

The War has Arrived

In the autumn of 1944 air raid warnings came on a daily basis but no attack had yet occurred. On several occasions the Russian planes came to the edge of the suburbs and turned back. The aircraft were barely visible to the naked eye due to their distance and height but their vapour trails left us in no doubt about their presence.

Life was getting tough for the civilian population. Everything was in short supply, especially food and clothing. Our family was a little better off because Dad grew vegetables throughout the summer, and he also bred rabbits for meat. When he had too many vegetables he gave some away; selling the surplus was pointless because money was just about worthless. When he was lucky, he exchanged vegetables for something useful.

The Wehrmacht called Dad twice more to join the forces, but each time he was sent home on medical grounds. I was convinced he'd grossly exaggerated his disabilities, because I knew he hated serving in the army and had no wish to die for what he called 'the wrong cause'. Staying out of the army must have been quite a feat for him, because the Wehrmacht wasn't fussy about whom it conscripted late in the war. I lost four uncles on the eastern front, all of whom were brothers of Mum.

Uncle Paul came home from the Russian front some time during the autumn. He came on crutches because one of his legs was missing. I tried to get him to talk about his experience but he wasn't interested. It was a generally accepted belief that the army would discharge him due to his disability. However, some time later he was fitted with a stump, and a few weeks after he was ordered to report to a unit for duty. Uncle Paul wasn't happy about the unexpected development, but it was a question of either obeying or getting picked up as a deserter and shot.

One night late in 1944 it happened; the first air raid on Breslau by the Russian air force. Compared with the massive Allied bombing raids in western Germany, it was only a small raid. Considering it was the first one, however, it was bad enough. About eighty people died that night. I spent the duration of the attack in the cellar with the rest of my family. When the nearby explosions shook the walls of our house, I doubted I'd see the light of morning. The next day some schoolmates and I went searching for souvenir shrapnel from bombs and anti-aircraft grenades and we found we had the best rate of success on flat roofs.

After school one day I was playing in the Domain with friends my age. At one stage a boy arrived who had some interesting news: in a rarely used section of the railway goods yard he'd seen a lot of discarded rifle cartridges, and he offered to take us there. We agreed, and on arriving there we walked with him to a heap of sand from which the rifle cartridges were protruding. We were soon busy removing the cartridges from the sand, and when we thought we had enough we carried them back to the Domain. There the authorities had just recently finished building a public air raid shelter. The concrete slab above the entrance to it seemed to be as good a place as any to open the ammunition, so we put the removed gunpowder in a heap nearby. We then laid a fuse from the gunpowder. By the time we'd opened the last cartridge, night had fallen. We then sent one of the boys home to fetch matches, and when he returned someone lit the fuse and everyone stepped back. The gunpowder went off with a mighty flash. People came running out of their houses to investigate. It was a good time for us to disappear.

A few days later the parents of all the boys involved in the incident received letters from the police requesting them to take the boys to the station. I went with Dad and was very worried about how I'd be punished; it was common knowledge that the Nazi authorities dealt very harshly with those in possession of weapons or ammunition. My interrogators were two Gestapo officers in civilian clothing, who asked me to tell my side of the story. While they were listening they must have realised that it was only a childish prank, because afterwards we heard nothing more about the incident.

Christmas came round again, and although presents were scarce the Christmas spirit remained alive. Instead of roast goose, Christmas dinner, which is held in Germany on Christmas Eve, consisted of smoked pork and dumplings. Afterwards Dad opened a bottle of home-made sweet wine and handed all us boys half a glass. For me this was the high point of the festivities. Boxing Day was spent with my grandparents in their apartment at the Ring at the centre of the city. The city had always been one of my favourite places. At the end of 1944 the shops were practically empty of goods, but decorations remained for us to look at and be reminded of better times.

Propaganda placards were everywhere stating slogans such as 'Victory or Bolshevism' 'Total war', 'Wheels must roll for victory', 'Save coal', and 'Beware of spies'. The city was blacked out after sunset; every bit of light had to be covered. Severe penalties confronted offenders. Even vehicles had covers over their headlights to enable only a small stream of light to be beamed on the road.

One morning in early January 1945 Dad went to work as usual but just over an hour later returned with a horse and cart. He'd been instructed to travel to Trebnitz, about thirty-five kilometers away, in order to pick up an article for the hospital he worked for. He invited us boys to join him for the ride. Horst wasn't interested but Hans and I jumped at the chance. It was a cold but windless day and the land was covered with a blanket of snow. Before leaving, we put on our warmest clothes and packed blankets for extra warmth. When we reached the main road to Trebnitz we saw an unbelievable sight. As far as the eye could see, the road was covered with people – or, more to the point, refugees. Most were women, children and older people. Some travelled by tractor and trailer and some by horse and cart, but most were on foot. Some pulled handcarts along, and others carried their most prized possessions on their backs or in their hands. When Dad asked what was going on, he was informed that all the people were fleeing the advancing Red Army. Seeing all those refugees made me realise that the war wasn't far away anymore.

On several occasions we were stopped by the chain dogs, the German military police, recognisable by the fact that each man wore a steel chain connected to a metal chest plate around his neck. Because we were travelling east, they were suspicious of us. They demanded authorisation documents for the journey to Trebnitz. In the villages along the road we could see farm animals standing bewildered in the snow. The cows mooed continuously; Dad told us they were in pain because they needed milking, Dad also mentioned that the farmers had let the livestock out of the stables in order to give the animals a better chance of survival, before they themselves packed up and joined the refugees on the road. On some telephone poles and trees people were hanged. It was claimed they were either deserters from the German army or spies. The chain dogs had caught them, judged them and hanged them.

With the onset of evening the temperature dropped considerably, so we wrapped ourselves in our blankets; our feet, however, stayed icy cold. Late in the evening we reached our destination, a hospital. Due to the lateness of the hour we'd missed dinner, which was very disappointing because I'd been looking forward to eating something hot. The dining room was filled with refugees, most who seemed to be farmers. When they heard there was no food for us, they sent a man to his wagon and he returned with slices of pork and rye bread. A woman cooked the meat for us in the hospital kitchen and gave us mugs of hot tea with sugar and milk. I found this strange; up to that time I'd never heard of the custom of mixing milk and sugar in tea. The only times I had tea was when I was sick, and neither sugar nor milk was added. Now I had something hot in my stomach I felt a lot better.

Later that evening each of us was given a bed in a large room. I couldn't sleep; all night I could hear heavy artillery bombardment. A battle was in progress not too far away. It frightened me to think that during the night the hospital might be overrun by the Russians. Early next morning Dad got us moving. The first stop was the mess hall for something to eat. The place was empty of refugees; they must have left during the night. Wasting no time, we got going straight after breakfast. The battle was still raging and now sounded even closer. The road ahead was clear of refugees except for the odd straggler.

It was already dark when we got home, where an unpleasant surprise awaited us. Although the house was empty, red-hot embers remained in the fuel stove. On the kitchen table a note from Mum read: *Gone to my parents at the Ring*. Slightly confused, we went to the old farmhouse. There we found that Aunt Frieda also seemed to have left her home in a hurry. Dad decided to drive to the police station. Along the way I found it odd that no people were to be seen on the streets. When we arrived at the police station, a constable informed Dad that the Russians had broken through the defences. This had made it necessary to evacuate the whole population from the eastern side of the Oder. The constable added that the problem should be rectified within a few days, which meant the people could come back as soon as the danger had passed.

From the police station we travelled to the hospital where Dad worked. After putting the horse into its stable, we went by tram to the Ring. As expected, the family was there, as well as Aunt Trude, one of Mum's sisters. No one was taking the military situation seriously; all thought they'd be back home within days.

The Evacuation

The future moved in a different direction, however. Several days later the Nazi government declared Breslau a fortress, which meant the city would be defended and the civilian population evacuated. Exempt from leaving were all able-bodied men; they were needed for the defence of the city. Dad wasn't a member of the military but he was required for fire-fighting duties. I remember seeing him standing on the snow-swept railway station platform when a train took us away. No one knew where the train was going, only that it would travel west, deeper into Germany. The journey was a stop-start affair – mostly stop and not much start. The reason for the slow travelling lay in the fact that all the railway lines were overcrowded with military and refugee traffic and many tracks had been destroyed by bombing.

At midnight, more than twenty-four hours after the train had left Breslau, we arrived in Striegau; the distance travelled had only been forty-five kilometers. Even at that late hour, local authority officials were waiting on the platform. After all the passengers had disembarked, the officials took them to temporary homes. In our case home was to be a two-storey building that had only two occupants, an elderly couple. Next morning I got out of bed and went to the window to take a look at my surroundings. The glass was frozen over with ice, which made it impossible to look through. I breathed against the ice in a small area until I'd melted a hole large enough for me to peek through.

