“Rückblende” by Robert Schweikart 1995
Translated from German by Sabine Patterson Jan. 2019

Reflections

Memories of the end of World War II (1939-1945)

Recorded in the summer of 1995. This was 50 years after Robert Schweikart's experiences had occurred.

On February 14, 1945, I traveled according to my draft notice with other comrades of my age to

Koblenz-Ehrenbreitstein. Shortly before noon we already arrived there with our suitcases when we found out that the uniforms were waiting for us in Wiesbaden. A Wehrmacht truck brought the “men” (we were all 17 years old) directly to Ochamps Barracks in Wiesbaden. During the next few days the transformation from civilians into privates of a replacement and training battalion in the 87th infantry division took place. (Replacement and Training Battalion 36).

The return home would only happen two years and ten months later on December 14, 1947. I was in the German Wehrmacht for 36 days and in American and British captivity for 1000 days.

But slowly, first things first.

The battalion consisted of 3 companies, and it was stationed in a suburb of the town of Mainz on the Rhine.

On March 12, 1945, the US 3rd Army's attack began along the line Saarbrücken-Trier-Koblenz eastwards towards the Rhine. A group of twelve men, to which I belonged, had been in a reserve position in Mainz since March 16. On March 20 American units advanced to the town limits. On March 21 at dawn, our group was ordered to defend this city district. We occupied two houses at a crossroads, and the assailing GIs came under heavy fire. At about noon German tanks with mounted soldiers approached our position. A comrade was wounded and since there was no medic with us, some ran back down the street to the Rhine with him. The tanks stood directly in front of our house, and we were trapped in the buildings. My report starts at this point.

Chapter 4 – In American Captivity

from March 21, 1945 until March 16, 1946

Now there were just seven of us. Nobody was injured, but we were uncertain of what we should do. To run through a blaze of gunfire seemed too dangerous to all of us. The Americans had occupied the citadel in front of us, and they could take us under fire much more effectively than we them. Nevertheless, we shot with our rifles through the windows at the GIs, who were advancing to the town center. Finally we ceased fire. Our situation was pointless. Now we noticed that it was very quiet, and the adversaries didn't shoot back. Then we thought that they had called for fighter bombers, but it wasn't so. Right after that we heard tank treads on the road, and then we all agreed to surrender. We destroyed the rifles and because we kept totally quiet, the adversaries might have thought that nobody remained present. The first GI who entered through the door was a short stocky young man with an automatic rifle at the ready. Egg-shaped hand grenades dangled on the breast pockets of his uniform jacket. We could read on his face how startled he was when he saw us. He was white as chalk, and the moment of shock lasted much longer than the term might indicate. When he had composed himself, we walked towards him with our hands up, and the first English words "Come on" together with the familiar hand and finger gestures ended the war for me and my comrades.

More GIs were walking towards us, and we walked in single file into a bombed out building, where a small room was still recognizable as such. We had to line up next to each other, and an American soldier planted himself about 10ft in front of us. Facing us, he raised the rifle. In this moment I thought, "Now they are going to kill us!"

For a second I was certain that when he pulls the trigger, we'll be dead, and nobody will ever talk about it. But it came completely different. They checked us for weapons. They took away our pocket knives and flatware. I had a pocket watch that I pulled out of the watch pocket of my uniform pants. We had already been told before that the Americans collected all the watches. It hung on a watch chain about thigh high on the inside of my pants between pants and underpants. The soldier who had searched me didn't discover it. Apparently, they regarded it as special to score watches because they asked for "watches". The soldier who stood in front of us intimidated us thoroughly so that we turned in the watches without hesitation. Two or three of my comrades had the same experiences.

Later I saw American soldiers whose forearms were covered with wrist watches from the wrists to the elbows. We couldn't explain ourselves this "custom" at all. We thought it childish. "Lightened" in that manner, we marched to the town limits and met more fellows in misery in the front yard of a single family house. A few bored GIs stood or sat around us. Eight or ten soldiers gathered on the balcony of the next house. They had taken off their jackets, rolled up their sleeves and were taken in the sun. An American soldier was searching a German sergeant in another front yard. Apparently, he had captured him and while frisking him noticed that there was a weapon hidden in the pants. The American yelled at him and since the German only grinned, he gave him a push so that he fell into the rose bushes. Then he demanded for the German to open his pants – which he didn't do. The American got angry. One could see it on his face and hear it in his voice. To pull off the pants was not so easy because the German wore riding boots, and the riding pants were tight. He was still sitting in the bed of roses. Then the American pulled a jackknife from his pocket and sliced open the left pant leg from the top of the boot to the crutch. Then he did the same with the right leg, and finally the pistol turned up. The stressed out American got so furious that he grabbed his revolver from its holster in the same moment and took aim at the German. But then his comrades protested loudly that he couldn't do that – especially the group on the balcony on the other side of the street, who had watched the entire scene while laughing

and commenting. Finally he put the weapon away again, punched the German, and the matter was finished.

In the evening we had to climb on a truck, and we were taken to a barn in Kastellaun. At that occasion we first got acquainted with the six-wheelers by General Motors and the drivers of the US Army Transportation Corps, who were mostly black.

We didn't have any difficulties due to luggage. In the beginning I mentioned how we had been outfitted sparsely. Now our sparsely outfitted gear was advantageous to us as we were tucked away on the loading area of the truck. The wording “tucked away” can be taken literally. This process went as follows: A GI stood on the truck, and we had to climb up one at a time. Under constant calls of “Let's go,” everybody was grabbed by strong hands and starting at the driver's cab pushed against one another. If I remember correctly, using this method, 60 infantrymen fit onto the truck. My comrades and I were just skinny boys. We had neither ammunition belt nor flatware, neither coat nor hat. Even when we were outfitted, we hadn't received a steel helmet nor gas mask, neither haversack nor canteen. But there were older soldiers from a police unit, who apparently also were to defend Mainz, at the the collection site. They had been equipped like in “peace times” as one could say. Most noticeable were huge backpacks. Maybe they are bigger in my memory than they actually were. But they couldn't be put on the floor or outside of the loading area. No, they were on the backs of the men. They were round and therefore used up space like an additional person.

