and dastardly murders. It put us in such a state that we would have gleefully killed any Russian we could have gotten our hands on, prisoner or not, and done so without regard for whether or not they had any hand in the murders. That is the one moment that I think I would have been capable of killing. I would no longer have been able to take pride in the fact that no man's life was on my conscience. What we saw there was an incomprehensible crime that drove us into a rage. Our anger had no basis in any ideology, it was directed toward the animals who did this thing.

In that moment we were blind with rage, but after a while we calmed down and became more reasonable and less emotional. We saw this deed for what it was, a loathsome crime. It put one of my comrades in mind of something he saw in Russia that was also loathsome, but that time carried out by German and ally troops. It became clear to us that this war had for a long time had the character of squalidness, beastliness, perfidy and a gruesome lust for murder. No matter where and no matter which side. As we realized this it served to deflate our emotions and bring us back closer to normal. Quietly, very quietly we climbed out of the cellar and into the open air and left this place of horror. We reported our finding to the command center in Lauban. Our communications center was set up in another house, and we lost ourselves in our work duties.

A short time later our company was deployed to the area around Ratibor in Schlesien where an intense Russian push was underway that had caused the German front to falter.



Leobschütz

In a wooded area there were scattered some well constructed dugouts where regimental and battalion command posts were installed. Our company found a place there. Before us were the towns of Ratibor and Leobschütz. From our position on the heights we had an unobstructed view of Leobschütz. One of our comrades found this view heartbreaking. This fellow was a good friend and a great guy. Leobschütz was his hometown, that is to say it used to be his hometown. He was born there, the family home was there as well as the family

business, a brewery. From our vantage point we could see his house and the brewery. It was very hard on him to look out on his little town, particularly when we watched as his house was destroyed by Russian artillery and then was overrun by Russian troops. Together, we witnessed the drama. With the help of binoculars everything was clearly visible, so close you could almost touch it. I had to watch as his nerve gave out and he fell apart. His brain short-circuited and I had to hold him back from breaking away and running down the hill to his parent's destroyed house. It was an equally bad experience for me. I tried to comfort him as best I could, then when the food-carrier came I entrusted him with the task of taking our comrade back to the medical tent in the hope that they could do something for him there. As I told the food-carrier what I needed of him, he told me that he also came from the town. He

said it was difficult for him also because he did not know if his family were still in town or if they had fled. He was concerned that his father may have been pressed into the Volkssturm. This shitty war had a lot of ghastly stories to tell! Führer command us, we will follow you!

Our positions came under heavy fire and I had considerable trouble keeping the phone system functional. Particularly the lines to the combat companies and to General Nehring's HQ had to be kept up. All of the dugouts were shored up with wood supports, but they were beginning, slowly but surely, to weaken and it would only be a matter of time before the safety of the dugouts would become questionable. We also had to keep in mind what might happen if the supports failed suddenly and buried us all. The lines to the forward positions broke constantly. No sooner did the lineman manage to repair a line than it got shot up again. The linemen took heavy losses and were hardly functional any more.



*Führer Command
Us, We Will
Follow*

It happened that at one point I only had a single functional line. That line led to a battalion commander, a captain named Tschaikovsky, just like the composer. A few days before we had met at the phone switchboard and spent some time talking. He asked me to call him from time to time when I could so that we could chat. He had the impression that I was a decent guy that one could have a sensible conversation with in spite of these crappy times. Of course private conversations on the communication network were forbidden, but we thought we could pull it off anyway.

There came a day when the Russian attack developed to a point where a complete collapse of the German line became a real possibility. Suddenly Captain Tschaikovsky was on the line wanting to speak to me. He wanted to speak to someone in this instant which could well be his last. There was so much going through his mind that he felt like he had to talk to me about it, at least for as long as Ivan would allow him time to do so. He wanted to talk about his screwed-up life that was about to come to an end. The situation outside of his bunker was such that there was no possibility of getting out. Our conversation suddenly broke off, but he got back to me after a while and told me that he had now lost all contact with the rest of his company. Couriers that he sent out were not getting to their destination and none were getting through to him. He had nothing left but this thin line as his only contact to another German soldier, and he wanted to use it to talk to me until it was all over. Then something horrifying happened that I have never been able to forget. He said that the Russians were at the entrance of the bunker and then he said, "I take leave of all of you now, the comrades who are still alive. Live well and try to get home safe and sound. Get this shitty war over with. For me it has come to an end along with my life. See to it that there are no more wars." What I heard next was a single shot. I could not tell where it came from. I can only assume that he took his own life. The line was dead. The connection was lost and the battalion was nearly wiped out and Captain Tschaikovsky was gone too. Even today I must bow to this man. I honor his memory and ask myself why must men meet such miserable deaths. Why, wherefore, for whom and for what? For Fatherland is out of the question for me. Here in Ratibor German soldiers were still losing their lives senselessly and hopelessly. Senseless to my mind, even when others held the opinion that the Russian conquest of the Reich had to be stopped even if it cost many more victims.

The Russians weren't to be stopped not even by the courage born of despair. What was happening was senseless murder. The force of orders was so strong on our part that there was no revolt and even the most insane orders continued to be obeyed just as before. The German Landser did their duty. They

fought and died to fulfill what was once their pledge to the flag, but was now their personal pledge to the Führer Adolf Hitler, who now let his soldiers die senselessly. The soldiers fought on. Delusion had not yet given way to Reason.

