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MEMOIRS

FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

V-E day recalls one German family's frightening 1945 journey along a road from despair to hope

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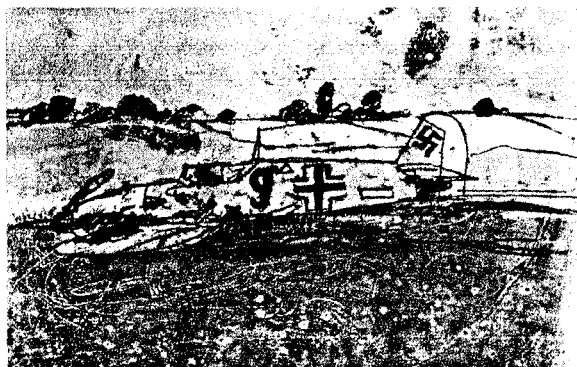
A bright morning sun. A rust-brown train under mortar fire. Gray figures in panic scrambling to hide. Faces wrapped in swaths of white. A muddy ditch. And along hillside, red crosses.

FOR THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO FOUGHT and won the war in Europe, V-E day meant the exultant, resounding vindication of good against evil. For me, then an eight-year-old boy and one of millions of Germans on the run, it would be a recurring nightmare. Afterward, I often dreamed of the final days of the war, of trains under fire, of soldiers being hanged for desertion, of refugees in desperate flight. In time the dreams would become more infrequent and the memories fuzzier, but never—even a lifetime later—would I forget the smell of May 1945, the strange combination of rubble and early summer, of something dying and something about to be born.

There were times when, in my child's perception, it all seemed like a great (if frightening) adventure; not until much later did I come to understand the full dimensions of the horror created by nearly six years of war. My family's experience pales into insignificance in the grim sweep of events, but it was one of millions of similar stories—a mosaic of suffering and hardship on all sides of the conflict. We were fortunate. We survived.

At the beginning of May 1945 it was clear to even the most zealous of Hitler's followers that his "Thousand Year Reich" was doomed. The Führer was dead. Berlin had fallen to the Red Army, and from west and east the Allies were sweeping into the German heartland. Some 4 million refugees from the eastern regions of the country were on the move toward the west. Terri-

fied by the tales of rape and pillage that had accompanied the advance of Soviet forces, they were trying to find safety behind American and British lines. The horror stories, told and retold and retold again, needed no Nazi propaganda to spread like wildfire. They certainly were heard in the town in which we lived: Gablonz to Germans, Jablonec nad Nisou to Czechs, in what was then known as the Sudetenland, a border territory with a mixed German-Czech population that Hitler had grabbed from Czechoslovakia in 1938.



The town was physically untouched by the war until early 1945, when we began hearing the distant thunder of artillery from the eastern front. In February, during the devastating Allied air raids against Dresden, 100 km away, we saw the night skies light up to the northwest. The big bomber streams, gatherings of silvery dots against the sky, routinely rumbled past as we watched from the backyard; air-raid sirens sounded, but the planes were not targeting a little town of no industrial or military significance. For me and my neighborhood friends, the most dramatic exposure to reality came the day a Luftwaffe Me-109 fighter slipped low over the houses, its engine silent, and crashed in a nearby meadow. We raced af-

ter it, a passel of kids looking for adventure. By the time we got to the landing site, rescuers had pulled the pilot from the cockpit—dead. The aircraft had so many bullet holes it looked like a sieve. We were stunned into silence.

My father was a company commander in an armored division, or what was left of it, somewhere on the eastern front. He had gone off to war at the age of 27, served as an infantryman during the blitzkrieg against France, and in 1941 was transferred to an armored unit in the east when Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union. We saw Father rarely, during brief furloughs and on medical leaves after he was wounded, the first time in 1942, then a year later at Kursk, during the largest tank battle of the war. We missed him, but that was the norm for every family I knew. The last time we had seen Father was in late April 1945, when he unexpectedly appeared for a six-hour visit, in filthy camouflage battle dress, his arm still bandaged from an old, oozing wound. He told Mother it was time to get out and head west. There were five of us at home—Mother, then 33; two younger brothers, 6 and 4; a sister about to turn 2; and me.

Mother would have none of it. Did she underestimate the threat or somehow expect the fortunes of war to turn? I never found out. She cited the practical reason that she did not want a repeat of the government-recommended, ultimately abortive evacuation of December 1944. We had spent three days on a crowded refugee train headed for the south. When we reached our destination, a hamlet on the Bavarian high plateau, Mother stood in the bitter wind at the station, took one look and declared that we were going back. The evacuation officials were flabbergasted: Why would anyone want to head east? She never explained why she chose to give up the relative security of that Bavarian hamlet, but I suspect she thought of herself as a city woman who could not cope with life in what she dismissed as a *Kuhdorf*, a cow town. We went back.

