

In Captivity

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[Editor's note: When the Bessarabian Germans were resettled in 1940, all able-bodied men were required to join the German Wehrmacht. As the end of WWII drew near, German soldiers began to surrender to Allied forces. This article tells the story of one Bessarabian German's experiences in an Allied POW camp.]

Late in the afternoon on April 26, 1945, we – various people, regular military, foreign workers, and others – were brought forward. Again and again we had to line up so they could scrutinize us. Sometimes one or the other was singled out and particularly observed.

During the first night in captivity it rained and we pressed ourselves against the walls of the houses in the yard where we were held or sought shelter elsewhere.

On Friday, April 27, we were loaded into trucks and transported north. In a school yard in Roth the trucks stopped and we received our first food in captivity. Then we went through Nürnberg and Fürth to Langenzenn by Neustadt. It rained all afternoon. We were soaked through and through and in poor condition. Outside Langenzenn the trucks stopped in an open field and we had to dismount. There was a very strict attitude. We were in an open field. There was not yet any barbed wire, but it was made unmistakably clear to us that they would shoot anyone who stepped over a certain line.

In the following days always more prisoners were brought and our space became ever more restricted. Naturally this did not proceed without friction. Our guards had taken long whips. With these they drove us like a herd of cows to one side. Several people were hit with the whips. Therefore each tried to stay in the middle of the herd.

However, also not too far to the rear because it could have happened that food could be served and one would have to wait until the next day. This food serving was delayed for a right long time. Again and again there was an ominous feeling about the other half of the camp. There was an easing of tension after the procedure of feeding was over and people were allowed to spread over the entire camp.

The provision of drinking water was also temporary. Large tanker trucks of drinking water drove up and people had to stand in a long line to get their water ration.

On the 29th of April I wrote, "The weather is cold and wet." If ever the sun came out, it was to us, standing in the open, a great gift. On one of these days, in broad daylight, a prisoner tried to flee. He didn't get far. The Americans did not try to pursue him, but just shot him down. Prisoners were taken away and new ones came. One did not know if it made sense to line up with those being taken away. On May 1, I tried it, but finally on May 2nd I managed to grab a place on a truck. No one could say where the trip would take us. On our way west we went through Kitzingen, Würzburg, Aschaffenburg, Darmstadt, Gross-Gerau, Oppenheim, Alzey. Then the trip ended and we stopped in Bad Kreuznach. On the way again and again I saw signs on trees and telephone poles, "Hitler is Dead." This was for us big news since we had been without news. The people along the way tried to throw bread to us. Sometimes it worked.

Between Bad Kreuznach and Winzenheim in western Talhang, above the Nahe River and below the grape vineyards, we were ordered to get out. Again we were unloaded in an open field. The grounds were catastrophic. We sank into deep slime over our ankles. We were among the first for whom this place was seen as a prisoner of war camp. Here there was also no fence, only

In Captivity

an open field. When night fell, the Americans used their trucks to build a truck city. All night the engines ran and they shone spotlights.

Only days later, the building of the fence began. There was no food. Tank trucks brought us water from the Nahe River. Naturally it was by far not enough for everyone. Because the greed for water, driven by the enormous thirst, caused such a scramble that much of the precious wetness was lost. A few days later, dysentery broke out. Now it was clear to me that it was not smart of me to push forward in Langenzenn. The dead, of whom there were many, were drug through the deep slime, piled up, and hauled away.

At first it was not hunger or thirst that tormented us most, but the deep slime, which didn't allow us to sit or lie down. Until total exhaustion we had to remain standing. In places where there was less slime, the prisoners tried to lie down very close together to rest and at the same time to get warm.

Then the big camp was divided into smaller camps and the prisoners were roughly sorted out. The worst enemies of the prisoners, the rain and slime, became unbearable. Without the tiniest shelter, most without covers, more than one hundred thousand men, we stood in the muck. A picture to be pitied.

We were soaked completely through and half starved. There was not the slightest indication of improvement! For the weak and sickly prisoners – the certain end. Many were near insanity and some also went insane. And food – there was no food.

In those days water allowances in the individual camps were strictly enforced. Later there was water. Water from the Nahe River flowed nearby. Weakened by the great stress, the people died like flies. The hygiene standards were indescribable. On the way to the latrine, people lay and died. No one concerned himself with the dying. Where the prisoners fell, they lay, covered with slime from head to foot. In the morning the guards dragged the dead together and hauled them away in an open truck.