The soldiers fought on also because they did not want to become prisoners of the Russians. They fought to delay the day when they might fall into the hands of the Russians, even though day by day this hope became more unrealistic. The basis of this fear was the certainty that the POW's would be the ones to pay for everything the Germans had done to Russia. There would be no mercy, we could not depend upon their humanity. It would be horrible for us. We could only expect the revenge of a gruesome internment. That knowledge was a powerful incitement to carry on, futile though it might be.

There came situations where you just no longer gave a damn anymore, because you just could not go on any longer and you didn't want to keep going. This happened to me when I found myself in a pocket and nearly surrounded by the Russians. Nevertheless many Landsers were attempting to slip out before they closed the circle. The situation was nearly hopeless. In the ever-tightening ring the Russians were firing all barrels and we no longer knew where to find cover, much less know where to take a step toward safety. I felt more godawful shitty than I had ever had before and I couldn't stand it any more. I was totally exhausted, my body couldn't take



Bundesarchiv, Bild 103-120033
Foto: o. Ang. | 2. Februar 1945

*Volkssturm Troops Looking Out Over Ratibor --
February 1945*

any more even if I wasn't beset with malaria and heart attacks for a change. In this state I became depressed and simply sat down on a bolder near the side of the street. I did not want to go on regardless of what happened next, be it death or 'only' wounded and taken prisoner by the Russians. I did not care either way. I was done. A two-horse wagon appeared from some German outfit loaded up with Landsers. As they passed me they stopped, and called to me to climb in. There was one place left and they were going to make a run for it to break out of the pocket, but there was very little time. As I hesitated, I found myself gently shoved into the wagon. We were off in the night and not only found our way out of the pocket, but also found our own unit. That was a situation where one could just give up because he simply could not go on any longer.

The Russians had become very active now with their loudspeakers and their invitations to us to desert. We were promised good treatment, but we did not believe it. What really irritated us was the accent-free speech of the voices on the speakers. These were true German voices and not just Russians who could speak German well. From the leaflets that floated down to us we could infer that the speakers were not Germans who had gone over to the enemy in the last few days, but were German POW's who had been brainwashed in prison. We listened to what the members of the "Committee for a Free Germany" had to say. The leaflets had a very German nationalistic complexion. They were framed in

the “black-white-red” colors of the old flag. They informed us that many German officers and even generals were part of the Committee. We heard names like Paulus and von Seydlitz, which impressed us even though their roles at Stalingrad were not very laudable. Mostly, though, we remained very skeptical or downright unbelieving of these claims. We didn't really believe anything we were hearing or reading from them. The Russian attempts were by and large wasted efforts.

To these 'activities' the Russians added another that was really not good for us and caused considerable havoc. Small squads of Soviet troops would slip through our lines seeking the army phone lines. When they found one they would splice into it and not only listen to the communications traffic, but they would also use a German-speaking Russian to actually issue orders. This caused a great deal of confusion for the unit who received the orders. These sabotage troops would order units to fall back from their current positions. These orders had to have been issued by former German soldiers rather than Russians. The disruptive maneuvers were executed flawlessly and required true familiarity with the nuance of military jargon as used in telephone communications. Most dangerous was their knowledge of specific units and commanders right up to the highest ranks. The people doing these impersonations were so good that on occasion German units were convinced to pull out of their dug in positions.

I experienced some really unbelievable things while working with the phone switchboard. It would happen that during a conversation there would suddenly be an entirely different voice on the line. This would happen when the Russian sabotage troops would break into a line that was jacked in and in use, before they had complete control of the line splice. This would generate strange sounds as they tested the line. But radio traffic wasn't always safe either because participants would join in that did not belong there. Absurd things could happen on a tapped line such as when you would receive an invitation to quit everything, go over to the other side and enjoy a life full of food and drink with young ladies! It would also happen that careless conversations among our higher officers would be overheard. The Russians would helpfully report the content of those conversations to the regular soldiers via leaflets the next day.

After the disaster at Ratibor our unit went to a rest area to regroup and replenish our ranks. Above all we had to get back up to combat strength due to the battering we received. We were replenished with whatever stragglers or separated units we could get our hands on. We took in all ranks, but their rank was not particularly important any more. As a result, Non-Commissioned officers, Sergeants as well as Master Sergeants, sometimes from other branches like the Luftwaffe, found themselves serving as common Landser in whatever outfit they happened to land in. That is how I, a lowly Corporal, ended up giving orders to Non-Coms, Sergeants and a First-Sergeant who worked for me searching out breaks in the phone lines.

As the only available technician I was per force the head of the signal corps group for the Regiment. I had authority over everyone who was assigned to the group. That is how a Corporal got command of stragglers of all ranks. Eventually, the phone network had to be made whole and patched back up. The new linemen had no concept of what a functional phone network should look like. They had to be taught by me how to use the cable spools and how to lay line. Then off they went to patch the lines without regard for enemy fire. I would tell them in which sector the break was likely to be, and then I would wait for them to report in that the break had been repaired. No one knew of course how long the line would stay up. Over and over they would hear me call out, “Move out and find the break!” I was holding a position in the group that would normally have been held by a Sergeant Major, but these were not normal times. Now, a Corporal who had stumbled into the outfit, had become the leader of the deplorable remains of what they still called the signal corps.