As said before, the loading occurred as the evening neared, and the drive took more than an hour. The drivers hit the gas petals, and off we went. The entire bundle of men swayed in the drive rhythm. As long as it was still daylight, everybody had the strength to balance out the motion. But soon it got dark, and the people were tired so that in every curve the men on the outside were pushed against the side wall so hard that they screamed. As a matter of fact, later a few had to be treated for rib contusions. Our quarters for the night were on the farm fields under the open sky. The barn had long been full by our arrival. First there was nothing to eat, but at dawn two or three women came from Kastellaun and threw bread over the fence. The guard detail didn't mind, but when the baskets were empty, they chased the good Samaritans away. There was no time to talk and ask for names or such. The next day we moved on – again with General Motors and with 60 men per truck.

We were registered in a camp near Trier, our next destination. Part of this process was that all valuables like money, papers, IDs, photos etc. were retained b the US Army. In my case that was a wallet with a few pictures from home and of friends, the pay book and the identity tags with the imprinted number 82 and the name of the military unit “schw. E. u. A. Bat. 36, 5. Komp. SMG.” Spelled out this means “Heavy Replacement and Training Battalion 36, 5th Company Heavy Machine Gun.” Further, there was a neck pouch with a few coins – especially noteworthy a silver 5 Mark piece. My mother gave it to me when we said goodbye. She said, “Carry it on you. It is supposed to be your good luck charm. God willing, you will bring it back home some day.” All these things were put in a large envelop, and we had to write our name and personal prisoner number on it. My number was 31 G 842 489.

After spending two nights there, we were taken to the railway station, and the train headed west. The camp into which we were admitted was near Stenay in northern France. It was another intermediary stop on our journey. The only reason to mention it is because my comrade Helmut left us here. After an “exploratory walk”, he returned with the news that he would stay here. They needed people for the kitchen and as a butcher he took his chance and stayed. His journey was finished for the time being. “Something better couldn't happen to you,” said Ottl. “You don't have to be hungry in the kitchen.”

Nobody could disagree with that even though the available meals were not requiring the expertise of a butcher, but Helmut would handle that. Nobody could know what would be ahead of us, but by this time we had regained our inner balance again. The war and mortal danger was evidently behind us. We were certain that there was no more immediate threat. We were unaware of the big problem to supply the many thousands of people who were completely uprooted from their previous situations. Only weeks and months later we realized with how much luck we crossed the destroyed western Europe without starving to death. When many hundreds even thousands died of starvation in this part of the world, we were far away.

The conversations revolved around the past days – the experiences and contact with the adversary and enemy. Quite unrealistically at this point, we saw ourselves as repatriates at some time. We were young and healthy, and at least based on myself , I can say that we were not overly worried about home. Maybe Otto might have seen this a little different. He was very attached to his mother and knew that she was very worried. He was her only child, and he would have liked to send her a sign of life, a greeting, but that was impossible. We comforted ourselves with the many older comrades who had been gone from home much longer than we had – married men who had wife and children at home and who had been at the front for a year or longer and now had to deal with complete uncertainty. For the people from the eastern German provinces the worries were even bigger. The Soviets were the conquerors and finally occupiers there. The term “liberator” was unknown in these days.

Our next shelter was a camp in Cherbourg . We traveled in freight cars that had been laid out with straw. We were in cheerful spirits, and I remember that we sang songs for a while – folk songs that we knew by heart, and we sang in harmonies. In Cherbourg 16 men each lived in tents with steep walls without beds of straw but on firm mud floors. Every man got a woolen blanket. Food rations were of course a main conversation topic all the time. While on the train, we received American Army rations: Canned goods that contained everything that a human needed to survive. There were heavy cans of vegetables, potatoes and meat. There were also light cans with cookies, chocolate, coffee and milk powder, fruit juice powder etc. Now in camp, the food was supplied by a kitchen. In the morning there was coffee with a few cookies, stew at noon and in the evening a round loaf of white bread for eight men. The men who had to share this bread were not to be envied because every crumb counted. Along with the bread there was sausage or cheese and tea to drink. It was sufficient to live but not to be full.

On Tuesday, March 27, 1945, we arrived in Cherbourg. A long band of people marched up the mountain to a gigantic camp. There were an approximate few thousand German infantrymen here behind barbed wire. It was an area that had most likely served as shelter for imprisoned soldiers for years or even decades. Here we stayed over Easter. March 30 was Good Friday. On Easter Sunday the German camp commander gave a speech. He originated from Mannheim, so he said through the loudspeaker. He tried to bolster our spirits. His words amounted to this: “We made it with our skins intact. Now we have to see to it that we'll return home healthy as well. Germany is destroyed. We have to rebuild it again. Everybody is getting an egg to eat this Easter so that we stay strong.” When nobody had seen an Easter egg after Easter had passed, he said the egg had been in the soup. This way it was easier to distribute. Oh well, one has to maintain one's sense of humor. Also, Easter Sunday had been on April 1.

Then I sent the first Red Cross card as life sign to the relatives at home (see copies).

The days in Cherbourg passed without any special events. It was told that a few hundred infantrymen were led as a work crew to the port every day. They had to unload the ships that brought the new supplies for our outfit. We were also told how the guards punished thieves. If somebody was caught

with a can of sausage, he had to eat it all right away. The same happened with lard or chocolate but also with cigarettes for example. I myself and also the other tent residents were spared from being part of the work crew.

On April 6 a long band of people marched out of the camp, downhill to the port and over a swaying gangway onto an overseas ship. It was a transport ship of the liberty class with the name "William A. Graham." In the cargo hold of the 5,000 gross register ton (GRT) large ship were the sleeping berths that consisted of canvas tarp clamped to pipe frames. Of course Ottl and I tried to stay together and because apparently we were some of the last who climbed down the steep stairs, there were no more beds for us. We followed the sailors' instructions to lay on the floor in front of the door to the heating system. Somebody brought an additional blanket for everybody. Later we learned that stairs on the ship are called "ladders" and the bed "berth" even if it's no room but only a piece of canvas. It was ice cold in the cargo hold and after we asked a sailor, he opened the door and turned the heater to full blast. That had two obvious effects. First, it got very warm within the next two hours, and everybody undressed to their shirts. Then the sailor returned and turned down the heater. Since it was really much too warm, he also opened all the vents to let in fresh air from the outside. That resulted in almost everybody having the sniffles two days later. During that first night we realized that the ship was underway, but after some time it lay still again.