Four months later, with Father again at the front, Mother was still hesitating. Soviet tanks were only a few kilometers from our town. In the early morning hours of May 7, Father made the decision for her, in absentia. A three-axled Wehrmacht truck arrived at our door, barely visible in the blacked-out street. Mother shook us out of bed and hustled us downstairs. We brought two rucksacks and a baby carriage; there had been no time to pack more. Two soldiers bundled us into the truck. It was already crowded with other refugees and their gear—suitcases,

sacks, boxes—as well as two tin tubs filled with a white substance that we later discovered was powdered milk covering a pile of hand grenades. At the back were several barrels filled with rifle ammunition.

It was still before dawn when we set out. In the chill and damp, the 20-odd strangers on the truck huddled against one another in silence. I asked Mother where we were going. “West,” she said. “West.” Where had the truck come from? “Father sent it,” she said.

Every few kilometers we stopped. Amid much cursing, two soldiers—boys, really—who were riding the front fenders of the truck clambered down and set to tightening the wheel lugs. The vehicle, it turned out, had come straight off the assembly line, but because of parts shortages each wheel had only half the lugs necessary to keep it attached. As we rolled along, they worked themselves loose and had to be tightened again and again.

Sometime during the first morning, we crossed the Elbe River on a bridge choked with traffic: army trucks and fighting vehicles, refugee carts, and overloaded cars powered by wood gas, all headed west. At the eastern end of the span, panic erupted when military policemen announced that it was about to be closed. Somehow our truck was allowed to pass, but even as we inched across the bridge, Wehrmacht sappers were attaching charges to its stone arches, and moments after we reached the other side, we heard the dull explosive thump that indicated the span had been blown. A few minutes later and we would have been blocked on the other shore.

Allied fighter-bombers were everywhere, prowling for targets, flying so low that it was impossible to spot them until the very last moment. On the back of the truck, we piled mattresses against the canvas sides—as if that could have stopped cannon or machine-gun fire. Whenever our escort troopers sighted planes, the truck rumbled to cover—a copse of trees, a clutch of houses. The threat from the air was not new to us: during the December evacuation, when the refugee train had come under repeated air attack, Mother had covered the baby with her body and the rest of us had flattened out on the floor of the carriage, shielded only by its thin metal siding. At one point, an old man became so frightened that he jumped off the moving train. Our carriage was not hit, but the sense of helplessness had been overpowering—as it was now on the truck.



We covered perhaps 80 km the first day. The adults whispered their worries to one another: Were the Russians catching up? The children slept much of the time, or perhaps pretended to. Once in a while, one of us was allowed up front in the cab. When my turn came, I sat between the driver and another soldier and on top of a bright yellow leather case, the kind German kids used to carry schoolbooks; this one was filled with grenades. A rack under the windshield held two rifles with the troopers' helmets hung over the muzzles. Every time the

truck hit a rut, the weaponry rang like a bell.

The driver was a big, red-faced staff sergeant who spoke rarely and was nearly deaf. His name was Peise. Mother eventually told me that Peise was in Father's outfit and that Father had asked him to pick us up after the truck was ordered westward. What Peise's real mission was—if any—no one knew. It seemed strange that he had orders to go west when the Wehrmacht needed every man in the east. The sergeant shed no light on the question. He drove the truck with singular determination, fatigue

cap pushed into his neck, submachine gun slung across his chest, eyes on the road.

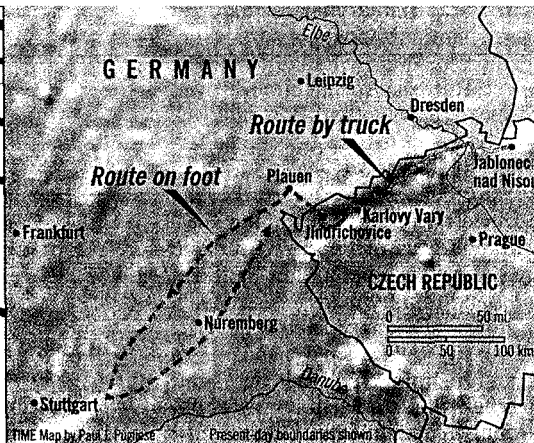
The truck hit a man that first day, a brown-uniformed trooper from the Arbeitsdienst, or labor service, who suddenly stepped into the road out of a long column of marching men. The impact spun him into the marchers, spilling them like bowling pins. Peise gripped the wheel more tightly and stepped on the gas. No one said a word. Nor did the sergeant stop a few hours later when one of the soldiers riding the front fender slipped off and fell beneath the treads of a tank. My brother, now 56, says that once in a while, in a dream, he still hears the dying man's screams.