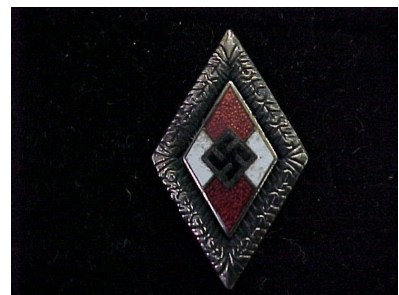
After successfully refreshing the Regiment, it was redeployed to a whole different area. We were hurried to the Sudetenland. There, General Schörner had specified a spot where we were to build a new front line, which of course was to be held 'at all cost.' The Russians attacked immediately. This was happening at a time when some of Hitler's closest henchmen, and Himmler was among them, were making contacts with our enemies to the South and West sounding them out on the possibility of making a separate peace. We knew nothing about this, obviously, only finding out about it after the war. One can only wonder about that and ask oneself the question how could it be possible. The Führer was continuing to pursue the war while some of his closest staff were trying to negotiate for peace behind his back.

We Landsers had to continue to obey orders that could get us killed. We had to keep building new defensive positions at the behest of a commander who still wanted to deliver victory to his Führer.

When we arrived at our new positions the Regiment staff settled in on the edge of a small village. I, the new Regimental Signal Corps team leader, had my 'command post' and communications center set up in the cellar of a large house. My new duties were such, that I was not permitted to go out, I was not to patch any lines myself, I was to remain safe and sound in the cellar. It wasn't all that wonderful because I was very aware of the problems and the difficulties faced by my linemen. They had to go out under enemy fire to search out breaks in the lines and more often than not there was no usable cover for them. Go out under enemy fire, search for the break, repair it under fire, then make your way back under fire. Many of them did not come back, most of the fatalities were among the men who got stuck with this duty without any knowledge or experience or notion of what to do. All according to the motto: "When it goes well, all is well, when it goes bad, tough luck!"

As our troops were shoring up the pockets in the front which was necessary for the building of the new defensive positions, they experienced occasional counter-attacks. During one of these actions prisoners were taken. These were prisoners that, according to the latest orders, were not supposed to be taken. It was a group of about 15 men, mostly Poles but also a few Russians among them. They were brought back to Staff HQ. Contrary to orders, they were not shot on the spot. They had surrendered during the counter-attack and came to us under the guard of a few Landsers.

At Staff HQ the prisoners were handed over to the Ordonnanzoffizier [Orderly Officer; Aide-de-camp], a midshipman who was new to the unit. The Midshipman was assigned to our unit so that he could get the front-line experience that would qualify him to move up to the rank of Lieutenant. Even in these mad, insane times the army bureaucracy still functioned. Everything else was going to hell in a handbasket, but the bureaucrats were still in business. At least something still worked in the army although we could not figure out how they managed it. This young man, who wanted to be a hero, was only just out of the military academy and was new on the front. He caught my attention because on his uniform he wore the "Golden Hitler Youth Pin," which was equivalent to the "Golden Nazi Party Pin." This pin was considered a decoration, not just a mark of membership, and awardees were required to wear it as a part of their uniform. I was curious about the decoration. He would have had to perform some extraordinary service for the Hitler Youth or a high-ranking leader of the Hitler Youth would have had to single him out for this distinction. He couldn't be a so-called "Old Warrior," he was far too young. I soon got to know him better, but not in a good way, and a little too well for my own good.



Gold Hitler Youth Pin

The Order from the Führer was still in effect, to wit, that we were to take no prisoners into custody, even though today people often deny that to be the case. When prisoners were taken, their ID documents would be taken from them, Intelligence would interrogate them and after interrogation, they would be eliminated just like the others who might be eliminated in the field. This order was issued on "humanitarian grounds" because the army no longer had any way to transport, intern or care for prisoners. Killing them was really a humanitarian act! Apparently, the Führer and the helpers at his headquarters did not give much thought to the fact that this was pure murder carried out by soldiers who, by this act, became true murderers.

Now that the enemy prisoners had been brought back from the front it threw the Midshipman into a fit of rage, because to his mind the Führer's Order had been disobeyed. He gave his anger free reign in a phone call to the HQ of the Division that had taken part in the attack. This conversation took place in the room next to my communications room and I overheard everything. His complaint about the illegal taking of Polish and Russian prisoners did not leave him with any clear answer as to what was to be done next.

He was still demanding that the Führer's Order be carried out and he went to our commander. But Herr Fondermann avoided giving an explicit order for an execution, he wanted above all *not* to take any sort of a stand in this matter. This led to a hefty protest from the stalwart, decorated Hitler Youth which now sent our commander into a rage of his own. All of this was happening in the next room and I could hear every word. The commander showed the Midshipman the door with the remark that it would be best for the Midshipman himself to resolve the problem. He, the commander, had other things to worry about. He added that there was a further query from Division and they wanted two or three prisoners sent with their ID papers on to Division HQ. The rest were of no concern to HQ. No one, in spite of the Führer's Order, wanted to take responsibility for the death of the prisoners, because everyone knew it would be a criminal act and no one wanted to dirty their hands with it. Only with the Midshipman it was not so clear, he wanted the Führer's Orders to be carried out...the orders of his Führer.