The kitchen and the food distribution were on the same deck as our sleeping room while the wash room and toilette could be reached by a ladder that also led outdoors on the upper deck. There were three meals a day, and we could be satisfied. Of course we discussed the big question, "Where does the journey go?" On the second day we were allowed on the upper deck. Then we saw that we were surrounded by water – nothing more to see of the mainland. Our ship had lain in the Channel on the French coast, and it was not alone. A large quantity of other ships were scattered around us – larger and smaller and even tankers that were recognizable by their superstructures. On April 8 we felt that the engines were started, and the ship was moving. During the past two days a convoy had formed that traveled from Europe to America. I counted 120 freight ships and tankers. So this was our destination: America. Ottl and I looked at each other and wished each other good luck on this long journey. We were not just a little astonished about what was happening to us and could only ever sit and gaze ahead quietly. The surroundings on the ship had soon been explored and of course one searched among the 500 soldiers on board for men from the Palatinate home region. There was a man from a neighboring village. His name was Jakob. He was 42 years old and therefore could have easily been our father. During the first week everything went well. The sea was quiet. We sat or laid on the upper deck and counted the ships again and again. We noticed that the ship of similar design ahead of us was also occupied by soldiers – apparently fellow sufferers. Later we learned that 3,000 German infantrymen were on this last transport to the USA. One could see that the tankers were in the middle of the convoy, then the freight ships and on the outside in keel line the ships with the prisoners. The war wasn't finished yet. The German submarines were not really a danger anymore, but the captains' fears were great. The wind came up, and we saw whitecaps on the water. During the following night the ship swayed in the wind, and it wasn't long until we both were seasick. When this started, getting food turned into a balance act. Ropes were stretched out so that one could hold on. But after the first person dropped his porridge, the walk to the kitchen turned into a sliding match. The effects of seasickness are well known. Soon we were no longer able to get up. Everybody had his tin can in front of him. Our friend Jakob was not affected. He wasn't seasick for a minute and ate our portions during those six stormy days with up to gale force 8 winds. We two lay in our corner just like dead, and during the climax of the swaying our unanimous wish was, "If this damn boat would just finally sink."

Finally it got quieter. We could stand on our feet again and poke our nose outside. The washroom was

located midships under the bridge and was reached via the steep ladder. The water faucets above the iron sinks were on the outside walls across the keel line. Parallel to that were two rows with each eight toilette bowls in the middle of the room. When after a few days the storm weakened somewhat, I went onto the upper deck that afternoon. Otto stayed in the cargo hold. He didn't want to come along.

The sea looked fantastic with whitecaps on the waves far around us. I was able to really enjoy that since one gets used to the swaying with time. The neighbor ships swayed just like our own and since they had no cargo, they were drawing not much water. When the ships dipped in with their bow, one could clearly see the ship's propeller sticking halfway out of the water at the stern. Well, the people over there are not doing much better. Especially the small war ships that guarded us on the other side constantly disappeared from my view behind the waves. On the way back into the ship's interior I had to use the toilette and went to the wash room. As I was standing in front of the first bowl with my pants down and about to sit down, the boat laid onto its side, and I slid in my hobnailed boots on the iron floor across the room until I landed happily on the last toilette seat in the row. I had to laugh out loud and had something to tell my friend. Right after that, I needed the previously mentioned tin can, and I stayed in our corner until the storm was finally completely over. That was the case after about eight days and when we then stepped onto the upper deck together, we couldn't believe our eyes. The sea was like a mirror, totally smooth, and it wasn't stirred by the slightest draft. It was unbelievable how different the element can show itself. Just days ago waves that had whitecaps and made the big ships roll and now a smooth surface that reflects the sun. Swarms of flying fish jumped out of the water and disappeared again. Spontaneously we both said what we thought, “What a pity if the boat would have sunk during the storm.”

Nice weather days followed, and the ship's leadership looked for volunteers to help with rust tapping and subsequent repainting with gray paint. Of course the work was rewarded with extra food and additionally there were rose hips drops. I participated, and the extra food was quite welcome after the “abstinent” days. I was especially looking forward to the drops. But what a disappointment! They tasted so terrible that I even had to use the tin can again, and I left the rust tapping to others.

Without any further remarkable events, we reached the port of New York, USA, on April 26, 1945. While we were in our cargo hold during that night, the engines were suddenly quiet. The ship lay silent, and we heard the anchor drop onto the seafloor. Later we were allowed to come on deck, and this view of the silhouette of the skyscrapers in front of the rising sun I will not forget for the rest of my life. There are other moments that have been unforgettable, but this instance surpasses all others. Individual cars drove in the streets, and the window rows of the elevators along the houses were lit up. Otherwise only the outlines were visible. The sun rose higher, and Manhattan awakened in front of us. The egg-shaped water containers that deliver the water into the people's apartments impressed me on their stilts on top of the houses. I had the feeling I was dreaming and didn't think I was really experiencing this. As the sun rose higher, the shadows slipped into the Hudson River. A river steamer came alongside and took us on board. After a short trip we stepped on land. We were really in America.

Quite shaky on our legs, we had to run on the double through a gauntlet of guards. They each had a machine gun at the ready with the barrel turned up. A shock for us! “Why the weapons?” we asked ourselves. “Do they think we are the fifth column? Do they believe we'll create a revolution and start an attack?”

Our thinking wasn't completely wrong. People, including the commanders, were so rattled by the war propaganda that they had a downright uncanny fear of the Germans. What stepped on American soil just now were Nazis, who until a few days ago fought without chance of winning against our brave GIs.

Who knows what miracle weapons they will conjure up if we don't keep our eyes on them. We were searched in a huge hall in which there were large barrels for what they took away from us. There was nothing to be found on the comrades of my unit. Then we were showered and deloused. For delousing the soldiers sprayed a disinfectant with a big pump sprayer on all of the hairy body parts. The cloths were disinfected as well. The leather was very hard afterwards – like dry bread crust and was of no use anymore. The cloths were placed in a big mesh bag and dipped in the steam bath. Afterwards we put them on again and ran through the gauntlet of machine guns out of the hall onto a railway platform. A train arrived, and we were allowed to get on. We traveled in a passenger car with soft seat cushions. On every four seats sat three men. Somebody thought these were Pullman cars and therefore assumed that the journey would be longer. The windows had to be pushed upwards in order to open them, but they had been prepped so that only a small gap was possible. Between each of the cars stood a man with a machine gun, and a soldier with a rubber truncheon in hand walked constantly back and forward in each car. As far as I could see, nobody was beaten. It was forbidden to get up and if somebody had to use the toilette, he had to raise his hand. Obviously, permission to do so was only given by the guard one at a time. After we had ridden on the train for a while, the food was served. Everybody was served at his seat. There was coffee to drink, and according to the time of day cold or warm dishes. The drinks were in paper cups and the food on paper plates – even the goulash with much sauce. I am sure that none of us would have thought this possible before. At the end of the meals the cups and plates were to be thrown out of the window. So that explained the window gap. A look at the railroad embankment showed that all travelers did that. When I close my eyes and think of this railroad line, I still see the plates and cups as an escorting path right and left of the track.

