

Chapter 5

April–August 1945

With transfer to the 102nd Division on April 9, I am entered in a table of organization and told I will soon be a captain. The destination of the Ninth Army is the Elbe River, and the 102nd Division reaches Stendal, Germany, about a quarter-mile from the Elbe, on April 15. Between the river and Stendal is the site of a well-concealed, abandoned Luftwaffe airdrome. From the air it looks like a poultry farm. Fowl of all kinds are kept there as camouflage.

As soon as we arrive, a nearby atrocity is reported. I go immediately to the scene—a large barn near the town of Gardelegen. The 50-by-100-foot brick barn smolders. I park the Jeep and walk toward it. I see bodies and smell the strong stench of burned flesh. I feel sick and angry.

More than 300 slave laborers have burned to death in the brick barn. Bodies cover the entire floor, piled thickest at the four sliding

doors. Nearby are mass graves dug—by slave laborers—five feet wide, six feet deep, and 15 to 60 feet long. More bodies lie in the ditches, some only partly covered. We find one person, a Hungarian lieutenant named Bondo Gaza, who has miraculously escaped this horrid death through a sliding door.

“At first there were 2,000 of us, transferred from a concentration camp and factory in East Germany where they were making airplane parts,” Gaza says. “The Russians were about to capture the SS guards, who quickly put us on a train going west. American planes strafed the locomotive, and it stopped about 12 miles east of Gardelegen.

“We were marched farther westward, but only 1,200 reached Gardelegen,” Gaza recalls. “The lame who fell were shot at the side of the road and left without burial. At Gardelegen, most of the 1,200 were shot, and their bodies were dumped into the recently dug mass graves. The 300 remaining were herded into the barn, where there was gasoline-soaked straw scattered almost knee-deep on the floor.

“SS guards herded us with machine guns into the barn. One guard opened the door slightly and threw in a lighted match. The prisoners tried to escape through the doors on the opposite side, only to be mowed down by gunfire. Some tried to put out the fire, and the SS guards threw signal flares into the spreading flames,” Gaza concludes.

The 102nd Division chief of staff is furious. He orders all able-bodied men from the town to come to the barn immediately. When they arrive, he climbs onto the hood of a Jeep and in stinging language tells them the story in detail. Then he points to the barn and orders the German civilians: “Now, get in there and see what your fellow men have done. Stay in there 20 minutes. Then come back here.”

Witness to Barbarism



The author points to the bodies of slave laborers who tried to escape the fire at one door. SS troops shot those who tried to escape through another door, below.



Witness to Barbarism



American soldiers show Gardelegen citizens a mass grave near the barn where the prisoners burned.



Witness to Barbarism

The people hesitate at the pile of bodies at the door, and one man faints. When they come back from the barn, Colonel Lynch orders them to dig more graves and bury the bodies. The next day, I drive the 12 miles of road over which the prisoners marched to their deaths. We see clusters of bodies along the roadside. We determine that the 2,000 were mostly Russians and Poles, with some French, Hungarians, Greeks, and Italians. They were marching to another concentration camp—farther behind German front lines.

The following day a message comes from General Eisenhower. It requires proper burial, in separate graves with markers, in an existing or new cemetery. One German civilian must dig each grave. Another, with perpetually designated successors, must care for it.



Witness to Barbarism

Fifty years later, a neat cemetery with a cross at each grave, except for about 40 graves marked with the Star of David, will prove Hitler's order, prove that his SS guards marched foreign workers out of many of the concentration camps, threatened them with capture, and when "necessary" killed them on the spot. He did not want any witnesses to his barbarism left in the camps.



Cemetery at Gardelegen



I report our findings to the Ninth Army HQs, which will forward them to the Central War Crimes Evidence Library in London for safe-keeping until the perpetrators are caught.

The new headquarters at the Luftwaffe (airdrome) provides us with first-class accommodations. The JAGD unit is in an office building, and I have a private bedroom on the second floor of an adjoining German officers' quarters. It is luxurious, the best so far. There is no electricity or running water, but we find a storehouse of canned goods, Polish hams, wine, and champagne.

A patch of woods conceals the whole complex. The Germans have left V-1 and V-2 bombs, loaded on railway cars (see below). An airplane hangar with a German jet fighter, the first I've seen intact on

the ground, catches my eye. The Germans have left in a hurry. For us the hot war is almost over.