Outside stood the poor devils who didn't know what might be before them, but they did not have a good feeling about it as was clear to see from the looks of fear on their faces. Their fears grew as they saw two or three men pulled from the group and their ID papers taken from them.

The Herr Midshipman now had his big moment. He acted as though he were the big boss. He asked for volunteers to step forward for the firing squad that he had just ordered to carry out the Führer's Order. His request did not have the results he was hoping for. No one stepped forward. So this sleazebag had to resort to ordering men to serve on the firing squad. He even tried to order men from my communications team. He came to me and told me to select some of my men for his firing squad. I categorically refused. I pointed out that the signal corps team did not fall under his authority as Orderly Officer so I was not required to obey the order. I only took orders directly from the commander. And in any case, I added, I did not have the men to spare except the few standing here who were already designated for other duties. The duty of lineman was of the highest priority, superseding other duties. I also made the point that shooting prisoners went against international law, which was also valid for Germany. I also asked him if he had thought about the bad consequences if the advancing Russians came upon the corpses of the prisoners. What would it mean for the guys in our outfit? The Russians knew exactly what unit they were facing on the front line. The Midshipman was not going to get a single man from me and I would be glad to tell the commander the same thing. He ranted for a while, but it did not do any good, he got nothing from me.

So there stood the war hero of Greater Germany who wanted to prove himself at the front and couldn't get anyone to listen to him. The Midshipman could not get any people from Staff, nor any authorization from the commander. He couldn't put a firing squad together. He couldn't get the people he needed to commit this murder.

Indeed, the commander had not forbidden the execution of the Führer's Order, that could have turned against him if the Midshipman reported him to his superiors. The basis of the order meant that it was not only possible but required that superior officers act on it. The commander had worked it so that everything fell on the Midshipman according to the motto, "Work things out on your own, just leave me out of it." It should also be pointed out that according to this new order an officer who is aware of another officer's failure, regardless of relative rank, to obey this order not only can, but must be shot on the spot for failure to obey. Failure to have the officer shot would result in a court-marshal at Division. In the German army no one, be they officer or Landser, was safe from the executioners and their henchmen. Anyone could have their life snuffed out without any involvement of the enemy.



Some Russian POW's (Date Uncertain)

Everyone at Staff was very upset by this situation, and the Midshipman was advised to simply ignore the order and just lock the prisoners up in an empty house and forget about them. Pretend they did not exist. We were waiting for orders to move out, the prisoners could make a run for it then. The whole matter would be put to rest and the poor devils would get out of it alive. But this man did not want to hear any such suggestions. For him the only thing to consider was that the orders had to be carried out and done so immediately.

The Orderly Officer finally found the 'men' for his firing squad. They were not part of Staff, but rather couriers who lived in another house. He was able to put together his murder squad using these guys. He got his 'volunteers' and a couple of them even said that they were eager to have a chance to try out the new weapons that they had just been issued. I heard this from one of my linemen who was there.

They did the deed only about 150 yards from the Regiment's command post. At the hands of these heroic German soldiers the prisoners fell under the fire from the brand-new automatic weapons. The Orderly Officer himself delivered a coup-de-grace to each victim using his pistol so he could get some target practice in also. The proud holder of the "Golden Hitler Youth Pin," a true servant of his Führer, was a wretched murderer.

But he was of the opinion that he had managed to accomplish a great achievement and was very proud of himself. If he were awaiting acknowledgment and praise for his actions, he must have been very disappointed, because he got nothing, not even from his fellow officers. The great man was shunned by everyone and they all hoped from the bottom of their hearts that he would just go away. That is actually what happened. One day he was simply gone. The commander eliminated his position. The

reason for that was that the losses among the officers in one of the Fusilier companies were such that immediate replacements were required. He sent this sleazebag directly to the front lines. We never heard from him again. We had other problems.

Two days after the death of the defenseless POW's the Regiment moved out. The advancing Russians had to have discovered the hastily buried bodies of their comrades. Probably their feelings were just like our feelings when we discovered the mutilated bodies of the German women in Lauban. No one can say that the two events were different. Murder is still murder whether the victims are women or POW's. The discovery of these bodies had to have an effect on the Russians that would have repercussions in their behavior toward all Germans whether they be soldiers or civilians. The inhumanity of war had now overflowed its banks and had now become the normal measure of behavior of everyone on all sides. The already evident grotesque face of inhumanity in war was now apparent to all, visible to everyone if they wanted to see it. The reputed humanity in a 'normal' war was evident now for what it always was, pure inhumanity, a crime of mankind, not just their leaders.