We were on our train for four days and four nights. The food came regularly. We slept as good as possible. One of us could always lay on his side. The journey went from New York to Arizona. The paper plate trail became less prominent in the south. The destination was a prison camp close to Florence near Phoenix. Due to the constant sitting during the previously mentioned four days and nights, my feet were so swollen that the shoes that I had taken off in the beginning to be more comfortable didn't fit anymore. But it was warm in America and no problem to walk around in socks. Ottl had the same experience. Between a high double fence we trudged in the direction of the camp gate, but the entry was delayed. Everybody had to take a seat on one of three orange crates that stood in front of the gate. The first men were handed hair clippers, and everybody got a bald head. When the cutter had enough, he handed the clippers over to the next person, and that way everybody lost his hair. That was a mere measure of hygiene, and in view of our "social standing", it didn't matter to us. All of us joked about it. Then we were finally in the camp, but before we were allowed into the quarters, we had to stand in line once more. There were separate cabins in large halls, and everybody had to undergo a political interrogation. An officer, who spoke German very well, asked me about my age, about my parents and their profession and political activity in the Third Reich. I answered everything honestly and received a little red card from the gentleman. I took it with me outside, and a group of infantrymen called, "Red cards here!" I asked the men in that group about Ottl. He was not here, and I anticipated nothing good. Other infantrymen stood on the other side of the hall, and I went there and called out for Ottl. He was there and had a white card. That meant he was "Anti-Nazi." The people with red cards with "Nazi", and it was now time to say goodbye. In the gloomy light of a lamp installed high above us, we hugged. "Take care! We'll see each other again at home." That was all. We didn't have much time.

Two years and eight months later we met up again in our home village. By then we were too old for pranks that we had played before. But during our times with the men's choir and when we went dancing with the girls, we sometimes asked each other, "Do you still remember?"

Let's say this right away. This categorization of the newly from Europe arrived Germans had no influence on their assignments or treatment. Everybody had to work – partly inside and partly outside the camps everywhere in the USA. The same goes for Canada as well. However, according to my knowledge no prisoners were taken there anymore this close to the end of the war. Aside from "Nazi" and "Anti-Nazi", people who claimed to be communists were also grouped together and separated from the other two groups. These were men who thought to gain an advantage if they passed themselves of as adversaries of the Nazis. As far as I know, they didn't have an advantage rather disadvantages because the Americans could tell very quickly the difference between honest men and hypocrites. In this context belong my own experiences and episodes told by others that I will have to explain in a later chapter.

Our group was led into a barracks where other infantrymen already were. Right away they said, "Comrade, throw everything away. America gives you everything new."

We undressed, and all the cloths piled up in front of the shelter. Next was showering with nice hot water, and we received soaps and towels. Everybody was provided with clean underwear. The things were not quite new, and they had a "P" and a "W" in big letters drawn on in tar paint. This could be distinctly smelled. We were real "PWs" (prisoners of war). Beds, just like the ones the American soldiers had, were ready for us in the barracks. These are single beds made of iron with steel springs topped by a thick mattress covered in white linen. A fruit crate served as night stand, and all that together astonished us tremendously. We had dinner even though it was late at night – as much bread as we wanted, a big piece of sausage and plenty of tea to drink. Today I am unable to recall all the food, but during these first days all of us bounced back quite splendidly.

The war still raged in Europe, and the care in regards to our health was also precaution against introduction of all kinds of diseases from the Americans. We were thoroughly examined and had to give stool and urine samples. The results were given to us in writing. I still have them in my possession today. It was a great picture when all of us reported. All of us were bald. Some of us even had their head shaved clean. Everybody wore the same khaki colored American uniforms – of course without insignia but instead with "PW" on the back and the upper pant legs. The high lace-up shoes were brown, and the tropical hat on our heads was blue. The barracks here were single-storied four or five steps up. They were arranged so that a parade ground for a company of 250 men was formed. There, we were counted during the daily formation. There was no military hierarchy. POWs who kept up the gardens were also assigned to supervise the parade ground. People who were perhaps cooks or butchers worked in the kitchen. The company commander was an NCO who usually could speak English and who was also the contact for the camp command. But there were also American interpreters, often emigrants for whom German was their first language. Officers were consolidated in special companies.

During walks around the camp we met people who had already been there for a while. Most of them were captured on the invasion front and therefore had been in the USA for months. The first questions were always, "Where are you from? Where were you captured? When was that?"

There were newspapers and news over the loudspeaker in German. But there was some disbelief about these messages. We had been lied to very often, and mistrust was understandable.

"What, captured in Germany and now here. Why didn't you escape?"

"You have no idea. Escaping – where to? Everything is part of the war. No place is spared. Hiding is impossible unless you risk starving."

“How are you doing here? Are you going to work?”

“Work? According to the Geneva Convention, POWs don't have to work. But to sit around for months is very boring, and some work voluntarily.”

This led to rivalries amongst the Germans. Especially fanatical contemporaries flocked together. Their mantra was, “We don't work for the Americans.”

They formed so-called raiding squads and attacked those willing to work. At night when they were sleeping, these squads invaded their sleeping rooms, pulled the blankets over their heads and beat them up – sometimes so badly that they were unable to work. During the war the camps were visited by representatives of the German Red Cross, and they couldn't be happy with this state of affairs. So one started looking for a solution which was found by prompting the people who wanted to work to defect. They signed a form in which they confirmed that they voluntarily defected to the American forces. Thereby they were no longer prisoners of war but interned camp inmates and could be used for all work. Gradually, they were consolidated in separate barracks. But because this was not always possible fast enough of thoroughly enough, they were marked. A white stripe (about 1 inch high and 4 inches long) was put on the left sleeve – either by color or cloths. The term “white mice” was coined for these people, and woe to them if they behaved somewhat conspicuous outside of their group and maybe even provocative towards others who still had the “PW” painted on. Frequently, there were dreadful brawls. For the Americans it was an interesting diversion, but when somebody needed medical attention, then things turned serious. These things ended overnight after the German Reich capitulated on May 8, 1945. Now all were equal again. For us from the last transport, the 3,000 men who came from Cherbourg to Arizona, these were just stories.