Author with V-1s

While waiting for the Russians to reach the Elbe, the Allied artillery spotter planes take turns watching eastward for pre-arranged flare signals (red if the Russians are stalled and green if they're moving toward us). It is a boring job. At the evening mess, I learn that the pilots have been in a playful mood. Seeing a large white goose flying about four feet above the road, they decided

to give it a thrill, then added a rooster and a turkey to the experiment. Lt. Fred Campbell tells us:

“We tied a piece of cloth to the leg of each bird so we could identify it and took them all three to a height of 1,000 feet. First, we threw

Witness to Barbarism



The author, above with an intact German fighter jet at the Luftwaffe, below with a shot-down German fighter, also near Stendal.



the goose out. He made a straight nosedive, then suddenly came out of it and landed safely. Next, the turkey. He plummeted like a lump of lead, and we couldn't see what happened to him. Then the white

rooster. He went head-over-tail but came out of it, feathers flying, close to the ground.

“When we landed and looked for the birds, we found two of them in the farmyard we got them from, with the cloth still tied to their legs. The goose was groggy, continually shaking his head and teetering. The rooster was back with the flock of hens, strutting around as if nothing had happened. I’ll bet those hens don’t believe a word of it,” he says with a big smile.

The Russians are entering Berlin, only 50 miles due east, and we have reached the Elbe River, the agreed-upon line dividing the Allies from the Russians. Organized resistance from the Germans has collapsed. Only some detached Germans on the Elbe to our front and an armored task force to the rear give real trouble. The day after the Berlin entry, American fighter planes bomb the Germans and clear us. On April 15, the fighting is over for us!

Over the next several weeks, until Victory in Europe (V-E Day, May 7, 1945), we accept the surrender of some 60,000 fear-crazed German soldiers trying to escape capture by the Russians. When we hear the great V-E news is announced, there is mild excitement lasting about five minutes. Then everyone goes back to work.

A short way from the Luftwaffe airdrome is a demolished steel bridge crossing the Elbe, about 200 yards wide. When the Russians take Berlin in a mighty battle, fleeing German soldiers jam the bridge on the east bank. Unable to climb across the twisted steel, some Germans use boats and rafts; others swim. Our guards stop them because of the agreement that the east bank be the Russian zone of occupation.

Witness to Barbarism

I go down to the west bank for awhile each day, to watch the end of the war. Thousands of Germans, still armed, are trying to cross the river. Yet for them to fire a shot at us is unthinkable. Their one consuming thought is to escape the Russians. We alone can give them sanctuary. Like children in the shadow of the monster, they cry for protection. We give no quarter but don't fire at them. The guards discourage their crossing by firing into the water when any of them try. I've never seen anything like this before. I can't say I enjoy it.

One day some Russian Yak fighters fly over and strafe the





German soldiers crossing the Elbe River over the bombed-out bridge at Stendal.

Germans. Even that doesn't scatter them. The Germans move up about 40 white ambulances, and the mob gets bigger. Finally, the Allies make an agreement with the Russians, and we let the Germans come over to surrender. We give them no help in crossing but leave them to their own devices. They string planks through the wreckage of the bridge, but it would take a gymnast to get across that way.

One German, carrying a huge knapsack, falls off the bridge and drowns. Others use rubber pontoons, assault boats, or logs—anything that will float. The few boats take what seems forever to make a round trip, and some Germans wait for rides in cold water up to their necks. An American GI borrows my binoculars, then says, “It looks like a shipwreck.” And these are only the deserters.

After about a week, German officers—a brigadier general and a lieutenant general—come with a white-flag party to a regimental command post of the 102nd in Stendal. They formally surrender what is left of two of the German armies. At first, they insist we occupy the

Witness to Barbarism

areas across the river so they can save face, but finally they agree to *our* conditions. After surrender, the German soldiers cross over in droves. They funnel into the approach on our side, where they must walk down the street to a shakedown point. None tries to escape, though we have only a handful of guards for every thousand of them. At the shakedown point, GIs search them, throwing the weapons into a big pile. Not one complains about anything. Not one German soldier cries “Geneva Treaty,” as others have done. They are simply tired of running from the “Bolsheviks” and glad to be alive.



Afraid of capture by the Russians, as many as 18,000 German soldiers a day surrender peacefully to the Americans. Above, the officers; below, the troops.



The GIs like to frisk the German officers most. They know it nettles their dignity, and so they do a slow, painstaking job. To add to the humiliation, they make the officers take off their shoes.

One GI takes a box of cigars from a general (we take in 18 generals today) and hands them out to German privates coming through the line. Each takes a cigar with a startled, quizzical look. About 75 feet down the line, another GI takes back each cigar as the soldiers pass. They look back, trying to figure out the game.

As the line progresses, German civilians, mostly women, line up about six deep on either side of the street. There isn't a wave or a smile. They just stand sadly, perhaps looking for loved ones. Not a word passes between soldier and civilian.