It is important to understand that throughout all of this there was always the possibility of refusing orders without consequences to those who did so. It was also the case that men did not trust themselves or know the regulations. Because they were unsure of themselves they did not want to set themselves apart from their circle of friends. No soldier was ever forced to be part of a firing squad, they were always made up of volunteers, which the Midshipman also knew quite well. My way of refusing the order was not an offense against military regulations, it was not assailable by other officers. One simply had to have the courage not to be intimidated by his superiors, because their authority was not without limits. Even in this war there was a military law that was not dependent upon an intrinsic force of orders. To refuse orders that went against this body of law would not be a punishable offense and you could not be brought up on charges. After the war the unbending requirement of following orders was often used as an excuse, but in nearly all cases its use was wrong and deceptive. It was just a stupid excuse for someone who took part in a misdeed. No one will admit that he, or German soldiers for that matter, were very reluctant to participate in atrocities. That does not strike me as a trait of German soldiers specifically, but rather a bad habit of all soldiers throughout the world. One only has to take a look in the armies of today both in the free world and the un-free world to see these 'bad habits' unfurl on a daily basis. The one-sided indignation, after 1945, was not really appropriate because even the highly respected armies of the 'good' democracies were not free from crimes and misdeeds on the part of their soldiers, or their officers, and not only in Vietnam. It proves once again that every war is a crime and always offers opportunities to do evil things, and often men are required to do them. It allows the brutality and animal nature that exists in so many men the chance to express itself in the real world. It was also the same in the German Wehrmacht even though the people always had the opinion that the German soldiers were honorable and never did anything to stain that honor, especially not in the Greater German Wehrmacht. Crimes were committed by all sides and by all armies. The German Wehrmacht committed crimes from the highest officers to the lowest soldier. In no way can anyone truthfully say that it was only the Waffen-SS that committed crimes. Even the brave god-fearing soldiers of the regular army have skeletons in the closet and have soiled hands. But it was very practical to shove all of the guilt on the Waffen-SS after they were named a criminal organization by the Allies in 1945. That way the supposedly good, honorable and upstanding men of the Wehrmacht could feel themselves to be innocent. The whole world seized on the idea that there was only one rogue troop, the Waffen-SS. All other soldiers in all other armies were good soldiers, simple as that. The fact is that the Waffen-SS was made up of fanatical warriors that were trained and built up to be so-called elite troops, just like the elite troops of other nations, not the least of which in the USA! I will repeat here, that I wanted to belong to that elite although it did not work out for me in 1939. I went to join the Waffen-SS as a volunteer, but not to be a criminal. I had no criminal

tendencies or desires, I didn't want to act like a murder or killer. I wanted to join this troop simply because they were recognized as the elite and only the best in the land could join them. Then, it was an honor to belong to them.

This is not intended to be a white-washing. The Waffen-SS ended up committing many crimes and not only as guards in the concentration camps. I am just trying to make the point that the Wehrmacht was not as good and respectable as the majority of German people still believe. I also want to make the point that it was not only the German soldiers who committed war crimes as the majority of people suggested after 1945. This one-sidedness distorts the truth and camouflages the fact that war crimes, barbarity and inhumanity are part of every war and always have been. Because of that these frightful truths must be laid as charges against the whole world since they are the usual practice throughout the whole world, in all peoples, all nations, all races in all wars. To mock the people all of this is embellished and prettied up with the alleged necessity of implementing democratic goals. This unpleasant truth combined with perfidy is unfortunately the 'common knowledge' of the people masterfully manipulated by the current 'leaders' as a misuse of their craving for power. In all nations and all peoples there are servile creatures who act as willing helpers to these 'Statesmen' in bringing their cravings into gruesome reality. I wish that inhumanity throughout the world would be brought to judgment and no longer channeled into one-sided oversimplifications. The Second World war is a horrible story of inhumanity and criminality on all fields of battle at that time, regardless of their location on the Earth. All were and are party to it, including the soldiers of the democracies who were reputedly fighting for a better world free from tyrants! To make such a statement is not an improper accusation, it is the sad statement of fact, that the whole world is full of men who do crimes, also as soldiers regardless of which nation they belong to.



Back to the atrocity that befell the POW's. I took it very hard. For me these deaths were a dastardly injustice that I couldn't let go of. During the war I never could keep my big mouth shut when I saw an injustice, and this was no different.

Shortly after the murder of the POW's Oberstleutnant Fondermann came into my communications center. He wanted to find out more about a broken phone line that we simply could not get back up in spite of the repeated efforts of the linemen. It had to be assumed now that this line was in the possession of the Russian saboteurs who were keeping it unusable or they were monitoring it waiting to issue false orders. I described the incident that I experienced where instead of a German outfit the Russians were on the line. During this conversation the commander asked me if any of my men volunteered for the firing squad. I was able to respond with a clear and firm, "No." He said that was good. The word 'idiocy' was used and that gave me the courage to ask if it were in accord with the Führer's Order. With a curt nod of the head the commander indicated that it was correct. That was the moment when I got excited and said that none of this was comprehensible or understandable any more. One couldn't simply kill POW's because there was no transportation or quarters for them. If that was all that was left, only nonsense, then we might as well put an end to this war. We would do better just to quit, otherwise there would be no hope for a good end for us all. I said a lot in my fury without thinking that there might be consequences for me because of it.