What I saw excited me very much: a beautiful mountain within easy walking distance. The mountain was covered in ice and snow, and on its peak stood a large wooden cross. Later that day I discovered the mountain was called Kreuzberg (Mount Cross). Excitedly I ran back into the bedroom where Hans was still asleep. I dragged him out of bed and to the window. He was less than happy to be woken in that way, but when he saw the mountain he became restless too and wanted to go and have a closer look.

After breakfast we got going; our aim was to climb to the peak. It turned out to be a tricky undertaking. Due to the unfavourable conditions, we repeatedly stepped on loose rocks under the snow cover, which several times caused us to slide downhill. Another problem was that the snow and ice made our fingers cold and numb. About halfway up I considered abandoning the task. Going downhill would have been no easier or safer though, so we kept climbing. At one point I looked upwards in order to estimate the distance to the peak. To my surprise I saw a number of people leaning against a railing and watching us. When we eventually reached the peak, I realised we were standing on a lookout. Steps led up to the peak from the other side of the mountain, which made me feel embarrassed and foolish. We didn't go to school in Striegau, so we had plenty of time to explore the district.

Once a large column of men in prison uniform marched through the town. They were guarded by members of the Volkssturm, a new unit that comprised mainly elderly men and teenagers. Many of the prisoners ran into the houses beside the road to ask for food. I followed one who ran into the house we were staying in. He asked the women for something to eat. Although his German wasn't good, he was understood. He was about thirty years old and was very jumpy. He made the women understand that he had to be back on the road in a hurry. The women gave him what they could spare and he took it and ran back to the road, where he disappeared amongst the other marchers.

Over the radio came reports that Breslau was surrounded by Russian forces and that heavy fighting was in progress. There were also reports that the Russians were closing in on Striegau. German troops arrived and built defence positions; on the outskirts of the town they dug trenches and made embankments for machine guns. Hans and I watched them on many occasions. Some of the soldiers were Asians and wore strange fur hats. I once asked one of the German soldiers whether the Asians were Japanese. 'No. Mongolians', he replied.

At some stage Mum received a message from the local authorities telling her to be at the railway station on a specific day and at a specific time, along with everybody connected to her, in order to continue the journey westward. On the morning of the departure day, the Stukas arrived to bomb the Russian advance forces which were only a couple of kilometers away. The planes dived

with ear-piercing siren screams. After dropping their bombs on their targets, they flew straight up out of reach of the explosions. The bombardment lasted until just before midday, when the Stukas left.

Not long after, the local air raid sirens sounded the warning alarm. The women, however, decided to go to the railway station early, and along the way the sirens sounded the all-clear. At the station we found the train but it was already full to capacity with people. Fortunately, due to the presence of our baby Hannelore, several soldiers took pity on our family and set out to make room for us.

After we'd settled into a carriage, Hans and I decided to return to the platform because the departure was still a couple of hours away. The platform was crowded with people, all who wanted to get away before the Russians arrived. Some German soldiers had congregated near the exit gate. I noticed that they were deep in discussion and that they were repeatedly pointing skywards. I could also hear that they were talking about our planes. I followed their skyward glances and saw a squadron of planes heading towards the railway station. There were about ten bombers of the two-motor type and a smaller number of fighter planes. Even though the planes flew very low, I could see nothing out of the ordinary. I took the soldiers' actions as a guide; they didn't notice anything unusual either.

No one noticed the planes were Russian. As they flew over the station, they dropped their bombs. Immediately all hell broke loose. The noise from the explosions was ear-shattering and the crowd ran in aimless panic along the platform. I realised that by being smaller than the adults around us, Hans and I were in grave danger of getting trampled to death, but there was nowhere to go. I therefore pushed Hans against the boundary fence and joined him: that had to do.

The planes were gone quickly and the bombs had narrowly missed the station, but another wave of planes was approaching. Luckily their aim wasn't better than their colleagues. About five minutes later a third wave approached. Now at last the German anti-aircraft batteries had woken up and fired on the planes. A bomber got hit; it appeared to smash into a house and exploded. This time the planes' target was the town centre; they dropped their bombs and left. These incidents prompted some passengers to see the stationmaster to ask permission for the train to leave early. The passengers were successful and the train left soon after. Just outside the station it passed a deep crater – the bomb had missed the tracks by metres.

The following journey was again stop-start, and much time was wasted on side tracks. Next morning the train entered Dresden. There I saw a few bomb-damaged buildings but all in all the city had escaped serious damage. The train stood all day in the main railway station, which was crowded with refugees. At about midday the passengers were supplied with sandwiches and hot soup by the German Red Cross, which was much appreciated. Just before dusk the train began to move again. It travelled a few kilometers out of the suburbs and then stopped. The locomotive was disconnected from the carriages and was driven back in the direction of Dresden. The passengers settled down in the carriages for another cold and uncomfortable night.

Some time before midnight we could hear an unusual sound coming from the west. At first I didn't know what it was, but the sound grew louder and louder and the air began to vibrate from the

rotation of hundreds or thousands of propellers. By this time most people had left the carriages to look at the sky. They realised what was happening: an air raid on Dresden was about to commence.

The noise was deafening; these weren't the much smaller planes of the Russian air force but the big four-motor type of the western Allies. Visible to the naked eye only as shadows, they flew straight over the train and on reaching the city dropped their bombs. In no time at all the sky above the city turned red from the fires and vibrated from the explosions. The bombers kept coming. Hans and I stood with the other passengers beside the train and watched the destruction in silent awe. The planes could easily have dropped a few bombs on the train, but surprisingly no one was thinking of his or her own safety. It made me shudder when I thought of the people I had got to know in the railway station; they had very little chance of survival. The stream of bombers seemed to be never ending, but eventually the last squadron dropped its bombs over its target and continued to fly back to its base. The city, however, kept on burning. No one got much sleep that night, and no one expected a locomotive to arrive from the direction of Dresden in the morning. To everyone's surprise, a locomotive did come. As it passed the carriages, the driver leant out of the window and shouted, 'Dresden is completely destroyed'. This was no news to us.

The train moved on soon after and again it was a slow journey. In the evening we stopped at a station by the name of Oberwiesenthal. It was the end of the line and all passengers were requested to leave the carriages. After we'd assembled on the platform, we were told to board a small-gauge train that had been waiting for us in another part of the station. After the transfer was completed, our new train moved out and travelled into the nearby mountainous countryside, stopping at every station. On each platform stood local authority officials holding lists of names. The people whose names were called out had to leave the train. At a station displaying the name Geyer, our turn came.

After vacating the carriage, we were taken by a young town official to our temporary home, an apartment in a three-storey block. An old man, Mr Gephard, lived alone there. He'd been notified that our family would be staying there – a mother and her six children. Mr Gephard kept one bedroom for himself and we occupied the other two bedrooms. The kitchen and bathroom were shared by all, an arrangement that was to work well. Our grandparents and Aunt Trude were given accommodation in the same building. The following morning I went with Hans to explore the surroundings. We found Geyer to be a nice little country town with beautiful scenery.

We had to attend school in Geyer. Horst and I went to the high school; Hans and the older girls went to the primary school. Just outside Geyer was a mountain by the name of Binge. It wasn't very high but consisted entirely of rock and was ideal for climbing. Hans and I spent a lot of time and energy there. On one occasion we attempted to reach a part of the mountain we hadn't been to before. To get there we had to cross a tricky spot where we had to move across a slanting rock, the lowest side of which ended over a cliff. We decided the best way across would be to lie with our backs towards the rock and move on hands and feet – that way we could use our shoes as brakes to stop us from sliding down over the edge.

Hans was first to go and had no problem going over the obstacle. Then it was my turn. What followed I never found a satisfactory answer for. Somehow the soles of my shoes couldn't get a hold on the rock, or maybe I just froze. I knew I was going over the edge. It was the end – there was nothing I could do to save myself. Suddenly a hand grabbed my coat near the neck and pulled me up

and sideways, back on safe ground. A familiar voice said, 'That could have hurt'. My lifesaver was a fifteen-year-old boy I knew well – another refugee, but from East Prussia.

Due to this near fatal incident I decided to explore other places, because there were many things of interest in the nearby woods and hills. In Geyer, Horst and I again had to join the Jungvolk organisation. At school one day, all Hitler Youth and Jungvolk members were informed that an army officer would be arriving next day and would be speaking about his experiences on the eastern front. He would talk mainly about an incident during which he and his unit were encircled by Russian forces before subsequently breaking out. For this feat he'd been awarded the Knight's Cross with Swords and Diamonds, the highest German military order of the time.