We keep most of the prisoners at the airport, where a single strand of barbed wire encloses them. There are only a few roving guards in Jeeps, but again no one tries to escape. With typical efficiency, their ranking officers start a chain of command and organize the mob into squared-off platoons. Then they ride the privates as if they were in training camp.

A German soldier clicks his heels and stands like a board while the officer shouts at him from two feet away: "Dummkopf!" I ask my interpreter why they don't just take it easy. He lived in Germany until 1938, and his answer is simple: "They're Germans. They never relax."

The 29th Division, my earlier outfit, is demobilized at München-Gladbach (later Mönchengladbach), and I take a day off for some visiting. I see my friends—including a good buddy, Chaplain Joseph Shubow of Boston—at division headquarters. He tells me he held a traditional Jewish Passover seder in March in the dining room of the

mansion of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. “It’s retribution come home, for Goebbels’ decree in November 1938 was to burn all the synagogues in Germany,” he says. Just thinking about this delights me for days.

Back at Stendal, we talk with some of the German prisoners, who say that the Allied bombings have been pure terror attacks against helpless cities. That the Allied attacks might have been strategic targets and reprisals for bombing England doesn’t occur to them—they haven’t been “told” that. They have no conception of how their war has affected the “inferior” people from the east, or of the suffering of the slave laborers. They know nothing of mass atrocities, never heard of them, and do not believe they have occurred. Not one admits to being a Nazi, not even the cold, cocky Hitlerjugend. All have been “forced” into the Wehrmacht.

The Germans are all positive that the Allies will fight the Russians when they meet. The Americans have no business in the war, they say. Churchill has tricked them into it. They keep asking whether they can go home, as the war is practically over. One asks to go to nearby relatives tonight: “I’ll be right back early in the morning. It’s such a short



The author at Stendal town square.

distance.” From the Bronx, he says he was visiting here and couldn’t get back. He insists, but I tell him to go back to his unit.

Gen. Kurt Dittmar, the Wehrmacht publicity chief, has surrendered at the River Elbe today. The interrogation team says it took no pumping whatever to get him to talk. Rather, it was hard to stop him. “The High Command was convinced of defeat after Stalingrad,” he said. “No doubt was left when the German counteroffensive failed to split us in Normandy. Your air forces made the invasion possible. We couldn’t get our reserves to the front. The Ardennes counteroffensive was a poor man’s choice, the only object being to gain four months to build the Rhine defenses. That attack cost too much, and it would have been smarter to spend everything at the Rhine.”

“Hitler is still in Berlin, running everything down to the details. The National Redoubt in the Alps is only a paper idea. He knew they would lose but never dreamed the destruction would be so terrible.”

Col. Edward Beale, my immediate supervisor, and I will have a private session with Maj. Gen. Hermann Eicher for four hours tonight. Eicher is “judge general” on the staff at Berlin, a rank corresponding to our assistant judge advocate general in Washington. We are interested in the German system of military justice.

Eicher is a typical, poker-back Junker. He shows the marks of an elite military class in bearing, demeanor, and Heidelberg scars—two deep ones on his left cheek. He is 65, tall, with a long, severe face. His uniform is elegant, with several flashy medals. He tells us: “The Wehrmacht has only two courts—the central court that tries both soldiers and civilians for high crimes such as treason, espionage, and sabotage, and the single-division field courts with general jurisdic-

tion that try soldiers only for military and social crimes.” The sentences of the field courts are final (no appeal) and are executed automatically.

In contrast, the American military has three courts in each division command, having fixed jurisdiction and limited power of punishment for offenses of varying severity. Each offense is tried in the lowest court having jurisdiction. We have an automatic appeal, and there is a searching review of serious cases before a sentence can be executed. The

penalties differ, too. A German soldier convicted of rape ordinarily gets one to three years while the American soldier gets mandatory life imprisonment or death.



Maj. Gen. Eicher with the author.

We acquire some documents, elaborate plans for activities of the Werewolves, mainly Hitlerjugend. There are specific instructions on how to snipe and run, cut communication wires, blow up bridges and important American installations, contaminate the water supply, and disable enemy vehicles. The Werewolves are supposed to continue their operations against the Allies no matter what happens in the war. We do have some trouble with these brats, especially with their sniping and cutting wires, but not enough for real concern. From nearby

woods they shot some men on the roads recently, and the other day we caught four of them red-handed, cutting our communication wire. The four boys are only eight, nine, 11, and 15 years old. MG (military government) sentences them to confinement. We catch another, older boy, who has planted dynamite on a pontoon bridge, and find several of their headquarters, including caches of explosives and weapons. Afraid the activities of the Hitlerjugend could bring reprisal, some German women tipped us off.