In this context, I have a few remarks about the presence of the Red Cross in the prison camps. During the 1,000 days that I spent in a camp, I never experienced that a representative of the Red Cross looked after us. Care in the form of entertainment, that means books, playing cards or other games, we only received from the YMCA (That means Young Men's Christian Association). That might have been different during the war, but that was only about six weeks for me. After the end of the war the German Red Cross was not present anymore, and the International Red Cross gave us the impression to only care about the victors.

The medical care was outstanding across the board where I was. There were German as well as American dentists and general practitioners in the large camps in the USA. The Americans themselves were much too afraid of contagious diseases or epidemics as to leave something to chance or let something slide.

In a group of a few thousand men there will of course also be teachers of all kinds of fields. Therefore, lessons in all subjects were held. The books for this came from the YMCA. Likewise, it was possible to learn every musical instrument. There were orchestras that gave concerts, too. The instruments came from the YMCA. We could do any kind of sport – outdoors, indoors, team sports, wrestling and weightlifting as well as track and field. The equipment came from the YMCA.

For me, it came first to learn English. Interested men received a text book with the name *One Thousand Words of English* for that purpose. Under the guidance of an American officer, who was a very kind helpful older man, I memorized the given sentences and phrases. Unfortunately there wasn't much opportunity in the States to use them when speaking. Only much later in England I benefited from these lessons, and I think I still do today.

We could buy toiletries like soap, tooth paste and aftershave in the canteen. Electric razors were provided to everybody. However, I didn't need one at first. My facial hair was peach fuzz, and my comrades teased me about it. They said, "You only need a sharp towel."

On my 18th birthday in December 1945, I shaved for the first time. That means a Swabian comrade, whose name I forgot, did it. He was so much older than I that he could easily have been my father. We exercised together. In the 1930s he had been German champion in wrestling. I don't know anymore in which weight class. There were public libraries and a movie theater that showed two American movies a week. There were barbers who cut the men's hair in specially for that purpose furnished barracks. Maybe that sounds odd since our heads had been shaved bald when we arrived. But hair grows again, and for me this had a special effect. As a child I had blond curls, real ringlets, as one could see on pictures. Later, when I was 12 or 15 years old, they had disappeared. However, when my hair grew longer again now, the curls returned.

On May 9 about 150 men were relocated into a small satellite camp. It was a camp made up of frame tents in the middle of the prairie. Of course there were still guards like before, but we could nearly feel how relieved the Americans were that there was no more danger that we would escape. We stayed in the desert for a few days. The interpreter, clearly a German emigrant who certainly had good reason to despise us, made his feelings known. "You have no rights anymore. You only have duties." At that he pointed his thumb downward. "You can sing *Ein Männlein Steht im Walde [*a German nursery rhyme] but not *Deutschland über Alles* [German National Anthem]."

The food rations were cut. There was no more coffee just tea that was very thin. For lunch there were six slices of white bread very meagerly covered – two of them with a knife tip of lard, two of them with a leaf of lettuce and the other two with a little slice of sausage, cut out of a can. For supper we had stew, a thin soup with more eyes looking in than out. Then, in the middle of May, there was another train journey – this time towards north for another four days and nights. Just like the first time, the cars were hooked to other trains. During the trip the guard detail used the same procedures as the first time, but the soldiers were a little more friendly. Our destination was a small camp near the town of Toppenish in the Yakima Valley in Washington State.

The second life sign, a Red Cross card from Fort Lewis, written by me in the beet camp of Toppenish (see copy).

About 600 German prisoners of war lived in this barracks camp with barbed wire and guard towers. The camp was constructed per the request of the operator of a nearby sugar factory. The farmers had claimed that they didn't have enough workers for the beet production. The area is an Indian reservation and because the Indians were not working the land, the state leased the fields to white farmers. Thereby, since all was leased land, there were people from almost all known nations here. Among them were also many Germans. However, only occasionally they had come directly from Germany. Most of them were former so-called Volga Germans who immigrated to America in 1905 or 1906 to avoid having to fight for the czar in the Russo-Japanese War. They talked in our southern German dialect with a slight English tone of voice. We could understand them well. So now our work was to hoe the sugar beet fields, later to harvest and afterwards the camp was dissolved.

Four or five hundred comrades were already here, and we experienced that the work was very exhausting. Of course some said, "What, you are a farmer by trade. You are used to the work. It must be easier for." But at home we don't work on the beet field every day, certainly not for weeks. Additionally, the unaccustomed climate made matters worse.

The Yakima Valley is a semi-desert just like the entire region between the Cascades and California Coast ranges and the Rocky Mountains. It rains very rarely during the summer, and therefore the fields have to be irrigated for about three months in the summer. The Yakima River is partly canalized, and its water is channeled through flood gates onto the fields. We arrived on May 20, and until October it rained just once. That was a thunderstorm in July when terrible lightning strokes came down and deafening thunderclaps followed. But the rain was finished within two hours, and the sun beamed again the next day. The sky was always without clouds, and the daytime temperature reached 104 degrees in the shade. During the first weeks the rations were not very good. There was little bread and almost nothing with it. There was always sufficient tea to drink and also always fruit – per man two apples or oranges and a daily vitamin pill. The fields were infinite. The men in groups of 12 to 15 people were positioned so that there was a distance of about 15ft between them. That made conversations during the work impossible. The task work area had been allotted before we arrived. At noon, when the sun stood high and I wanted to straighten up from having been stooped over, I got dizzy. We had to hoe between the beets, and the weeds had to be removed at the same time. For this we had small hoes with a short handle. So I liked keeping my head down. Besides, a guard soldier with a rifle stood at the edge of the field. If I still remember correctly, for this 80 cents were deposited into an account daily, and 10 cents were paid out in camp money. These were simple paper strips that we could use to shop in the canteen. When I was released, I was handed a check for this bonus money. For this "Military Payment Order" of $101.94, I received 340 Reichsmark at the Landeszentralbank at home in Landau on December 18, 1947.

Of course the farmers had to pay more to the government. (See map of Yakima area and the picture of Ruth and Robert in front of the hops field. The tractors from back then stand in the museum now. This article was published in the newspaper in May 1945. Apparently the people believed the radios should be given to the Germans. The picture of the beet harvest is a montage because of course it was already October.)

The work detail was organized so that the crew was put together completely randomly. The farmer who requested the men sent a truck, sometimes even a bus, and picked us up from camp. Then we drove accompanied by the guard to the field, the work area was assigned, and in the evening we went back the same way. There were other prisoner camps in the vicinity and in Montana where men had to do the same work. That's why the following poem was published in the German language newspaper of the northwest, the "Staatsanzeiger und Herold". It was composed in Camp Greeley, Colorado.