On the following evening boys and teenagers of both gender streamed towards the amphitheatre, which was located deep in the forest. When I got there it was already dark. With its natural and man-made setting, the place looked very impressive. Some Hitler Youth members in uniform stood holding flaming torches on the rocks surrounding the arena; others carried trumpets. A blast from these instruments got the show going, and on a wooden stage Hitler Youth officials introduced the officer to us. He was a young man smartly dressed in his uniform, and he was carrying his new medals. The introduction completed, it was up to him to tell his story. It went something like this: 'Yes, I was encircled with my unit by the Russians for about a week, and then I decided to break out. We therefore threw a few hand grenades to our left and a few to our right. This way we made it.' A Heil Hitler salute followed and then he left the stage. The speech had lasted no more than five minutes. I was very disappointed; at the very least I'd expected a much more detailed story of heroism and so had my friends.

About that time Geyer underwent air raid warnings on a daily basis. Large numbers of planes flew over the town – big Allied bombers with four propellers. Like clockwork, they came in the evening between ten and eleven o'clock. Geyer wasn't their target; they only flew over it. Nevertheless, bombs fell on the town some nights. Most bombs were incendiaries that caused fires, but they were usually put out quickly.

One night something unusual happened. Previously the bombers had never come back after hitting the targets; they always took a different route from the bombing sites to their bases. However, this night they returned; they still had the bombs on board and dropped them aimlessly. Judging by the sound of the explosions, most of the bombs fell in the surrounding forests. A few incendiaries fell on the town, but as usual the ensuing fires were quickly extinguished. The following morning I went with Hans to the forest for a look around. What we found was hard to believe: the ground under the trees looked like a sieve. Thousands of black holes marked the ground where incendiaries had fallen and burnt themselves out. Had the forest not been saturated with melting snow it would surely have burnt down.

At one point we met a group of boys standing around an unexploded incendiary bomb that looked like a silver-grey stick of aluminum less than a metre in length. One boy put a foot on one end of the bomb and then got hold of the other end and pulled upwards. The pressure caused the bomb's guiding part to break off, thereby exposing a red button on the bomb. The boy told the other boys to step back while he pressed the red button, and then he also stepped clear. A few seconds later the bomb went off like a big firecracker, throwing burning phosphorous material in a radius of about four

metres. It wasn't hard to see that all the boys enjoyed themselves immensely. After that experience Hans and I set about finding unexploded bombs ourselves, and we found several. Because I was a year older than Hans, I was the leader and the one who activated the bombs. This was a lot of fun. We also found deep craters in the ground where high-explosive bombs had come down.

Some time later the planes changed tactic and came during the day instead of night. Almost every morning at about eleven o'clock they flew over the town. When the sirens sounded the alarm, the teachers immediately dismissed us all with the recommendation that we go home or seek an air raid shelter. Instead of joining our family in the cellar under the apartment building, Hans and I would run up a nearby hill. There beside a pond stood two medium-size trees that we used as cover and from where we watched the planes fly over us. The planes were mostly American Flying Fortresses and flew very low; the pilots in the cabin and the gunners in the turrets were faintly visible. There were no fighter escorts, but, considering the large number of aircraft involved in the raids, they probably wouldn't have been necessary. The Luftwaffe was seldom around – rumour had it that there was a fuel shortage.

On one of these days we learnt that watching the planes could be fatal. As we watched another flight of hundreds of planes, a high-explosive bomb was dropped on the hill nearest to ours. It hit a barn – the only building there – and was a bullseye. The barn disappeared in a cloud of smoke and debris. This prompted us to conceal ourselves better. Mum was very unhappy about our absence from the cellar. However, I couldn't have stayed in the cellar voluntarily, because I hated the thought of being trapped in a collapsed building and being burnt or drowned or simply bleeding to death without any chance of rescue. If I had to die, I wanted it to happen outside in the open.

On another school day the teachers assembled all the students in the yard and told us that the planes had dropped large numbers of potato beetles for the purpose of destroying the potato crop. All the children were therefore required to support the war effort by going to the district's potato fields and searching for the beetles. The class I belonged to was taken to a potato field several kilometers out of town. There the teacher allocated each boy a row of plants and told him to start searching. Most of the boys didn't like this, so instead we kept ourselves amused by throwing lumps of dirt at each other. The success rate of the entire school consisted of two potato beetles; however, it was generally understood that they belonged to the local, not the imported, variety. As time moved on, the planes changed the landscape around Geyer considerably. The bombers had dropped large amounts of shredded silver foil for the purpose of disrupting the German radar installations. The foil hung from power and telephone lines, and many trees also glittered with it when the sun shone.

One day the old man, Mr Gephard, approached Mum. He wanted to invite all three of us boys to join him on a trip to his relatives in another town. Mum, however, left the decision up to us. It came as no surprise that Horst wasn't interested – he liked to study and had no interest in the activities of his younger brothers. The feeling was mutual. Hans and I were happy to accept the invitation.

It was a bright, sunny morning when we started the journey. The distance to the old man's relatives was just over ten kilometers and had to be made on foot because there was no public transport. The road took us through picture book landscapes: through forests, over hills and through meadows covered by the yellow blooms of wild primulas. Several times the quiet was broken by a lone fighter plane flying above. Somehow that didn't fit in with the peaceful surroundings.

We soon lagged behind our old companion and we were surprised at how well he walked. As time moved on we got thirsty, a problem we solved by drinking the crystal-clear water in the creeks beside the road. About an hour before midday we reached our destination. We were exhausted but our much older mate looked as fresh as he did before leaving Geyer.

After meeting Mr Gephard's relatives, Hans and I went sight-seeing. It was a typical mountain town for that region. Through the centre of town moved a fast-flowing stream, and where the houses ended the forest took over. There was evidence of bombing even there. An air mine had exploded over a house and removed all the roof tiles. The walls remained standing but had cracks all over them like a jigsaw puzzle, and looked as though they might collapse at any moment.

There wasn't much more to see, so we turned round and walked back to Mr Gephard's relatives and arrived there just in time for lunch. In the middle of the afternoon we started the return trip. I hated the idea but there was no other way of getting back to Geyer. After walking for some time, we lagged behind as before. When Mr Gephard reached the halfway mark, he stopped and waited for us to catch up. We then sat under a shady tree and our companion unwrapped a parcel that contained cake and a bottle of lemonade. While we ate, the old man told us a few interesting anecdotes from his younger days. In time we went back on the road to finish the now rather tedious journey, and I was more than pleased when I stood on the last hill before Geyer and saw the town in the valley below.

During the last days of the war many soldiers marched through Geyer. They knew the war was almost over and lost. Their main purpose was to march towards the American lines in order to be taken prisoner. It was common belief at the time that the Americans treated their POWs best. The massive raids by Allied planes had stopped days before the end, but single Allied fighter planes were constantly in the air during daylight hours, on the lookout for targets.

One morning I heard a lot of commotion. People were approaching each other with the news that the war was over and so I went and found myself a newspaper. There it was – front – page news. All the people I came into contact with were happy the hostilities were finally over, even though Germany had lost the war. There were no celebrations though, nothing of that sort at all. The people knew the hardships weren't over yet and that a period of foreign occupation lay ahead. In real terms the first day of peace was quieter than the previous day; this was mainly due to an absence of planes in the sky. One of my main interests that day was speculating how long it would take before I could expect to see chocolate in the shops again. Later that day Hans and I walked along one of the main roads outside the town. On both sides lay massive amounts of weapons and military equipment. Soldiers must have discarded it on hearing that the war was over.

Days later I walked with Hans and a number of school friends along a road through the forest. At one point three strange – looking vehicles passed us and disappeared from sight round the first curve. It took only seconds before one of us shouted, 'They're Americans!'. As if commanded, we turned round and ran back to town, where we found the vehicles – jeeps – parked outside the town hall. Soon the soldiers came out of the building. There were six of them, all young and seemingly very relaxed. They got into the vehicles and moved on. The town nearest to Geyer in an easterly direction was occupied by the Russians, and terrible stories came out of there. Town officials and

suspected Nazi supporters had been hanged in public. How much truth was in the rumours wasn't clear, but the stories frightened many Geyer residents.

Going Home

Now the war was over, I became very restless and was looking forward to returning home. I therefore approached Mum to find out her plans for going back to Breslau. Her opinion was that the journey was much too dangerous and that we'd just have to wait until things were more settled and much safer.

However, Mum's words didn't stop me wanting to go. I missed my old friends and wanted to know whether Dad was still alive. I also liked the idea of getting involved in adventure along the way. In school there were exams, and I did badly; my mind wasn't focused on learning. Even my teacher was surprised, because I usually did well in class. I repeatedly pestered Mum to pack up and go home, but her answer was always the same: 'We have to wait for the right time.' My brain told me she was right but that didn't stop my resolve to go.

Eventually I came to a decision: I'd go on my own. I informed Hans of my intentions, and his reaction was that he wanted to go along. After giving the idea some consideration, I decided to take him. This proved to be a decision that I would regret for the rest of my life. We both knew Mum wouldn't give us permission, so it was agreed we'd go secretly.