The Oberstleutnant looked at me for a while in silence then he said to me that even if the Corporal were right he would do well to keep his mouth shut. The dead POW's were enough, we did not need to add

any of our own soldiers to the count. It was now more important than ever to keep your mouth shut even if now it were particularly hard to do so. It would not be good at this time to willingly hurl oneself into misfortune. He looked at me again, then with a faint smile he left the room. I took to heart what he said to me, but I was also quite surprised that a long-time, career officer would have made those remarks. Were such thoughts and opinions more wide spread in the higher ranks than I had suspected? If so, why weren't these consequences done away with and an end put to this war that none of us could have any effect on anymore? Still deep in thought I went back to my switchboard and sat down. A very short time later the commander and I had another talk. This time it was when the report was broadcast of the alleged 'Heroic Death' of the Führer.

During this time none of us knew what was going on in the world beyond our horizon. From time to time we got what was called the *Feldzeitung* [Field Newspaper]. However, we never knew for sure if the paper we received was our own, or an elaborate facsimile produced by the "Committee for a Free Germany" that was spiked with Russian propaganda. These newspapers were not fired over our line in leaflet canisters, rather they would appear in the company as though delivered by the newspaper carrier. It was also possible that the papers were 'used' by both sides.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B10710
Foto: Sanden, Heinrich | September 1941

Soldiers on the Eastern Front in 1941 Reading the Feldzeitung

We had very little connection back to the Homeland, the *Feldpost* was pretty much non-existent. Mail no longer came to us and no one knew if their loved-ones were still alive, if their homes were still there or how far the 'enemy' had pushed into the West. We only had vague bits of information from unknown sources. Mostly they were obtained from listening to illegal enemy radio stations. We still tried when we could to send letters home. We wrote them and handed them over to Staff for the supposedly still-functioning *Feldpost* office, but we had no idea if it was really able to move mail, assuming it even existed any more. None of my letters ever reached home. My father and my wife, Ilse, had no news from me whatsoever for quite a long time. I found this out after the war.

As part of my communications equipment I had not only the switchboard and the field telephones, I also has a portable Wehrmacht radio receiver. I guarded it jealously. I would use it as often as I could to try and pick up any German radio stations that still existed. In the evenings the commander would often come in to see if I had managed to get any news. We were still unsure if we could believe anything we heard. It would happen from time to time that a station would break in that clearly was not a German station. Of course one could twist the dial if you wanted to take the chance and pick up an enemy radio broadcast. This was strictly forbidden and could result in the death penalty if you got caught. It was very difficult for me using the radio because as I was searching the dial for a German station I would come across an enemy broadcast. As quickly as possible I would turn the dial and hope that no one near me heard the foreign station. It was only a slip, and that sort of thing happened. Anything that was possibly overheard did not exist. We did not look at each other and not a single word was spoken about what was, perhaps, heard.



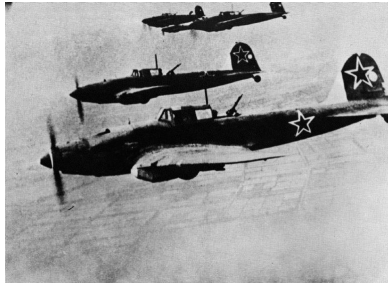
Wehrmacht Radio Receiver

From time to time I would make use of a wool blanket and go 'under cover' to learn a little more from the radio than was strictly allowed. Often in the morning there would come a moment when the commander would ask me if I had heard any news and he would look at me in an odd way. I would tell him what I heard on the Reich radio stations. I stated what I heard just so and left it to him to believe it or not. Above all I was careful only to report when asked. I always had the possibility of learning more but I held back, even when it came from German sources because you could never be sure if it was truly a Reich radio station.

Not only did I watch that radio like a hawk, each time we changed location I would treat it as the most important piece of equipment in the communications center. Ultimately, I wanted to retain for us and myself the possibility of keeping informed on the happenings in the World.

Within the company there was, naturally, a very active grapevine, but most of the information was shaky, much of coming from our ex-comrades who had gone over to the other side. Often the information was simply made up of wishful thinking far removed from reality. For example a rumor went around once that we were going to be deployed to Dresden. That would put us closer to the Americans and we could look forward to being captured by them. Another time the rumor mill said we were going to Berlin. No one found that prospect very appealing. None of these rumors proved true, even when we were scrambling to cross the mountains in the Sudetenland and ended up in the area around Mährisch-Ostrau. Once again we were deployed as the 'fire brigade' because on April 15, 1945 the Russians had launched a big offensive here. We were only there a short time and soon fell back to Olmütz, from there we took all of the equipment we had available on a fast march to Brünn. The town was being attacked from two sides and we were sent there not only to defend it, but "...to hold it at any cost." Once again an 'absolute' hold-the-ground order that would soon turn into a retreat as we had seen many times before.

Our compliance with these orders did not get very far once we got to Brünn. The situation was such that the construction of a new front defensive line was just impossible. The Russians pushed toward Brünn with a powerful superiority. It turned into a regular rabbit hunt with the Russians flushing us out and hunting us down. The city was already half occupied by the enemy as our Regiment got the order to establish positions around the airport and halt the Russians there. This was a hopeless assignment and a pointless effort because the whole area around the airport was already under heavy enemy fire. In addition the skies were filled with ground-attack aircraft in numbers that we had never seen before. Armored aircraft that at one time were scorned and mocked by the Germans now owned the sky and taught the German soldiers a new meaning for the word 'fear.' There were no more German airplanes. The skies belonged to the Russians. The former German airplane crews now served on the ground. Many landed as Grenadiers or Fusiliers. I had some working for me as linemen.