A translation of the poem on page 38 is not provided.

Sometimes the hunger was really noticeable, and I peeled a young sugar beet and nibbled on it. The days were long and without much variation. A fellow sufferer from the Palatinate, Günter Reinhard from Grehten near Bad Dürkheim, once discovered a pheasant nest in a row of beets. The hen sat on the nest, and he slayed it when it tried to scurry away. There were 15 eggs inside the nest which of course he took back to the camp in the evening. He had no use for the hen. I said, "We won't leave it here." "If you think that somebody can roast it, then take it," he said. Of course I took the bird, and a friend from the kitchen personnel roasted it. I had plucked, disemboweled and cleaned the animal. For us two it was an additional meal.

We were given written rules of conduct that laid out what we were allowed to do and what not. We were not allowed to work bare chested. Conversations with the population were strictly forbidden. Also, people were not allowed to approach us or to give us something. However, there were exceptions

– both positive and negative.

Once, when the task work area was determined, a farmer managed to stand at the end of the field with a carton of Chesterfields. He called out, “Whoever makes it here first and hoed his row cleanly, gets the carton.” This farmer was a German. He knew the mentality of his countrymen, and it helped to increase the productivity for the day.

Once, after we had finished working the fields of another farmer, we were driven to his residence. Most of the time the houses were simple wooden buildings made out of boards, often even pretty warped, but this house was of stone with nice flowers in front of the windows and a garden that could be called a park. There we were served an excellent meal: turkey, potatoes and salad and afterwards a delicious dessert. This farmer was a Frenchman. The lady of the house also appeared briefly to greet us. It was in the end of August, and our situation had changed for the better. About three months after the end of the war, the rations in camp got distinctly better. Now there was as much bread as we could eat. There were three kinds of spread at breakfast. For the first time we became acquainted with peanut butter, which has become very popular with the children in Germany for many years. Sundays there was cake.

In the evenings there was a real meal with salad and vegetables not just stew – also more often portions of meat. I believe big politics played a role in this. When we were interrogated back in Arizona, I was assigned to a Nazi company. That was known, and it was talked about. Of course nobody had contact to the other camps. But when now in late summer 1945 and in the years that followed, the name of Senator McCarthy was mentioned in the news more and more, and it became known that he tracked down and pursued active communists in the American administration and industry, a conversation that I overheard in the train from New York to Florence came to mind. On the bench behind me sat two comrades who often chatted. One of them was somewhat older with a slender boney face, deep eyes and a little beard. Back then everybody was somewhat hollow-cheeked and pale. So it didn't make an impression, but now in my memory I belief to recognize a certain type. His conversation partner was my age – a kid. He mostly listened but was always agreeable in his remarks. I don't know any names and don't remember the exact wording, but it was about politics, more specifically social policy.

“What do you think, when there is a different system here some day? The proletarians will come out of their huts and boast.”

The younger man said, “We have to be part of this. You all ensured that the Nazis are loosing the war.”

Later in Florence there was talk about young fellows calling themselves communists during the interrogation. At that time they were asked, “Since when?” They stuck with it without realizing that the Americans weren't thrilled and would have preferred to push them off to the Soviets right away. We thought to see a tendency that the investigations were not only to provide details about our deployment in the war but also about the mood and opinions of the people in order to sort the entire crew roughly.

Besides better rations, our work assignments became more humane. We got used to the climate, and the hoeing tools for the second cycle had long handles so that we didn't have to bend over anymore. Finally this work was finished as well and since there was nothing else to do with the beets, we were almost unemployed. One day we drove to a German farmer. The company was called “Wunsch & Rosemann.” We had to harvest potatoes there. Now I have to tell who the workers were who worked alongside us in the fields. These were so-called Mexicans, multiracial migrant workers, who work on farms all year around. The whole family works in the summer in the north where they harvest beets, potatoes and fruit and then in the winter in the south where they harvest cotton and tropical fruits. They are mobile with

the help of large trailers to which they hook their cars. Mostly they make handshake agreements with the farmers, park their “apartments” near the fields and when the work is finished, they move on. They work incredibly fast and do a very good job, but they need a break after three or four days. Normally by then they have earned enough to live on.

Now we came to “Wunsch & Rosemann” and were dropped off next to a potato field. The potatoes had been cleared on an area of about 1.2 acres and lay on the ground to be picked up. Every man received a “harness”, that means a wide belt. It was strapped around the belly. In the front it had straps on the right and left connecting downwards to a crossbar that sat on the thighs. On the lower rim of the wood there were two strong hooks onto which the potato sack was hung. The empty sack hung down to the ground. When one walked forward while stooped over, it was easy to throw in the bulbs. After a few steps the sack was filled with 100lbs. Then it was grabbed with both hands and all lined up in a row. Later a truck drove along the row, and the sacks were loaded onto the vehicle by us. So that no time is wasted, the belt has on the back two large thin hooks which hold as many empty sacks as possible. This work was fun. But on the third day a commission of our employers from the sugar factory came and decided that we weren't busy enough. Only now we learned about the other side of the matter, the situation of the farmer. He told that a Mexican family had been willing to pick up the potatoes for 8 cents a sack initially. When the head of the family arrived before the work started, he wanted 9 cents. There was talk back and forward and when the farmer agreed, he wanted 10 cents. That was too much for Mr. Wunsch. He walked away and requested Germans from the camp. Now the work moved ahead, but the third day was the last one. We didn't return there. He had to accept the demands of the Mexicans whether he wanted to or not or the potatoes stayed in the ground.

Then we also harvested tomatoes for a few days. When we got off the vehicle at this field, somebody dumped simultaneously a load of crate boards there. Tables were set up on which the little boards were nailed together into crates. Some of us received buckets in which we collected the ripe tomatoes. Other put them into the crates, and still others nailed them shut. When we had to pick hops in a big field, we discovered a field with wonderful melons nearby. With the guard's permission we helped ourselves there, but the melons disagreed with us. The entire detachment met up in the latrine, a classic thunder box, at night. We joked about it for days.

Another experience during that time had to do with acquiring pears. There were wonderful fruit orchards nearby – pears, apples and wonderful peaches. Something I remember well are the vast quantities of fruit that were just laying on the ground and spoiling. A comrade by the name of Franz Braun from near Offenburg and I fetched pears from the grounds. We filled our pockets and still wanted to take more of the wonderful fruits, but we didn't have any containers, sacks or bags. So Franz took off his windbreaker, closed the zipper and knotted the sleeves. But when he wanted to fill the makeshift sack, the pears rolled out at the neck.