Our first chance came a few days later. Mum had gone shopping with Horst, and only the girls were in the apartment. This stirred us into action. We each packed a backpack and made sandwiches for the journey, after which I wrote a note for Mum and placed it on the kitchen table. It roughly stated: *We are going home, and don't worry.* Traute, our eldest sister, wanted to know what was going on. When we told her we were going home to Breslau, she wanted to join us, but we refused.

After saying goodbye, we left the apartment and headed for the railway station. There we bought tickets to Oberwiesenthal. On arriving there we looked at the timetable. Our intentions were to travel first to Dresden. However, we found that the first train going in that direction wasn't due to leave for several hours. Standing around waiting on the platform gave me much time to reconsider what I'd done. I knew I'd hurt Mum badly by running away with Hans, but the urge inside me to go was stronger than the guilty feeling.

Our presence on the platform hadn't gone unnoticed. A woman who lived in the same apartment house in Geyer confronted us and wanted to know why we were there. I was never a good liar, and so it didn't take her long to realise that we were running away. To my horror she insisted that we go back with her to Geyer, and I felt we had no choice. I was very uneasy about confronting Mum after what I'd done, but I never considered abandoning the journey; it would simply have to be postponed. We found Mum very upset, and it was easy to see she had been crying, but she didn't even give us an earful - she was just happy to have us back.

The next opportunity to leave came on 25 May 1945. I'll never forget it; it was Han's tenth birthday. I was eleven at the time. Mum and Horst were out. Hans and I therefore took a chance and

again put our plan into action. I took half a loaf of bread from the cupboard and then I wrote another note for Mum and again left it on the table. We then headed for the station. About two hours later, we arrived in Oberwiesenthal, where we went straight to the timetable for the national rail network. We discovered there were no departures to Dresden until the following morning. However, a train to Zwickau was leaving in a couple of hours. Zwickau wasn't in our intended direction, but we assumed that, considering it was a sizable city, getting a connection to Dresden from it would be easy.

We went to the ticket office and found it closed. Two hours later it got dark. The train arrived and the ticket office remained closed. We were getting desperate; people were leaving and getting on the train and the ticket office was still closed. The train was just about to leave when I decided to ask a traveller for advice. He told me, 'Don't worry; get on the train – if the ticket collector wants your money he'll come and get it.' This was good enough for us, so we got into a carriage. During the journey several people wanted to know what we were doing on our own on a train at that late hour. We told them we were going home to Breslau. Most of the travellers seemed to be impressed and wished us good luck.

The train arrived in Zwickau at about midnight and terminated there. We therefore left the carriage and went to look at the nearest timetable. The next train to Dresden wasn't due to depart until morning. It seemed we had a long wait ahead of us. While we walked aimlessly from one end of the platform to the other and back again, it occurred to me that we didn't have enough money even to get halfway. Somehow I hadn't thought of that.

All the platforms were crowded with people, mostly foreigners. I guessed the war had uprooted most of them from countries further to the east and that they were now travelling back to their homeland. All of them carried their meagre possessions in bags or cardboard boxes. We also saw the first Russian soldiers, who seemed to be doing some repair work on another train. It struck me as odd that all of them, except for an officer, had shaven heads. Later we discovered the Russian army kept its combat troops bald as a protection measure against lice. Having been exposed to years of Nazi propaganda we kept well clear of the soldiers.

After we'd waited for about an hour, loud shouting emanated from a goods train that had stopped at the far side of the station. The shouting was in a foreign language that we couldn't understand. In reaction to the shouting, many people jumped from the platforms onto the tracks and ran towards the goods train. We watched them with interest and considered our options. We were convinced the goods train would be travelling east. Maybe there was a chance we'd get a lift on it, which would also help financially. We therefore decided to grasp the opportunity and jumped onto the tracks and followed the crowd.

When we arrived at the train, we saw it consisted of boxcars and that they were filled to capacity with people. We also noticed many men climbing onto the roofs via ladders connected to the boxcars, and we decided to do likewise. Many people were on the roofs already, but we found enough space to sit down. I was a little worried that we'd get thrown from the roof when we were travelling at speed. Later on I found there was no problem in that area. Tunnels were a different matter: the smoke from the locomotive made travelling through them very unpleasant.

Our co-passengers were a mixture of many nationalities. There were Russians, Poles, Estonians, Latvians and Germans. We didn't have to wait long before the train moved out of the station. Once daytime arrived and we got used to travelling on the roof, we started to enjoy ourselves. The weather was sunny and warm, and we had a good view of the countryside. We soon became acquainted with some of our neighbours.

Nearly all of them had learnt some German while in Germany, which made communication easy, and most seemed to be in a happy frame of mind finally to be going home to their families. The train moved slowly and stood on side tracks for lengthy periods. We were used to this way of travelling because of our journey in the opposite direction several months earlier. The following night we'd become so comfortable on the roof that we even got a few hours' sleep.

Next morning the train stopped near a railway station in a town. My stomach told me I should be looking for something to eat. So I said to Hans, 'Stay on the train; I'll be back soon with food'. After jumping from the ladder onto the tracks, I crossed many rails before reaching a major road. I intended to follow it – shops shouldn't be too far away. Just then the locomotive blew its whistle. I turned round and ran as fast as possible back to the train, which was already in motion when I got there and moving too fast for me to get to the boxcar ladder without help. Luckily a fellow traveller had seen me coming; he positioned himself on the ladder and extended his hand to me. I accepted it gratefully and he pulled me onto the ladder. This experience gave me a fright: I'd almost lost my brother through my careless action. I told myself to be more careful in future.

The train entered Dresden about midday and stopped in a goods yard. The place was a mess; all around was utter destruction. The half a loaf of bread from home had long since been eaten, and to get some food became a priority. This time Hans and I left the train together. In one direction, not far from the goods yard, we saw a row of houses that by comparison with houses in other areas in the vicinity seemed to have suffered less damage and looked to be as good a place as any to search for food.

As we got close to the buildings, we noticed several shops – but all were bomb damaged and closed. We walked up and down that street several times, not knowing what to do next. A woman was standing in the doorway of one of the terrace houses. She'd been watching us for some time and sensed we were having problems. She called us over, wanting to know what we were looking for. We told her we needed food otherwise we wouldn't be able to complete the journey to Breslau, our home town. We'd tried the shops but all were closed. At first the woman found it hard to believe what we'd told her; Breslau was a long way from Dresden. Eventually she told us to wait. She turned and went into her house and returned soon with a loaf of bread, which she handed to us. Just then a Russian officer walked past. On seeing us he stopped and in broken German asked the woman what we were up to. She told him all she knew. This made the officer's attitude change and he gave Hans a one dollar banknote in Allied forces currency. Hans accepted it happily. Unfortunately no one ever accepted the banknote as legal tender.

We thanked the woman for the bread and headed back to the goods yard. There we found that the train we'd come with had left. We decided the only sensible thing to do was to wait for another one. While waiting for transport, I ripped two lumps out of the bread and handed one to Hans. Our hunger made the bread taste delicious.

Some time later a goods train arrived and stopped nearby. It consisted of flat, platform-type wagons laden with railway rails. Many passengers were already sitting on the rails and judging by their appearance they were travelling to an eastern country. We therefore climbed onto a wagon and sat down on the rails and waited for the train to move out. It didn't – it stood there all night. Sleeping on the rails was impossible. In order to get some sleep at all we lay down on the ground beside the train, without blankets because we didn't have any. Luckily the night was warm.

Next morning the train moved out. Two of our new neighbours were ex-German soldiers. One wore civilian clothes, while the other was still wearing his uniform but with the markings removed. Like everybody else, they were returning to their families. Both were young conscripts of about twenty years of age. We got to know them well and gave them some of our bread. They returned the favour by giving us some of their food.

The train moved slowly eastward, and again much time was wasted on side tracks. Two days after leaving Dresden, at about midday, we pulled into the station of a town by the name of Sorau and stopped. We had no food left and the soldiers were in the same position. We therefore decided to look for something edible immediately. The soldiers went in one direction and we in another. In time we met back at the station. Hans and I were out of luck – we hadn't been able to find anything. The men had more success: they'd found a few potatoes and some parsley, and set about making a fire beside the tracks. They then cooked the potatoes in a soldier's helmet they'd also found. After the potatoes were cooked and mashed with a fork, the chopped parsley was added. We were very hungry, so the hot potatoes tasted like a feast.

While we were waiting for the train to move on, several passengers told me that trains didn't go to Breslau any more. Apparently the region's whole train network had been destroyed. I knew the stories were only rumours, but I also suspected that there could be some substance to them. The train stood in Sorau all day and the following night. As everybody else did, we slept on the ground beside the wagons. To sleep further away could have been risky: the train could have left without us.

Next morning rumours circulated that the train would go no further. Many passengers believed this and left the train to walk fifteen kilometers to another town, Sagan. Other rumours had it that a train was waiting in Sagan in order to continue the journey eastward. By midday the soldiers had also become convinced the train would go no further and therefore decided to walk to Sagan. Hans and I were in two minds: should we stay on the train and hope it would take us further, or go with the soldiers? Eventually we settled on the latter option.