In Stendal, the division band assembles on the lawn in front of the regimental command post. A lot of German civilians gather, but no one knows the purpose of the show. After a while, a string of sedans pulls up, and the band blares out the "Internationale." Out of the cars step ten Russian officers, who face the band and salute. When the music stops, there is a spree of handshaking and backslapping all around. Then the officers obligingly pose for a mob of GIs snapping pictures with their "newly found" German cameras. The Russians look sharp in their smart uniforms. When they go into the command post, I notice that the civilians across the street stand as if fixed, their expressions a mix of disbelief and apprehension.

I find out later that the Russian officers' group includes Marshal Konstantin Rakossovsky and his aides coming from the Berlin area. We haven't yet met the bulk of the Red army, on the other side of the river. The Russian soldiers are waiting to cross until we take custody of all the German prisoners.

By the time we meet them here a few days later, several other contacts, including a meeting with Rakossovsky, have occurred. Because the river is difficult to cross, each side exchanges only small groups

representing similar units in each army. The bang-up affair we had planned doesn't materialize, but it is a friendly, enthusiastic meeting.

I meet one of the first groups of Russian officers coming over to our side. At first, everything is formal—they exchange salutes and all that. But when we start chatting and they see what ordinary guys we are, they wring our hands, slap our backs, and hug us. We can't help but like their robust, straightforward manner. They grin all the time and throw a lot of action into the conversation. They are physically rugged and plenty lively—not the stolid, grim types we expected.

Linkup with the Russians opens a pathway for the return of GI prisoners of war. The Russians bring them to us first-class. They have motor-powered rubber boats and planes to get to our side of the Elbe. I spend a whole evening talking with a group of returning American POWs. They are housed temporarily in a school building without running water, electricity, and toilets, but they have no complaints. They are so happy they don't know what to do with themselves. But some are starving, skin-covered skeletons.

As tired as they may be, not one man lies down. They pace and talk excitedly about how wonderful it is going to be to take a bath, to eat good chow, and to wear clean clothes. They are told that their shipment home will be as speedy as possible. I am interested in their treatment at the hands of the Germans because I



Yank taken at Battle of the Bulge.

wish to obtain evidence of treaty violations. But I soon find myself absorbed in their personal experiences.

Most of the men were taken in the Battle of the Bulge. One GI says, “Life in the German prison camps was rough. The guards didn’t beat us, but the routine ground us down. We were up at five o’clock every morning and given a cup of bitter, ersatz coffee but nothing to eat. Then we were formed into work gangs. We protested at first because that treatment was an outright violation of the Geneva Treaty, but it didn’t matter. The rule was ‘No work, no eat.’ We were made to work at repairing bomb damage, mostly the railroads, and building road blocks.

“At noon we took a half-hour rest but no food, then worked until 6:00 P.M. After marching back to camp, we got our one and only meal of the day—a cup of thin turnip or potato soup and some black bread, six men to a small loaf. Weeks of hard labor and a starvation diet of bad food made us stuporous and docile. We lost our will to attempt escape and could think of nothing all day but to get back to our straw ticks and lie down.”

Another skinny GI tells me, “The only thing that kept our hopes and interest alive was war news, and we did everything we could to get it. Whenever a prisoner overheard guards talking about the news, he told the others through the grapevine. In one camp, a GI radio operator rigged up a crystal set from parts he pieced together. He kept the whole place informed of BBC broadcasts. Another guy wrote the headline news on a small piece of paper, which he folded in a wad and put under the fence almost every night.”

Some others were prisoners much longer. One American taken at Tobruk 26 months ago dropped from 140 to 87 pounds and looks ten

years older than his 24 years. A British soldier, starved to a rail, carries a shriveled right arm in a sling. He was taken at Dunkirk five years ago: “About two years ago, while working on a railroad gang, I picked up a handful of dried peas that spilled out of a freight car. The Nazi guard broke my arm with a rifle butt before I put the peas in my pocket. I received no medical care; my arm is now useless.”

They all brighten when I ask about their liberation: “The Russians gave us everything we wanted, but liquor first. If you didn’t drink with Ivan,” one says, “he gave you everything he had.”

Russian soldiers, American military personnel, and liberated prisoners alike—all are waiting for a big change around here soon. Everybody is busy overhauling weapons and equipment. We have all had physical examinations, and the re-organization program is going at top speed. Everyone is counting service points, with most finding themselves a little short of the 92 needed for discharge.



*What a few vodkas can do!
Author with Russian lieutenant.*