“A string,” he said. “Do you have any thread?” I said no, and then he reached into his pocket and what he pulled out was a rosary.

“That should work.” he thought. “ It doesn't happen every day that somebody steals pears and ties up his sack with a rosary.”

We also had a priest in our camp, and he was a contact for personal problems. On Sundays he held a short service in the dining room where a provisional altar was set up for that purpose. I have to admit that I didn't go there often – more out of indifference than rejection. We suppressed religion, Christian belief and praying. How should it help? “Help yourself, then God helps you.” That was often said.

Much later in a letter to the parents from England, I wrote that and caused some sleepless nights for my grandmother. She threatened me with a serious argument when I would come back home. But as far as I remember, it was never talked about.

In November all the beets had been cleared and shipped. Now a little bit of snow fell as well, and we took leave from Yakima Valley. I felt healthy and had found a few good friends during these six months. The previously mentioned corn on the bottom of the left foot was gone. When I moved into the barracks in Toppenish, there stood an orange crate next to my bed serving as a nightstand. On this piece of "furniture" stood a little container with a colorless ointment. It didn't smell and only later I knew that it was Vaseline. Every evening after showering I applied it to the corn. And there you go, after some time it came off, and the hole it created healed up nicely. I never had anymore trouble with it.

The move happened by truck – not like back then in Germany cooped up on a six-wheeler but nice and comfortable with bench seats and a tarp cover. The journey went westwards through the Cascade Mountains in view of the 14,000ft high Mount Rainier. Mount Adams with its 12,000ft somewhat farther south had been daily in our sight in Toppenish.

In the evening the convoy reached its destination of Fort Lewis, a huge military post about 10 miles south of Tacoma. The prisoner camp was occupied by a few thousand men – a town with everything that goes with that. The wooden barracks had two stories. Two hundred and fifty men formed a company that lived in four barracks making it 30 men a room. There was a furnace room on the ground floor, and the rooms were heated by warm forced air. Every company had a kitchen barracks with mess hall. People who were used inside the camp had a precise duty schedule. That included street sweeping, guard post at the gates, kitchen personnel, barbers and medics. All others went to work outside every day. That included city detachment, ware houses, canteen kitchens, bakeries, tailor shops, painting gangs and forest detachment.

(See attached article from 1995 and photos with General Hicks.)

Fort Lewis has been a huge and garrison since the times of the American Civil War. During WWII it was an important support base for the Asian theater. According to our interpreter the standing troop strength was 12,000 people. In the winter of 1945/46 several thousand GIs returning from Japan were added to that. They stayed here for two or three days before traveling to their home bases. All of them had to be supplied and fed. For that, the Germans were here. In the kitchens and the mess halls, the bakers and butchers, the forklift drivers in the warehouses and the street sweepers were all German POWs.

All of them were dressed very well and had plenty to eat. The person in the bed next to me was from Mannheim. He worked in the tailor shop. We arrived in quite tattered and dirty cloths but were newly clothed as fast as possible. Like all I had received an olive green uniform with a brand new shirt and creases at the breast pockets. Apparently, a badge had been taken off from there and on the left sleeve was a spot that had been fixed with a quilting seam. My "tailor" from Mannheim wasn't on board with that at all.

"No," he said, "you are not wearing something like that. Where are we? We are not in Siberia. I'll bring you another one."

"Don't make a fuss," I said. "That's a new shirt. I've never had a nicer one." But he brought me another one that hadn't been darned the next day.

“What did you do with my shirt?”

“I burned it,” was the answer, “like we always do.” I didn't know what to say. They burned cloths?

“ Listen,” he said, “when we come into the tailor shop in the morning, we put on new underwear. The worn ones are thrown into the oven. The same happens with the uniform on the weekend. We always wear new cloths.”

“What do the Americans say?”

“They are doing it exactly the same way,” was the answer. With that, the subject was closed, and we didn't talk about it anymore.

I was assigned to a forest detachment along with a few comrades from the beet camp. In the mornings we drove into the near forest. Two Army civilians were with us. Our job was to gather branches and brush and burn it. The Americans went into their hut. We lit up a fire, sat around it and told jokes. Our work spot lay on a hillside that sloped gently southwards. Below us, almost in the valley, we could see a road on which American soldiers with shouldered rifles marched back and forward once in the morning and again towards evening. They walked to a shooting range because we could hear banging from afar. Apparently, these were recruits who were practicing their shooting. At some time trees had been cut down on our hillside – thick trunks that almost all had been transported away. But the tree stumps stuck about 30 inches out of the ground. One of us had the idea to scare the Americans. If one spits a few times on a firm tree stump and puts a piece of charcoal on it, one only has to strike it hard and that creates a loud bang – just like a shot. The road was about 200 yards away, and we “loaded” an estimated ten tree stumps along a stretch of 50 or 60 yards across the hillside. Everybody spit on the wood, put the charcoal on top and when the soldiers marched by below us, we got going. One after the other struck his ax onto the coals, and the banging was so amplified in the forest that it sounded like rifle fire. The band of soldiers got out of order, and both of our civilians rushed out of the hut. Everybody believed that there were partisans in the forest. After a stern rebuke by the guards, everything calmed down, and finally everybody laughed about the practical joke.

On December 12 we were allowed to send the second Red Cross search card to the parents at home.

(See copy, observe the discriminating statement on the upper right.)

We read this with bitterness, but in the helpless situation we were in, we had no choice but to fill out the address and sender dutifully. Half a year after the end of the war, there is no more debate over the “defeated Wehrmacht”.

The attached response card reached me in England in February 1946. What I only heard much later, was that Jakob Nerding from Frankweiler, our naval hero from the Atlantic crossing, had already been back home in November. My parents and also Ottl's mother found out from him where we were.

Before Christmas I brought a small evergreen tree back to the camp. The people in the tailor shop brought colorful threads that we used for decorations because we had no balls or tinsel. We didn't get any mail, and nobody knew how our relatives at home were doing. At the Christmas celebration we ate a good meal and lit a few candles afterwards. We sang the popular Christmas songs, and all of us withdrew into ourselves and thought of home. Especially the older ones among us who had wives and children at home were sad. But everybody had to tell himself that we were well taken care of and that

we were probably better off than the people in Germany.