We'd walked about halfway when we noticed three large columns of smoke billowing into the air straight ahead but still several kilometers away. This got us into a speculative discussion about the source of the smoke, so much so that we didn't notice an army barracks on the left side of the road. All of a sudden, loud, agitated shouting came from there. We stopped and turned our heads in the direction of the shouting. A Russian corporal or sergeant stood in the middle of the entrance to the barracks. He looked very mean and aggressive, screaming at our friend in uniform and making him understand by his gestures that he should approach him. Our friend did as told. When he stood before the Russian, the Russian punched and kicked him and then chased him into the barracks.

We stood, shocked, on the road. I'd never seen anything like this. It was difficult for me to accept the situation. Maybe I could have done something for the soldier by claiming I was his son; perhaps that would have helped him. But I didn't do it, mainly because I also had a responsibility to Hans. I feared for our friend though. I then heard the other soldier say quietly, 'Let's go; we can't do anything for him anymore.'

This broke the spell, and we continued the journey to Sagan in silence. As we got close to the town, the reason for the columns of smoke became clear: three mountains of furniture were burning fiercely. Near the fires were several army trucks laden with more furniture, and the soldiers could be seen throwing more of it on the fires. A surprise awaited us at the railway station. The train we'd left in Sorau was standing there ready to resume the journey. We therefore climbed on a wagon and sat on the uncomfortable cargo. Soon afterwards the train moved out and travelled slowly for the rest of the day and most of the night. Very early in the morning it entered Glogau and came to a stop at the railway station. Glogau had also been declared a fortress during the last months of the war, and evidence of that could be seen all around. Not one building in the vicinity of the station had escaped damage. Across the main street beside the station stood the burnout shell of a train that at some time during the fighting had been used as a barricade. I remembered going through that town the previous year when going on the outing with Jungvolk to the village in the east. Glogau wasn't damaged then. While we were waiting around in the station, rumours did the rounds whereby it was claimed the train terminated at Glogau. The people who offered the information seemed to be very sure about that. As time moved on, we decided to leave the railway station to search for something to eat. Our last food intake had been the potatoes in Sorau. We had separated from the remaining soldier friend because we didn't want to be a burden to him, and I also thought it would be better if we stood on our own two feet.

We began to walk the streets in the vicinity of the railway station in order to find food. At one point we arrived at several apartment blocks. In front of the least damaged one we found a unit of troops lying on the grass, resting. The soldiers weren't Russian regulars because they all had hair and wore a mixture of uniform and civilian clothes. I assumed that they were partisans or members of the Polish army. Their appearance was very scruffy, and this prompted me to keep well clear; under different circumstances I would have done so, but to get food was essential.

I left Hans standing on the street while I walked to a man lying on the grass and asked, 'Can I have some bread, please?'

The man looked up at me with a surprised expression on his face. He must have understood German, because he stood up and walked to a canvas bag leaning against the building. He took a loaf of white bread from the bag and then gave it to me without saying a word. This incident taught me that appearance alone doesn't mean people are bad. While eating lumps of bread ripped from the loaf, we had to make a decision: we could take a chance with the train and hope that it might take us all the way to Breslau, or we could immediately walk the remaining one hundred and thirty kilometers or so to our home. It came about that we decided to wait at the railway station until next morning. If the train remained stationary then, we'd walk.

It was close to sunset when we walked back to the station, and just before reaching our goal we were stopped by a Russian military patrol. We couldn't understand the soldiers, but their gestures

told us to follow them. They took us to a big square concrete bunker. Other Russian soldiers guarded the entrance. On our arrival the guards opened the heavy steel doors and pushed us inside. They closed the doors behind us.

The structure consisted of one large room, which was crowded with people and their belongings. The air in the place was terrible – the only vents were two slits in the concrete high up in the walls. Due to overcrowding, Hans and I were separated. Although the distance between us was only about two metres, I couldn't see him and that worried me.

The following night was the worst of our lives. All the people were pressed together like sardines in a can, and the soldiers kept pushing more people in. My biggest problem was that because I was smaller than the surrounding adults, I constantly had my face pressed against a person's back or chest, which made it extremely difficult for me to breathe. My other worry was Hans. Fortunately, sometimes I could hear him, which told me he was still alive and well. Even adults found it hard. Some passed out, mainly because they were weak from hunger and from the rotten air. They had nowhere to fall, so their neighbors held them in an upright position until they came to again. There was no chance of doing what comes naturally. Personally, I suppressed the urge. The night seemed to be never-ending.

The morning came eventually, and the soldiers opened the doors to let us out. Experiencing that night had told me what to do, we'd walk immediately. No way would we spend another night in that hellhole! We went looking for the road that led to Breslau. This was no easy task, because the German road signs had been removed and the Russian signs were impossible for us to read. Around midday we at last thought we'd found the road, which was packed with masses of refugees all moving in the same direction: east. The only traffic going the other way seemed to be Russian military vehicles. Whenever the vehicles approached, the civilians would move sensibly from the road in order to give them clear passage.

Several kilometers from Glogau it began to rain. A few hundred metres ahead we could see an abandoned village. A large number of people rushed towards the village buildings to seek shelter. We joined a group heading towards a barn. It seemed to us to be a good place to wait for the rain to clear. Several men stood at the barn's entrance directing women and children to the far end. By nightfall the weather hadn't changed. The men closed the large door and bedded down beside it. The reason for this became clear during the night, when gangs of men arrived looking for women and loot. After a sometimes heated discussion with the men inside the barn, the criminal element moved on.

When we woke up the next morning, the sun was shining again. Some people had already left the barn and others were preparing to do likewise. Hans and I ate our last piece of bread and also got going. The road seemed to be even more crowded than on the previous day. I couldn't help but notice that a change had come over the people: the happy expression on their faces when I'd first met them had been replaced by a look of grim determination.

Beside the road I saw many blankets and sheets spread out on the ground, and I wondered why they were there. In time curiosity got the better of me: I wanted to see what was under the coverings. I left the road and walked towards a blanket. A man behind me sensed my intention and screamed, 'No!' At once I knew what the blankets were covering: dead people. On both sides of the

road I noticed a lot of destroyed military equipment – German and Russian. Some of it must have been removed from the road, because it was clear of debris. At one point we climbed onto a burnt-out personnel carrier and there we found the charred body of the driver still in the vehicle.

Near us walked two young women without male company. One was about twenty and looked like a schoolteacher, very prim and proper. The other woman was still a girl, maybe fifteen, and was very pretty. At midday we heard the sound of shooting coming from straight ahead, and it seemed to be getting closer. In time we saw an army truck moving slowly towards us, stopping repeatedly. On the open loading platform stood seven or eight Russian soldiers. Some of them fired in the air with their rifles or burp guns whereas others extended their arms towards some of the women on the road. The women, however, kept well clear of them.

In due course the truck stopped beside us and the two young women. Some soldiers kept firing their weapons in the air while others directed their attention towards the girl. They leant over the edge and tried to grab her and also screamed at her. Taking their actions and red faces as a guide, we had to assume that they were very drunk. The girl was very frightened; she kept away from the extended arms and cried. The soldiers, sensing success, kept up their terrorising stance, which caused the girl to become hysterical with fear.

Then suddenly something unexpected happened: her companion stepped forward and offered to go with the soldiers in the girl's place. This development surprised even the soldiers. They were quiet for a few seconds and then accepted. Strong arms pulled the young woman onto the truck, which soon afterwards moved on. The girl was left in a terrible state. Two older women who'd witnessed the incident came over to support her. After they'd calmed her down a little, they dressed her in old clothes and put a tattered scarf over her head, which they knotted under her chin, and rubbed dirt into her skin. This changed her so much that she now looked like an ugly peasant woman.

As the day moved on, we got very hungry. We had no food left, however, and had no idea where to get some from. Water was easier to obtain – it was available from hand pumps and wells in the abandoned villages along the road. It was wise to be careful, though: some wells had signs attached that displayed a human skull and crossbones. The water in wells marked in that way had been contaminated by dead animals or humans. To keep the hunger pains at bay, we drank a lot of water.

During the afternoon we were stopped at a military check-point. The soldiers there were from the same unit that I'd got the bread from in Glogau. This I assumed by looking at their clothes. One soldier took my backpack, opened it and stuck his hand in my belongings. When he pulled his hand out, he was holding my Jungvolk shirt. He swore at it in distaste and called me a *Hitlerschwein* then shoved the shirt back and waved us on. Hans wasn't searched. That experience told me I could invite serious trouble by keeping the shirt. Therefore at the first opportunity I threw it away. I was sorry to see it go, because it was the newest shirt I owned.