All around us was the detritus of defeat and retreat—the final testament to a last desperate attempt to hold the line against the Soviet onslaught. The roadside ditches were filled with small arms and ammunition left behind by fleeing soldiers. Tanks and self-propelled artillery squatted in the fields, abandoned after they ran out of fuel. Twice we came across the corpses of German soldiers dangling from trees, cardboard epitaphs pinned to their chests: I AM A DESERTER. The children gawked, but no one else seemed to pay much attention.

The road was teeming with humanity. Retreating soldiers, many without weapons; trucks, pushcarts, bicycles, anything with wheels—loaded with people and their belongings; slow columns of those on foot, most shuffling, a few stepping out briskly, hardly anyone stopping. "Keep moving!" was the shout up and down the line—and they moved. Faces that were angry, sad, empty; eyes that questioned: How close were the Russians? Where was safety? What was ahead?

The Red Army almost caught up with us early the second day. I awoke to heavy firing all around. "Get out, get out!" Mother shouted, half pushing me over the truck's tailgate.

With everyone scrambling off, she followed with my brothers; my sister was slung in a rucksack on her back. We stepped into mayhem: a vast jam of stopped vehicles, soldiers, civilians running for cover, explosions throwing up steel and dirt. A soldier grabbed me and dragged me under a cement culvert. We were in a narrow valley in which the road and a railway trestle, halfway up along one of the side slopes, ran parallel. A train was stopped on the track, the huge red crosses on the carriages brilliant in the morning sun. "Ivan is



mortaring," the soldier said. "The swine is shooting at a hospital train." By now, men were struggling out of the carriages, then trying to get underneath to find protection against the shelling. In the bright light their bandages stood out whiter than white.

THE SCENE IS SHARPLY ETCHED IN my memory, but it unrolls like a movie at half speed, the white figures swimming slowly against the green of the hill. I think I was too excited to be afraid. Twenty years later, when I knew better, I would find myself under a similar culvert along a red dirt road in Vietnam's Central Highlands, where a U.S. Army patrol I was accompanying had come under Viet Cong mortar fire. Half paralyzed by fear, I tried to tell myself to be calm—and suddenly saw the train scene flash back so clearly that it seemed to be unspooling right then and there.

In the confusion of that earlier morning, fear had risen only when I realized I had lost sight of Mother. Then I heard her calling my name, and I saw Peise. He had his submachine gun pointed at a soldier. "Get that thing out of my way," he yelled at the top of his lungs, motioning to a truck that was blocking his. The soldier hesitated, as if to call Peise's bluff. The sergeant fired a burst in the air, and the man backed off, jumped into the cab of his vehicle and rocked it out of the way. When I spotted my mother, her face was ashen. The baby was still on her back, and she had her arms wrapped around my brothers. "I thought I'd lost you for good," she said. We scrambled back on our truck, which Peise had by now maneuvered into the clear. She took a

length of heavy string and tied the family together by the wrists. "That's the last time anyone gets lost," she said.

That was May 8, the last day of the war, though we did not know it yet. We had our own victory that day: after close to 48 hours on the move, we finally reached the American lines, just outside the old spa city of Karlovy Vary, then still called Karlsbad. The first G.I.s we came across were guarding a group of German POWs. The Americans casually motioned for Peise and his men to surrender their weapons, though not themselves, and waved us on. Soon we were in the city, where we were put up in a hospital, one family to a bed. Peise surrendered his truck, changed into civilian clothes and announced he was headed home for Swabia, to the southwest; we would be safe with the Americans, he said before he vanished.

Peise was right, but not for long. A day later, the Americans announced that the lines were being redrawn and that Soviet units would occupy the area, including Karlovy Vary, which the U.S. was abandoning. That triggered fresh panic—and it grew when two Soviet officers arrived to look over the hospital. One stopped in front of our bed, tickled my youngest brother under the chin with his riding crop and tried, half joking, half threatening, to get him to say "Heil Hitler." The ward froze. My brother said nothing. The man tried again. My brother remained silent. The officers left, laughing. The following day, after impassioned pleas by some of the refugees, American soldiers loaded about 100 of us on trucks and took us to the village of Jindřichovice, outside the Soviet area and close to what is now the German-Czech border.

If the greatest danger was behind us, the second part of our journey would be longer and ultimately tougher—and bring out a strength and resourcefulness in my mother she probably did not know she had. In her early 20s she had been something of a daring spirit—the only young woman in town to own a motorcycle, for example—but



marriage and children had settled her down. Now, all alone, not sure where her husband was, whether in fact he was still alive, she came into her own. Worried that another U.S. pullback might leave us in Soviet-occupied territory, she led us on what would turn into an eight-week, 700-km trek to the southwest, into the heart of the U.S.-held zone. Most of the way we walked, my sister on Mother's back, on forest paths and country roads; occasionally, there was the unexpected relief of a ride on a U.S. Army truck, a milkman's cart, a rare train. We slept in barns and haystacks and ate whatever we could scrounge: a handful of potatoes from a farmer, a warm meal from a soup kitchen, a loaf of bread from a G.I.—though Mother had to be persuaded by two demobbed German soldiers that it was all right to accept a gift from a former enemy.