The Ilyushin-2 Shturmovik

The situation at the airport was such that Staff no longer had any communications with the forward units and couriers were not getting through. Where our squads were supposed to be, we suddenly found Russians. We got into a fix where the Regiment HQ itself was on the front line and could do nothing about it. Aside from a few hand-held weapons there was nothing at HQ that we could use for defense. The commander ordered an immediate evacuation toward Trebitsch by foot or vehicle. That happened on the 26th of April 1945. The city of Brünn fell that day and the same day English took over the city of Bremen! This was six days after

the Führer's Birthday. No one took any notice. There were no celebrations.

What reassembled in Trebitsch, under the most difficult of circumstances was no longer the old Regiment, it was nothing but the ruins of the old Regiment. There was almost no trace of the combat squads. Evidently, they were wiped out or captured. In Trebitsch were only the remains of the Regiment Staff. That was all that was left of the once proud Panzer Korps Füsilier Regiment 79.



The City of Brünn - April 1945

The harried withdrawal over the airport grounds had cost us even more lives. The earth around the airport had been chewed up with bomb blasts and exploding grenades. There was an almost endless string of craters. As we fled we fell in one hole after another, many of them

were filled with water. This flight was an almost hopeless undertaking. Not only were we under fire from heavy artillery but also from a lot of heavy grenade launchers and huge masses of rocket launchers, the much feared "Stalin Organs." By itself the sound of these rockets launching was demoralizing, not to mention the horrible effect they had when they landed. With all that we still had to contend with rifle and automatic weapon fire coming from the houses around the airport which were already occupied by Russian troops. It was a true rabbit hunt where we were the living targets, who, more stumbling than running, attempted to escape the inferno. At first we thought the craters would be great as cover, but we quickly changed our minds as we realized that although we could jump in and take cover quickly, getting out of the hole was not so easy. The wet sides were slick and steep. It was hard to pull yourself out and every moment you hesitated on the edge of the hole gave the Russian sharpshooters time to home in on their target. What happened here was mass murder.

As I tried to get out of this disaster I was hampered by the equipment I carried. I had the 10-line phone switchboard slung around my neck and the portable army radio tied to my back. I did not have a weapon, I lost my carbine, but I didn't care about that. The only thing I wanted to rescue, besides my own life, was this equipment which I still thought of as being very important. I needed the switchboard as the necessary tool of my function as signal corpsman and the radio as the vital information source in the coming days.

To this day I do not know how I managed to get out of the fields of ruins and bomb craters. At the time I did not believe that I would survive it, but somehow I did. I got out of the killing fields and did not become a victim of the orgy of murder that took place on the airfield at Brünn. That is exactly what it was, it was not a battle, it was a lousy, pointless turkey shoot. It was not necessary. We were routed, we were offering no resistance that would have justified these murders. I had the great good luck to survive and also the good luck to find my comrades from the Regiment again. Together we found the remainder of the Regimental Staff somewhere near Trebitsch. Very few of us survived the "Battle of Brünn."

It must have been around the 28th of April 1945 as the sad remnants of the outfit regrouped in the middle of an open field. With the remaining vehicles we had, we made a sort of fortress out of them. The reason for it was the activities of the Czech partisans. They were appearing all over and getting bolder in their attacks. We now had two enemies to worry about. The Czech "Freedom Fighters" had become very active and next to the Russians, a very real concern for us. They were particularly feared because of their brutality. They would attack by ambush and they never took prisoners.

Among our vehicles was an armored personnel carrier which afforded us some protection from attack in our little fortress. At night we hardly got any sleep, we stayed at a high level of alert in case of attack. I was armed once again. I had a carbine and a high-caliber army pistol, the 'famous' '08. It worked out that our supply of weapons was divided up and the rest were destroyed.

Communication services hardly existed anymore except for a few lines to our outposts. But they rarely worked and sending linemen out to troubleshoot the wire was out of the question since they would be sure to fall into the hands of the Czechs who had already killed two or three of them. Aside from a few 2-way radios we had no communications. Attempts to reach the staff at General Nehring's HQ or Schörner's were only rarely successful. When we did get through the connections were bad because the Russians were disrupting the signals.

But I still had the Wehrmacht radio receiver and at nights I could and would try to get some news for as long as the batteries held out.

We lived in an atmosphere of great tension accompanied by a bad feeling of uncertainty coupled with a boundless sense of abandonment. What was going to happen now? It was a bizarre and spooky situation for a military unit, or the remains of a Regiment, to be bivouacked out in an open field apparently completely on its own. No connections, no orders. We were helpless and alone. This could not be, it did not feel right. There was a sort of despondency that came with the miserable realization that we were finally about to fall into the hands of the Russians.

There was the even greater danger that we would be killed by the Czechs. We thought that the more likely case, but we were determined not to make it easy for them. This time we would fight until we were down to the last bullet. We would not go down without a fight. They would not take us alive. We were all agreed on this point.