Just before sunset we entered another abandoned village. According to the kilometre marker stone beside the road, we'd walked forty-eight kilometres that day. We were exhausted and footsore. With a number of other people, Hans and I went into a barn and fell down on the soft hay. We had

nothing left to eat, but food wasn't a problem at the time – the hunger pains had left us long ago. All we wanted was rest. I fell asleep almost immediately and didn't wake up until the next morning.

We both felt refreshed but were now very hungry, and to get some food became a priority. We drank some water, went back on the road and followed the crowd. At about midday we reached the outskirts of a large town by the name of Liegnitz. At one point we could see an army barracks on the left-hand side of the road. Across from it was a large meadow in which a large number of refugees had assembled. Most of them seemed to be queuing in a single line, and we could see soldiers' berets behind the people. I said to Hans, 'Let's go there; the soldiers might be dishing out food to civilians'. As we got closer we saw this was indeed the case. We joined the queue at once, and the expectation of getting something to eat gave us renewed hope.

The food didn't last long, however. Soon after we joined the queue the soldiers packed up and returned to the barracks. We'd missed out. Hungry and depressed because of the hopeless situation, we huddled together on the grass and pondered what we could or should do. There was no point in continuing the journey; without food we'd never make it to Breslau, and we knew that on the open road there was next to no chance of getting any.

We remained sitting there after the crowd, having realised that there was no more food to get, had left the meadow. All of a sudden a young Russian officer walked past us. This gave me a glimmer of hope. I told Hans to stay put and ran after the officer. When I caught up with him, I walked beside him and asked, 'Can I have some bread, please?' Thinking that the officer couldn't understand German, I pointed to my mouth. The officer stopped and had a good look at me, then, he said something in Russian and started to walk on. I hadn't understood what he'd said but hoped I was supposed to follow him.

The officer walked across the road and into the barracks; I was close behind him. He went into a building and stopped at an open door, where he made it clear that I was to wait while he went inside. When he came out he was carrying some Russian army black bread, a sizeable piece of salted pork fat, a can of fish and another item I've since forgotten. He handed me all that! I thanked him and hurried back to Hans, who jumped up when he saw me approaching with the goods. Being in possession of all that food raised our spirits immensely. After feasting on bread and salted pork fat, we returned to the road, safe in the knowledge that we had plenty of food to get us home.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully except for the fact that we walked through several more abandoned villages and saw more destroyed military equipment. In the evening we and many other people bedded down in a farmhouse. Sleeping on the hard floor was very uncomfortable. We longed for the soft hay in a barn. We knew, however, that it was too dangerous to go outside in the dark to look for something better. Our food was well hidden in our backpacks. To talk about it or show it round could have had serious consequences – even murder. Life on the road had become cheap.

A surprise awaited us the next day. During the afternoon we met Aunt Martha and our cousins Ruth and Jutta; they were going home too. After the greetings and hugs were over, and the general excitement had died down, we all walked on together. In the evening we reached the airport on the outskirts of Breslau. On our left we saw rows of apartment buildings in which the airport staff had lived. All the buildings were unoccupied and damaged by war. The walls were pockmarked by projectile

impact, all windows were broken and the doors were missing. Soldiers had most likely used the wood to fuel campfires during the siege of the city.

Aunt Martha led us to one of the buildings in order to spend the night there. We entered an apartment and began to clean the debris from the floor of the room. We then settled down for a bite to eat and I handed round the food the Russian officer had given me. This came in very handy because Aunt Martha had none of her own left. Sometime later we bedded down on the floor and tried to sleep. I couldn't, though. I was worried and less than happy to be in a small and isolated group, a situation I considered to be extremely dangerous. But I was only a boy, whereas Aunt Martha was the adult and therefore the leader. I couldn't tell her what to do. During the night prowling men outside kept me awake and on edge, and Dad crept into my mind. Was he alive or dead? Tomorrow I'd get the answer.

In the morning we were all safe and well. After eating the food left over from the evening before, we set out on the last section of our journey. A short distance from the airport we encountered ruins – or more to the point, heaps of rubble. It was the area where the heaviest fighting had taken place. As the walls of the buildings had come crashing down, the debris had buried the streets below; it was impossible to know where the streets had been. There was only one thing we could do: follow the refugee stream and hope that most people knew where they were going.

At many points, smoke came from deep within the rubble. I couldn't help but think that people might still be trapped alive in the cellars of what had been apartment blocks. After walking over the rubble for several kilometers, we saw the first ruins – burnt-out shells of buildings. Where the rubble ended and the ruins began was a square. The area was hard to recognise because of all the debris strewn over it, but I somehow realized that I was standing on familiar ground. The square was called Schweidnitzer Platz.

We didn't waste any time there and kept walking, past burnt-out shops and apartment blocks, until we reached the Ring, the centre of the city. To our surprise, we discovered that the town hall was still standing and that only minor damage to it was visible. Most of the surrounding buildings were in reasonable shape. By chance I looked towards our grandparents' apartment. In its place, from the top to the bottom of the façade, was a gaping hole – the result of a bomb strike. The old folks would have to look for another place to live when they returned.

On leaving the Ring, we found ourselves back in utter destruction. As time moved on, we reached the Hindenburg Bridge, which remained standing over the Oder; on the other side was Carlowitz. In the centre of the bridge we encountered a large hole, obviously caused by a bomb. Someone had placed several heavy planks across the damaged section, and on them we crossed to the other side. As we entered Carlowitz, we noticed the destruction wasn't really as bad as in the parts of Breslau we'd walked through. Even the water tower remained standing and on top of it stood a new ornament, a large communist red star, obviously put there by the Russians. Soon we stood happily and expectantly outside the old farmhouse on our property where Uncle Paul used to live. There we said goodbye to Aunt Martha and our cousins; they were also eager to enter their own home.

Now our relatives were gone, Hans knocked at the farmhouse door, which a strange woman opened. Hans said to her, 'This is my uncle's house and the one in the garden belongs to our family. Maybe you can tell us whether our father still lives there'.

The women turned round and shouted into the house, 'Has anyone seen Fritz?'

An elderly woman came to the door and said, 'He has gone to visit a friend'. This was good news because it meant Dad was still alive. We said goodbye and walked past the house into the garden towards our home. The elderly woman, Mrs Tauber, came along.

Hans knocked at the door and then we waited expectantly. Maybe Dad was home, despite the fact we'd been told differently. After a while, the door was opened and Dad stood in the doorway. It took him several seconds to realise that two of his sons were standing before him. He just stood there for several seconds. Then I saw tears in his eyes, and I noticed he was looking past us every now and then. It dawned on me that he was looking for the other family members.

We spent the following hours informing Dad of the whereabouts of the remaining family and of the journey to and from Geyer. Later on Dad asked Mrs Tauber whether she would mind making us something to eat. She agreed, and from that day onwards she stayed on as an unpaid housekeeper and had a room in the house. It became her new home because her own apartment had been destroyed. This suited both parties.

Hard Times

It was a miracle the house remained standing: we could see half a dozen deep bomb craters in a semicircle close by. One bomb had hit the top of the apartment house next door to ours before slamming into the ground not more than fifteen metres away and exploding. The blast had removed all the house's roof tiles but Dad had since replaced them.

Some time that day, Dad got us to take a bath. We were a bit strong on the nose because we hadn't had a wash since we'd left Geyer. I had always been a solid boy, but now when I undressed I found only skin and bones. Hans didn't look any better. After the bath we went to see whether any of our friends had yet returned from the evacuation. The only one we found was Gerhard Obst, living with his mother and teenage sister in their old apartment. Mr Fischeder, the tailor from next door to Uncle Paul's house, was also home; for some unexplained reason he'd never left his house.

Apart from the bakery, all the district's shops were closed. One of our first days back we decided to pay the police station a visit, and Gerhard came along. I'd always wanted to have a good look around inside without being supervised. As expected, the building was unoccupied. The windows were broken, the doors were ripped off their hinges and documents littered the floor. The place seemed to have been abandoned in a hurry.

Next was a visit to three army barracks. The first one we came to was occupied by Russian troops and the other two were unoccupied. To our surprise we didn't find much damage, but the unoccupied barracks had been stripped of everything – most likely by the Russian military. Later on, we found the contents dumped in a nearby meadow, where we found many interesting things. When

we left the area, we carried along a rifle and a small mortar. The mortar looked like a toy, but its weight told us that it was the real thing. We had no particular motive for taking it; we took it because it was there and had caught our attention. After we'd hidden the weapons in a partly destroyed building, we walked to the prison camp behind the army barracks, and discovered that it had been completely destroyed, evidently by bulldozers. What was left was lying in heaps in a field on the other side of the road. We found many interesting things there too. After we picked up an item that took our interest, we'd throw it away when something else aroused our curiosity.