The baby carriage, in which she had kept her jewelry and some of her money, was stolen along the way, which meant the contents of the two rucksacks were all we owned. Whenever we came across a crowd, she brought out her string; we might be embarrassed to be tied to one another, she said, but we would stay together. Sometimes, at night, I heard her cry. Eventually we reached the home of a relative but discovered there was no room for us. Mother bit down her tears, and we virtually retraced our steps, winding up in a refugee camp near the Czech border; we would live there for the next two years and then would move to northwestern Germany. When she grew older, she would proudly tell of how she had brought the family through the trek of 1945 and the hard times that followed: it was her life's greatest achievement.

We did not hear from Father until Christmas 1949, more than four years after we had last seen him. He appeared on our doorstep like a ghost off some missing-in-action list. He had been captured by Czech partisans on the last day of the war, shortly after one of his comrades shot himself because he did not want to be taken. Father was turned over to the Americans, who handed him to the Soviets; he spent the next four years in POW camps in the Soviet Union. Mother never doubted he was alive. He returned emaciated, fluent in Russian—and bitter about having lost 10 years of his life. He was lucky: of the 3 million German POWs held by the Soviet Union, many never returned. He died in 1976. My mother passed away in 1982.

For my generation of Germans, May 8, 1945, would come to mean many things beyond the immediate reality of defeat, rubble, hunger and humiliation. It would take



time, but as we came to comprehend the evil of the tyranny that had collapsed before our eyes, as we learned about the Holocaust, the 55 million war victims, the rape and pillage committed by Germans, May 8, 1945, emerged as a day of liberation. We came to hope that it would mark the beginning of the road to building a new country in a new Europe, a place where former enemies would become friends.

WHEN I RETRACED THE FIRST segment of our 1945 journey last month, I was accompanied by Lubos Beniak, a Czech friend made many years later. The weather this time was much colder and more blustery; the land was feeling the last breath of winter. Jablonec nad Nisou lay under a fresh coat of snow. It is a town of 40,000 where time seems to have stood still, except for the addition of a heavy-machinery plant and a few communist-era public buildings. The tram that used to run downtown has disappeared, and a new wing has been added to the elementary school I attended, but the old kino, which I recognized instantly, is still a movie theater. With the help of a city-hall official, who looked up the Czech name of the street on which we had lived, Lubos and I found our old apartment house. In my mind, I pictured an army truck outside the front door, a family stumbling aboard, but I was strangely unmoved.

As we headed west, out of the high country and its fir-covered slopes, the snow changed to a cold rain, and soon clouds obscured the hills to the north, toward the German border. Northern Bohemia is a place some Czechs describe as having no face, a reflection of the fact that most present inhabitants have no deep roots in the region, having settled there after the expulsion—officially known by Czechs as the “transfer”—of 3 million Germans after the war, in 1945 and 1946. Another reason is that industrialization, avidly pursued during the years of communist rule in Prague, has stripped much of the land of its character. West of Decin, where we had crossed the Elbe, there is a new bridge, but the forest and meadow—the green countryside I remembered—have yielded to smokestack and factory, pipeline and drab worker housing. Lignite mining has left massive scars and transformed vast stretches of land into a moonscape. “This looks like the end of the war,” Lubos said, pointing to one jagged excavation. Pollution haze darkened the clouds, and the smell of chemicals was in the air—a far cry from the bright skies 50 years earlier. Was there more promise then than now? I wondered.

We drove for about 250 km along the road Peise had taken. It had been widened and straightened but in parts was still lined by ditches and fruit trees. We looked for the valley where the hospital train had been shelled and, halfway through our journey, came on a place I thought resembled it: the railway track was there, though the slope was not nearly as steep as my child's memory had recorded. Other landmarks from the past must have been there; I spotted none but nonetheless felt oddly content just to be on the road I had first traveled so long ago.

Toward dusk we reached Jindřichovice, the place where the truck journey had ended and the long walk begun. The village lay quiet in the rain. In its midst, just below the church, we came across a marble slab with a gilded, five-pointed star and the Czech inscription IN ETERNAL MEMORY OF THOSE WHO DIED IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR. The little monument looked new—apparently erected after communism fell in 1989. The words embraced all: winners and losers, soldiers and civilians, the innocent and the guilty. To Lubos and me, men whose people had been at war with one another not all that long ago in the century's greatest tragedy, it seemed the appropriate, conciliatory epitaph. ■