One day someone determined that a farmer had already planted potatoes in one part of the camp. Like a mob they all plunged into this part of the camp. With fragments, tin lids, and with their bare hands the earth was ripped open in search of the potatoes.

In the first ten days of May, there was nearly a revolt. One day there arose in one camp a call for food. The inmates of the other camps took up the call, one hundred thousand strong it rang across the valley. The yelling for food was added to by pounding and hammering on tin cups and cooking dishes. Thereby the American guards were so frightened that they fired machine guns close over our heads. From all sides more soldiers were brought in military vehicles. Over loudspeakers, German-speaking officers tried to calm the masses.

The expanse of the camp was enormous, a couple of kilometers long and a good kilometer wide. On both sides of a long street were the individual camps. They were laid out so that between each two of them there was always a throughway for the guards, bordered on both sides by high barbed wire. The guards were able to surround a camp "skin-close" and enter the watchtowers without ever having to take a step inside.

In the first days, one could still approach to the outer fence of the camp. Citizens from Bad Kreuznach and the surrounding area sometimes tried to throw food to us over the fence. It was certainly forbidden because the guards tried to interfere. Later the outer fence was shielded by barbed wire so that no one could approach the fence.

In our camp there had earlier been an incident. An older prisoner could no longer tolerate it. He flung himself at the fence and tried to climb it. Before all our eyes, he was shot by the guards. Nights there were many escape attempts. Some had the good fortune of escaping the misery.

The day of the capitulation, May 8, 1945, was a day like all others. The prospects of improvement of the conditions in the camp were zero. The hunger and talk of food continued to be the main topic.

Until May 10 the prisoners were roughly sorted by lands of birth and origin. Thus I came into a camp with several thousand

In Captivity

Rumanians. They were older Rumanian peasants who had been drafted into the German army and did not speak a word of German. I also met a few Bessarabian Germans there. They were Erwin Schulz, Albert Flaig, Waldemar Hermann, also Mark, Traischel and others. Erwin Schulz was able to give me the address of our old neighbor, Klein, from Eigenhut-Schimke, Bessarabia. The family had fled to Glesien, Sachsen.

Since I was still to a certain extent fluent in Rumanian at that time, I was named a leader. I was in charge of 50 of these pitiful forms. On May 10, a former Rumanian national holiday, the half-starved Rumanians wailed, "Morim de foame!" "We are dying of hunger!" This gruesome hunger continued until WhitSunday, May 20, 1945. On that day we got our first bread and our first warm meal.

On May 21 I wrote, "Rain again!" This rainy weather continued the entire week.

Again and again the word went around that we would soon be released, but nothing happened.

At the end of May we were able to line up hoping to find work. Off and on it happened that a few were taken on a work detail. The Americans could always use a few willing workers. The prospect of being taken by a guard was very small because too many wanted to escape the boredom of the camp. Also there was often food when working with the Americans. Although I stood in line several times, I had no luck. However, one morning, it was May 28, it was entirely different. Two Americans drove up in a jeep. One stood up in an open car and looked for the tallest of the waiting mass. Thus I got to a work detail. With a couple of others, we were to build a latrine for the guards and hospital workers at the main gate. On June 4, the Americans had their "spending pants" on. I was allowed to select an overcoat and a jacket from a very large pile of clothes. I had nothing. Later the pile of clothes was lit on fire and burned.

On June 7, 1945, I wrote in my notebook, "All who live in Schleswig-Holstein, Hanover, Braunnburg, and in the North are to be

released." On June 9 it was written in a newspaper, thus it was told to us in the camps, that the states of Sachsen and Thüringen will be in Russian zone. For me this news was a serious blow because I had decided to go to Kleins in Glesien after my release.

I continued to work for the Americans. This allowed for more food and freedom of movement. When we had finished our work, the Americans took us along to town. In the hospital we did cleaning and re-arranging. Naturally we always looked for something to eat. In one kitchen in the hospital we made a find, and in the evening I was able to take 25 kilos of potatoes and 15 kilos of frying powder along to the camp. [Editor's note: Frying powder was used in cooking similar to oil or lard.] The food supply for my friends and me was assured for days.