On our way back home we again walked past the army barracks. When we arrived at the Russian army occupied barracks, it was Gerhard who persuaded us to go inside. The main entrance had no guard, so we walked straight in. As we moved around, we passed many soldiers, none who challenged us. At one point we entered the stables and came face to face with a number of teenage soldiers. All were bald, as was usual for the Russian combat troops both during the war and a short time after it. They seemed to find our presence a welcome change from their duties, and a friendly conversation therefore developed quickly, even though neither side could understand the other.

One soldier said something with a questioning attitude and repeated himself several times. We understood only two words: communist and fascist. We guessed correctly that he wanted to know whether we were communists or fascists. Well, none of us knew what the term fascist stood for; we only knew of Nazis and communists. We also knew the Russians were the communists, so each of us pointed a finger to his chest and said, 'Communist'. This made the soldiers very happy. They gave us the Russian army tobacco *mahorca* and pieces of newspaper to roll cigarettes with, and when they saw what a terrible job we did with the presents, they lent us a hand. In no time at all we began to realise that smoking didn't agree with us. Head and stomach pains forced us to make a hasty exit over the perimeter wall. We could hear the soldiers laughing behind us.

Almost all Breslau's houses had been abandoned when the Russian forces closed in near the war's end, and most occupiers or owners hadn't yet returned from the evacuation. In particular, most of the mansions stood empty. During the next weeks we went through many of them. All had been left in a hurry, and many had crockery or silverware on their dining room tables, this made it seem as if the occupants had only gone out for a while and were due back any time. We found many expensive items in the mansions but we were only interested in toys and books, preferably ones that had pictures. We didn't feel guilty about taking whatever we wanted, because we assumed that all of it would be gone in a short time anyway, taken by whoever wanted it.

A huge number of major crimes were committed against the German civilian population during the months immediately following the war; it was payback time. Unfortunately the new victims of murder, violence and abuse were mostly the innocent. The Germans who had something on their conscience had no intention of facing up to justice and generally kept well clear of the Russians.

Police didn't exist at the time; the only law enforcement came from the Russian military. Most of the Russian soldiers were decent fellows, but among them was a criminal element that caused many serious problems. Soldiers caught for violent crimes by their own patrols were dealt with harshly, but rape and violence continued. On a few occasions a German national was requested to identify an offender from a line-up. Invariably this never worked: due to their baldness they all looked alike.

The other main group that caused a lot of misery consisted of people in transit to places further east. Again, most were decent people but, as with the soldiers, the criminal element among them took advantage of the situation. Every night, and even in day hours, people – mostly women – could be heard screaming for help. A Russian major had moved into the apartment house near to ours. His presence gave our immediate vicinity a degree of safety, but he wasn't always around. Two words became very popular at this time. The first, *sapsarap*, was Russian and meant stealing, of which much was going on. The second, *kaputt*, was German and defined everything inoperable, from a broken light bulb to a dead person. All nationalities were familiar with these two words and used them freely.

I once went with Hans and several other boys to another suburb. The boy who led us had been living there. He claimed many things of interest could be found in the district's hobby gardens. From the time we entered the district, we found only desolation and destruction and we saw not even one living human. When we arrived at the hobby gardens, we found the whole area a wasteland – but with a difference. It was clearly evident that the bungalows had been destroyed by vandalism, not war. Also there was something strange that worried us: the grass had been trampled by a large number of people very recently, despite there being no evidence of human life. We believed we were being watched, so we decided to go home.

The boy who'd talked us into going there seemed to feel it badly that his promise of loot hadn't come to fruition, and to make up for it he told us the following story. Only a short walking distance from our position a woman had been gang-raped and murdered by soldiers. If everybody was agreeable, he would take us to the spot. I didn't believe him and thought it was only a ploy to regain his popularity. I was against going but the others wanted to see the place. The majority ruled, so we walked through more streets flanked by ruins.

At one point the boy stopped and pointed to a spot between the footpath and the wall of a ruin. There, among pieces of debris from the building, lay a skeleton. The bones were covered thinly in a black and sticky-looking substance. On the chest lay a bundle of sticks held together with string; obviously this had been a bunch of flowers at some time. As hard as we looked, we found no items of clothing in the vicinity. We stood and looked for a long time and in silence at the scene. Then somebody suggested we go home. In contrast to the usual chatter, we walked quietly, each boy occupied with his own interpretation of what we'd seen.

As time moved on, many shops began to open their doors. Wares were plentiful but the Reichsmark has ceased to be legal tender. To buy goods, Polish zlotys were required. Due to this development, Dad's money was worthless and he didn't possess Polish money. Before the siege of the city had begun, the German army had used cellars in ordinary houses as well as warehouses all over the city for food storage. Dad knew the location of many storage places due to his fire brigade service. Straight after the war had ended, he'd gone with a handcart to some of the unattended depots and retrieved from them basic food items which he stored in his own cellar. He was also breeding rabbits, and part of the garden was being cultivated. All these things combined kept us from starving.

One hot day I went with Hans to the Oder. We would have liked to take a dip in the water but neither of us could swim, so the next best thing was to sit at the river's edge and dangle our feet in the

water. This felt very refreshing. All of a sudden a number of Russian soldiers came over the levy dam carrying several bazookas and two wooden planks. They dropped the planks close to the water and then started firing bazooka grenades into the river. Soon afterwards dead or stunned fish floated to the surface. Two soldiers undressed down to their trousers and each pushed a plank into the river. They placed their upper bodies on the back end of the planks and used their arms and legs to paddle from the shore. They collected all the fish which they placed on the plank in front of them. They then returned to the shore, where they pulled the planks from the water and got dressed. The soldiers took all the fish and disappeared from sight over the levy dam. We'd been watching these activities with much interest and decided to use the planks in the same way. We stripped to our underpants and then pushed the planks into the river and paddled around on them. This worked well and was a lot of fun.

Another time we walked along some wire fences at the back of several gardens. In one garden we saw a tree laden with large blue plums. We assumed it was another abandoned property without a caretaker, because it was overgrown with weeds and grass.

Hans shouted excitedly, 'Look at all those plums! You want to get some?'

'Yeah, let's go.' I answered. We climbed over the fence and headed for the tree. Hans climbed up and threw down fruit to me on the ground. I stuck the fruit into my pockets and under my shirt.

All of a sudden a man wielding a stick came running and shouting at us to get out of the garden. I made Hans aware of the problem and then ran to the fence and climbed over it in a hurry. When I turned round on the other side, I saw a man hitting the tree with the stick. He was trying to get at Hans, who was higher up, just out of reach.

The man screamed, enraged, 'Come down here at once; I'm going to give you a good bashing.'

Naturally, Hans wasn't interested, and kept repeating, 'I'm not coming down until you go away.'

After a stalemate that lasted a few minutes, the man must have realised that, in order to get Hans down the tree and off his property quickly, he had to give him a chance to escape. He therefore moved away some distance. When Hans was convinced it was safe, he jumped from the tree and joined me on the other side of the fence.

Every day more and more people returned to their home town from their forced evacuation to central Germany. Strangers also came to settle in the area, including Polish people, many of whom the Russian military had forced to leave their home in an area along the Polish-Russian border. There were also rumours that Silesia had become part of Poland. According to the rumours this was the result of a meeting between the four big winning powers: the USA, England, France and Russia. However, the vast majority of German people thought the story was just another unfounded one.

On the far side, the southern fields beside our house bordered a factory. From our place only a long, roofed wall could be seen. Two small windows covered by steel shutters interrupted the

façade. The entrance to the property was located on the far side. We knew the property was unoccupied; the owner hadn't returned yet. One afternoon we went to the factory because we had nothing better to do. In the yard we found a unit of Russian combat troops in transit back to Russia. Their evening meal was cooking on a mobile range. Hans and I assumed this due to the steam that was escaping from under a large lid. As was usual, all the soldiers were bald except for the officer. When the soldiers saw us, they greeted us as friends. It didn't matter that they couldn't understand us, and vice versa; they just kept on talking to us. When dinner was ready, we were given a portion of barley and meat stew as though we were part of the unit. The food was tasty and different from our daily fare at home.

After we'd all finished eating, two soldiers walked towards the factory, opened the heavy steel doors and went inside. When they came out each was carrying a cardboard carton. The soldiers placed the cartons on the ground near us and took out several round bottles. The bottles contained a yellow liquid and each had a black plastic-looking cap with a button on it. A soldier pressed the button on a bottle and threw the bottle away. Seconds later the bottle exploded, and streams of white substance sprayed in all directions. I realised the bottles were fog grenades, used mainly to hide advancing or retreating troops from accurate gunfire. Other soldiers joined in, which was a lot of fun. We were invited to throw a few bottles but weren't strong enough to press the button down. We overcame this problem however, by throwing the bottles against the factory wall. It had the same effect: the bottles exploded on impact. Eventually it got late, so we left our new friends and went home. We agreed that we had had a terrific time.