I continued to attempt to establish contacts to get news and information that might affect our situation and give us a hint as to what was going to happen to us. They couldn't simply leave us out here in this Czechoslovakian field, but we couldn't hack out way out either. Once, we managed to get Commander Fondermann connected to General Nehring, but he had no cunning plans to offer us either. Fondermann inferred from that conversation that he was on his own to lead the remains of his Regiment. But how and what were open questions. These questions were not answered by what we were hearing on the radio.

We learned from the radio that all fronts were in total collapse and that one of Hitler's truest associates, Hermann Goering, had been removed from office for trying to negotiate a separate peace. We heard about the end of Il Duce, Mussolini had been killed. We heard about the capitulation of the army in Italy and how far the Allies in the West had penetrated into Germany. Dresden had fallen and in Berlin there was bitter fighting. And we, the pitiful remains of an elite regiment, found ourselves in the middle of nowhere in Czechoslovakia with no idea what to do next. It was a ghastly situation. We did not know anything about our enemy's situation. In front of us were the Russians, all around us were the partisans and just west of us was the German border, but we couldn't retreat there without formal orders. We could not make that decision on our own, it would be considered desertion as long as the war was still on and as long as we were still soldiers. Slowly we fell into despair, mostly because we were pretty well certain that this spot is where we were going to bite the dust.

Then in the night of May 1, 1945 something happened which was incomprehensible at first. It was about 11 PM as I sat with my radio that I heard an unbelievable news report. From one of the still functioning broadcast stations came the report of the heroic death of the Führer who fell during the battle for Berlin on April 30, 1945. It sounded so unbelievable that at first I thought the transmission must be coming from an enemy broadcast station who was sending out false reports. However, as it sank in that this was not a false report I let out a cry and bellowed out, "Thank God! That swine kicked the bucket!"

That was completely involuntary, I said it out loud without thinking, it just came out. It had its basis in my long standing opinion not only of the war but also of the man who I once venerated and for whom I was once ready to go to war. Now I hated and had no trust in the "Leader" who led his people into this catastrophe. His people and his country perished in this war. Millions of his fellow citizens had to die, had to pay a bitter price for their belief in their Führer with death and misery and now he was a dead man. He fell in battle, so the radio said, you could believe that or not, the main point was that this "Führer" was dead, and with that this shitty war could come to an end. His end was for me equal to the end of the insanity. The result would be the end of this war. That was my conviction and the reason for my loud exclamation over the end of Hitler.

After this loud cry the wool blanket was pushed aside that separated me and the radio from the commander's sleeping quarters. He wanted to know what was up, why had I cried out. I told him what I heard on the radio. At first he wouldn't believe it. Then he looked at me with a great intensity, and said that I must not repeat these opinions, even if they were right! He was going to forget them just as I should forget them. Then we both sat by the radio to hear the report again. Between the repeated news reports the station played sad music to demonstrate the sadness all of the listeners must be feeling over the "Heroic Death." The two of us sat there and smoked a lot of cigarettes, which were supplied in greater than usual quantities with our rations lately, and we drank some schnapps which was also supplied in greater quantities than expected. We shared our thoughts, the lieutenant and the corporal.



Otto Fondermann

After a while the commander said that I needed to try once again in spite of the difficulties to try to reestablish communications, because now it was desperately needed. First to the outer sentry posts and the other most urgently to the Staff of General Nehring's corps. After several tries I managed to get radio contact to Nehring's staff, only to hear that the "Comrades" from HQ had not yet heard of the heroic death of the GRÖFAZ [Acronym for 'Greatest Field General of All Time,' ie. Hitler]. So it was that I, the little corporal, who by chance and because of my not always good curiosity, was the first to hear this important news and pass it along.

In our little fortress made up of vehicles everyone was awakened and informed of the death of the Führer. A variety of opinions were expressed but very few were in accord with my verbal outburst. The commander was right to give me the warning to keep my big mouth shut for once and all. There was some question about how this affected our oath to the Führer but there was very little discussion about it. There were no expressions of joy, nor was there any demonstration of grief. The thoughts still centered around how we, sitting here in this damned Czech trap, were going to get ourselves out of this shit pile. That was the only concern that weighed on us.

The next days were filled with unrest and a lot of hectic waiting to see what was to become of us. We listened to the radio now to at least know what was happening after Hitler's death. What we heard was still catastrophic. The collapse was now total. When we heard that the Czechs in Prague were in rebellion and the Russians had launched a major offensive in Bohemia, we knew that it was the end for us. The Russians were on the move in this area to find the troops of the hated General Feldmarshal Schörner and destroy them before they could be 'rescued' by the American troops who entered Pilsen on May 6, 1945.

That was also the day the Flensburg Government was established to govern what was left of the Reich. Something was still functioning in the general collapse although it was nearly unbelievable. This new government had its seat in North Germany and part of Denmark. We did not, if you will pardon me, give a shit about all that. We just wanted to get out of here and into whatever piece of the old Reich we could reach. We had to be fast about it. Otherwise things were going to get nasty and we would probably end up having the Russians cash in our chips. We would be better off dead than the still living residue of the Greater Germany Wehrmacht. We had a great deal of anxiety and our thoughts revolved only around what was before us in the next few days, what was going to happen to us in Czechoslovakia where we found ourselves in a noose that was getting tighter and tighter.