A prisoner was never allowed near the camp kitchen. It was immediately to the left of the camp entrance, protected by additional barbed wire. Cooking took place in the open around the clock. Every three hours another part of the camp was authorized to get its daily ration of soup. In addition to soup there was bread and sometimes a spoon of sugar. But the bread supply was so short that there were days when it wasn't handed out because there wasn't enough. Our block leader – there 250 men under him – tied his bread to his waist at night so it could not be stolen.

Within the camps, order was maintained by Germans. These were mostly non-commissioned officers in the old army. Their friends were advanced to camp police. The camp leaders and their guards were feared. They had nearly life and death control over the inmates. To the right of the camp entrance was their dormitory. For the slightest violation there was draconian punishment, for example, taking away food or being locked up in the hole. This was an excavation 3x3 meters by 1.5 meters deep. In extreme heat and in rain, the offender had to sit out the day in the hole. It was a frightening torture.

Every day people from different occupations and laborers from whole areas were called to be released. One time it was

In Captivity

construction workers, then it was metal workers and mechanics. Several of our Bessarabian people signed on as metal workers. Later I learned from Traichel that those who signed on as metal workers were sent to France and only later returned home.

On June 15, 1945, the Bavarians were supposed to be released. I didn't go to work that day, but wanted to be released to Bavaria with several others.

The five of us, Mark, Flaig, Herrmann, Schulz, and I wanted to try. Mark had an address in the French sector in Bavaria in Mainroth by Coburg. So all five of us gave the same home address. But not until June 17, when the rest of the Bavarians were called up, were we included. We had to move from our Camp #7 to Camp #9. "Mainroth in Kreis Lichtenfels" is the home address I gave. I was the son of a peasant farmer and belonged to the estate of a certain Hans Vogel. For the first time, we were now officially registered. Until then no one knew anything about our internment in the camp. We were again deloused. For the last time they looked at the blood type designation under our arms to see if any of us belonged to the SS. We Bessarabians had our blood type tattooed under our arms and were therefore always afraid of being taken for SS troopers. On the afternoon of June 20, 1945, we got our release papers dated June 20, 1945. We had to throw our pay books on a big pile.

Should our imprisonment now really end? But about one question I had no answer and this worried me. Where were my parents? Did they get out of Wertgebrau okay? How and where could I find them?

June 20 was a wonderfully nice day. Already in the morning we were told to be ready to march out. About 11:40 a.m. we reached that point. In a long column we walked to Gensingen-Hoppenweiler railway station. For many the road was very difficult although it was not far from the camp to Gensingen. Almost all were very weakened. About 4:00 p.m. the train left.

We were all happy to leave the town and the camp behind us. The journey went to

Mainz. Not until the next morning did we go farther, past Darmstadt, Aschaffenburg, Gemünder, Karlstadt, to Würzburg. Again we were stopped for hours. Bamberg was the goal. Under severe guard we were driven through the streets of Bamberg late in the evening. The local people threw us bread. No one dared take one step out of the column. Since everything was handled so severely, we could hardly believe we were to be released. A sports stadium in Bamberg was our end station. Once more we were locked up and watched.

The 22nd of June was to be our last day in the American prison and also our first day of freedom. After a quick meal from the field kitchen, we were called one at a time, two similar appearing papers, along with our release papers, were pressed into our hands and we were loaded onto American trucks in groups depending on our designated home address. Lichtenfels was the destination of our truck driver. Since there were still ten men standing on the truck at Lichtenfels, he drove us on in the direction of Kilmbach. In Burkunstadt was then finally our end stop. Now they said, "Get out." We five Bessarabian Germans remained standing in the street. Which way should we turn? And what were we to do? No relatives. They gave us food cards for two days. The great feeling of being free did not set in. We were all somewhat depressed. After a short consultation we went to Mainroth. Schulz and Mack tried to talk to the mayor. The rest of us waited. Everything was so unreal, so depressing. We were free, almost free as birds! That first day of freedom we spent in Mainroth. We did not know for sure what we should do. We would almost have rather had a limited freedom. The unknown future drove away all joy.

Ted Weisenburger was born and raised in North Dakota and he's been a county judge in Benson and Walsh counties. He's taken his skills abroad by teaching in Ethiopia (also in Phoenix), and has served as a U.S. investigator in Berlin. He has 10 children (eight adopted) plus has also been a foster parent.