Next morning we went back to the factory. The yard was empty – the soldiers had moved on. The factory doors remained wide open. This prompted us to go inside and have a look around. To our surprise we discovered we'd walked into an ammunition dump stocked to capacity with many types of explosive. The words on the cartons and boxes told us it was German stock. 'We might as well get a few cartons of fog grenades and have some fun,' Hans suggested.

After finding what we were looking for, we opened the steel shutter from one of the windows facing the fields. We pushed several cartons of fog grenades through the window and placed them outside on the ground. We then climbed through ourselves and started throwing the grenades against the factory wall. Soon some kids from the apartment block next to our house noticed the fog and came over to investigate. It wasn't long before some of them got their own grenades from the dump and followed our example.

After lunch one day I went with Hans to the public swimming pool. It was actually a small lake and was located across from one of the army barracks, which at the time was occupied by the Russian military. At opposite ends, two sections of the lake had been cleared of clinging vines and been turned into safe bathing areas for the public: one for swimmers and the other for non-swimmers. The rest of the lake was infested by the clinging vines. Every year foolhardy people who'd jumped into that part of the lake for a dare had drowned.

When we arrived, the first thing I noticed was that the floating wooden marker poles for the non-swimming section were missing. We then directed our attention to the boat shed, where we knew an aluminium rowing boat used to be kept. All the sheds had the usual signs of war damage: the windows were broken, the doors were missing and the walls were pockmarked by projectiles. We

found the boat in the shed, but two Russian soldiers were standing beside it and were also showing some interest in it. We therefore gave the boat a miss and walked to the water's edge.

There we found two doors from the sheds. This gave us an idea: maybe we could use them as rafts. After searching for and finding two boards that were suitable for paddling, we pushed the doors into the water and tested them. The door I was standing on only just carried me. Hans, being a little lighter, was more comfortable on his. When the testing was completed, we paddled through the clinging vines towards the centre of the lake. Our progress was slow and involved some tricky balancing. The side of the door that was carrying most of my weight sank slowly below the surface, but by shifting my feet slightly to the other side I levelled it out again.

Near the centre of the lake, I happened to look back to where we'd entered the water. What I saw made the alarm bells ring in my head: the soldiers had pushed the boat into the water and were in the process of boarding it. With our vulnerable situation in mind, I screamed to Hans, 'Turn left, head for the shore and get off the door as quickly as possible!'

Hans wanted to know why, but must have sensed the urgency in my voice, because he did as he was told. As he was turning left, I kept paddling straight ahead in the direction of the non-swimming zone. My intuition told me the soldiers were trouble, and I was soon proved right. They paddled the boat in a straight line towards me and rammed the raft. The boat came to a standstill halfway up the raft. The impact almost threw me into the water and the weight of the boat made the raft sink. With difficulty I pushed the boat from the raft.

Judging by the soldiers' facial expressions, they were enjoying themselves enormously and they rammed the raft repeatedly. I pushed the boat off after each impact. At first I thought the reason for their action was to be found in their hatred of Germans in general. Hostile actions of this nature were common at the time. However, the more I registered their excited facial expressions and gestures, I began to realise that hatred had nothing to do with it – they were doing it for kicks. I knew it was only a matter of time before I fell into the water and drowned, but I intended to fight for my life as long as I could. While all this was happening, my brain was working overtime. How could I get away from my potential killers? As hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with anything useful. Soon I wouldn't have the strength to push the boat away.

All of a sudden a miracle occurred: from the shore a girl shouted to the men in the boat. The tormentors stopped their deadly game and directed their attention towards the voice. Three Russian teenage girls were standing on the shore and one of them was doing the shouting. The soldiers answered and a loud discussion ensued. I understood nothing of it but it at last gave me a chance to see how Hans was doing. He was standing on the shore and was all right.

Eventually the conversation ceased and the boat again rammed the raft. This time one of the men grabbed my paddle and pulled. I was no match for him; to avoid being pulled into the water, I had to let go. The soldiers then used the bow of the boat to push the raft towards the centre of the lake. I couldn't do anything about it except try not to fall off. When the soldiers reached the selected spot, they turned the boat round and headed for the shore. I assumed they intended to pick up the girls. I knew they'd put me on ice for their continued enjoyment, and I also realised that my only chance for escape had arrived.

Immediately after they'd turned the boat round, I went down on my hands and knees to use my hands as paddles in a desperate bid to get to a spot from where I could jump into the shallow water. While I was paddling a few strokes on one side, the raft began to sink. So I moved to the other side for a few more strokes. By this rotating system I moved ahead but very slowly. My biggest concern was time: did I have enough time to get to shallow water before the dreaded boat returned? Keeping an eye on the boat's progress, I saw the girls board the boat. After that it turned and began to move towards my raft.

In the meantime I'd ever so slowly moved in the direction of the area for non-swimmers. Because the marker poles were missing, I had no idea how far away I was from the area. My mind was made up, though. When the boat rammed the raft, I'd jump into the water and regardless of the depth – it was my only hope of getting away. If the water was too deep, so be it.

The boat rammed the raft while I continued paddling. Due to the extra weight, the boat was now sitting deeper in the water, and therefore the main impact occurred not on the raft but against it. This meant I was almost thrown into the water, but also that the raft was pushed forward another metre or two. I took advantage of this action and jumped into the water, which reached up to my chest. I then started walking towards the shore while behind me I heard the people from the boat laughing. I laughed too, but for another reason: I was overjoyed at having survived. On the shore I met up with Hans and we walked home. Along the way we decided against telling Dad about the incident.

At that time no official news reports were reaching the German population; radio and press news broadcasts were in Russian and Polish only. The Germans received their news by rumour alone. Most of the stories that were circulating weren't true and many were ridiculous; they ranged from rumours that war had broken out between America and Russia to fears that the world was coming to an end.

More and more people came from Poland to settle in Silesia, while the flow of returning Germans stopped. Rumour had it that a new border had been established between Poland and Germany along the Oder and Górlitzer Neisse rivers, thereby placing Silesia inside Poland. It was also said that the new border had been closed, therefore no more locals would be returning. Most Germans considered this to be another baseless rumour, but some people believed the rumours. By that time a Polish police force had been set up and they started forcefully and often violently to evict Germans from their homes for the purpose of housing Poles. The evicted Germans were then told to go to a particular railway station from where they were given a free boxcar ride to Germany. Ethnic cleansing had begun.

I believed that the rumours about the new borders were true. Dad thought differently, however. 'It's not true, and anyway, I have to stay and look after the house – it's all we own.' This kind of talk led me to believe that the family reunion had moved some distance in the future. Several things happened about this time that supported me in my belief that Silesia had indeed become part of Poland. For example, after the war the first shopkeepers had been Germans who'd been replaced by Poles, and the German street signs had been pulled down and replaced with Polish ones. Even the name Breslau was changed to the Polish equivalent, Wrocław. Also the Polish police became very

visible, were very much disliked, and were viewed as being saturated with criminals and basically hostile towards Germans.

Once I went with Hans and some other friends to look over some garbage heaps; we could usually find many interesting items there. At one point Gerhard bent down and picked up a bottle that looked like an ink bottle but contained a clear liquid. He unscrewed the top and sniffed the contents. 'It's schnapps,' he declared. Everybody sniffed the contents and came to the same conclusion. I was the only exception – I wasn't sure what schnapps smelt like. Gerhard then talked us into going to his place, and once we were there he got some water and mixed it with the schnapps. We all drank some, but I drank very little because I didn't like the taste and remained unconvinced it was what it was claimed to be. Hans didn't drink much either. Soon after that we left our friends and walked home.

The next morning I went to Gerhard's place. His mother told me he was grounded. She said the other occupants had found him and some other boys semi-conscious on the stairway.

Parcels from western charity organisations were arriving and their contents were being distributed. The goods were mainly meant for the Polish newcomers. Despite this, one afternoon Gerhard turned up with two tins from a charity parcel. The labels read HORSE MEAT. I'd learnt a bit of English at school but I'd never come across horse meat. Using a knife, Gerhard opened the tins and handed a sample to each kid. The product looked coarse liverwurst but the taste was different. Nevertheless, we agreed it was liverwurst made the American way.

Our next-door neighbor Mr Fisheder had his pocket watch stolen. A Russian soldier had walked up to him, said '*Sapsarap*' and had taken the watch out of his vest pocket. After that mugging, Mr Fisheder wore another watch, which suffered the same fate as the previous one. The robberies annoyed our neighbor immensely, so one day he decided to have the last laugh by tying a small onion to a watch chain and sticking it in his vest pocket. Some days later he was robbed again. Expecting to find a watch, the soldier who pulled the chain out of the pocket looked in disbelief at the onion, then pulled it off the chain and took it with him.

This event cured Mr Fisheder from carrying a watch in public. He was one of only a handful of Germans who had a full-time job. Being a tailor, his profession meant he was useful to the Russian military: he was used to make officers' uniforms.