The news that reached us talked about bad conditions, which was easy to imagine. A report in the newspaper said that there was famine in Europe. But since the population couldn't understand this just like that, one thought of a reason. You see, it said, “due to transportation difficulties.” For us, especially those who came to the USA last, this lie could be easily seen through. I myself had seen the long convoy that sailed empty to America in April 1945. If more than 100 ships would have returned to Europe filled with wheat rather than munitions, nobody there would have had to be hungry.

At this point the war was finished, but the huge capacity of the American industry continued to produce munitions. It was paid for and had to be delivered. A few weeks later in January 1946, when we drove to the port, we saw large parking lots full of brand new military vehicles from jeeps to semi-trucks standing in rows ready to be shipped out. There was certainly different military equipment sitting in other places at the same time. Was all that to be scrapped? Oh no, humanity wasn't at that point yet back then. It is my firm conviction that there is a cause for the many wars that have been fought in the world since then. That maybe rooted in the capitalist system, but today in 1995 we know that the communist system didn't provide humanity with a better life either.

But I digress with these remarks. Christmas 1945 was peaceful for the first time after six “war Christmases” - a reason to ponder about this.

“What had we Germans done? What were we thinking – going to war against the entire world?”

“Hitler was a megalomaniac, and the military obeyed him.”

“After 14/18 another war was lost. So many dead, so much destruction in the whole of Europe, and it's our fault.”

I'm writing these sentences from my memory without knowing who said them. But certainly these words were spoken, and the answers were not quite clear. There were definitely men who tried to find excuses. After 50 years we know the ramifications and that there are no excuses. But when, despite the huge devastation of things and people, the killing continues, we have to ask, “Who is the megalomaniac now?”

Apparently, there are always people who are wooed by the power over others.

One evening when we climbed off the vehicle in front of the gate, we weren't allowed to enter the gate. We were smuggled in individually through a little side entrance and had to enter the movie theater right away. All seats were filled. The light went off, and we watched a film that left us completely speechless. These were images of the liberated concentration camps that had been discovered by the Allies in Germany and Poland. Everyone of the assembled former soldiers had known that there were prisons. Military prisons, penitentiaries, POW camps, yes, even the term “concentration camp” we had heard before. But this! It was unimaginable. It gave us all a profound shock. Even with all we knew about possible propaganda, this could not be made up. Was it comprehensible that people do such a thing? Everybody must have asked himself, “Would I have participated as well? Could I have done this?”

We were spared an answer because we were allowed to live in different circumstances. But to what conclusion do the thoughts about guilt or complicity lead? The terrible things that happened at the fall

of the Third Reich are maybe seen as answer for the racial fanaticism of the Nazis. But where do crime and retribution start when we contemplate history? Is it not the other extreme when people claim, “All soldiers are murderers!”

How many – certainly millions of people in the whole world – went to fight as soldiers in uniform in good faith for their home and friends and won or lost? I would like to be counted amongst those who wore the uniform with a good conscience. But these images show events that cannot be explained. But because the course of history since that time doesn't show that the people in the world learned much from this, I don't believe it's good that the next generation is so directly burdened with this as it happens. Allocation of blame has its limits where their own behavior is only shaped by hate.

The images were a topic of conversations for a long time, but the everyday life, the work continued.

From the date on the medical record I see that December 28, 1945, was a black day for me. On this day we drove into the forest as usual. Rain was pouring down. Behind a fallen pine whose 10ft roots were pointing angular upwards was a halfway dry place for a fire. My axe was leaning on the trunk of the tall pine. I was standing with my back to the trunk and rested both my elbows. Somebody from our outfit had an axe with a double sided blade. He stood next to me facing the trunk and to kill time struck his axe diagonally into the trunk – once from the right, once from the left. As I said, it was raining lightly but continuously. We were dressed accordingly with a thick windbreaker on top of a shirt and a rain coat with a high collar. I wore the collars of the windbreaker and rain coat up, and that was lucky because suddenly the axe flew against my neck. Not very hard but enough that I called out to him to stop with the stupid game. But he didn't stop and shortly thereafter the blade flew so severely against my right upper arm that it cut through the cloths. Soon blood ran along my wrist. The horror was great, and I had to hold up my arm. A short time later the truck that delivered lunch came and took me home. “Jesus Christ,” said the guard at the gate and let us pass. After a physician treated me, I had to carry my arm in a pristine white triangle cloth for two nice weeks. It wasn't as bad as we originally feared. The x-ray pictures are still in my possession today. Once I was fit for work again, I was assigned to another detachment. We coated the roof shingles of the wooden buildings in the large area with tar. A civilian drove a big truck with a tar cooker as trailer. He set the gas burner ablaze at the job site and when the stuff was liquid, he filled our buckets. We climbed onto the roof armed with a broom and the tar bucket in the other hand. That was fun, and there was a lot to see from up above. We got around town and once when the flame from the gas bottle set the entire kettle on fire, our American had to call the fire department.

As previously mentioned, Germans worked in all the warehouses. Once we received a big package of cookies and another time a box of chocolate. One day we came to a bakery and when the roof was tarred, the comrades said, “ Are you hungry?” The answer was of course, “yes!” And there we were sitting around a long table and let them serve us. Somebody pulled a rope of Frankfurter sausage links out of a kettle that stood on the stove, and put it on the table. The sausage rope was a long as the table. “Say, if it is not enough!” Then there was real German army bread – what a miracle in America.

Day after day the Americans eat this bleached white bread that comes ready cut in slices from the bakery. It can't be cut with a normal kitchen knife because it is soft like cotton wool. After a short time it doesn't taste good anymore, and one craves dense rye bread. But this is only available from German bakers who can get dark flower outside the camp. These baker boys also had German Streuselkuchen! It was unbelievable! Our American was agape with amazement. Then a big can of pork schmalz was put on the table - with the dark bread a special treat that we weren't used to anymore. The American didn't want to eat the bread and spread the schmalz on the Streuselkuchen. Different countries, different

customs!

It was announced that everybody who wanted was allowed to send a package home. Karl, a compatriot from Offenbach, was my advisor and without him, I couldn't have done it. He obtained a fitting box made from plywood. I had bought some things in the canteen and to fill the available space, I spent all my money: soap, tooth paste, a box with an assortment of carving knives, tobacco (I thought of my father) and also laundry soap. We had to present the boxes openly in a large hall, and the Americans controlled the content.

Everything OK? Lid on, stop!

“You wanted to pack the sweater?”

“But the American?” I said. “He has moved on,” said Karl. “Take it off, and stuff it in.” No sooner said than done! Lid on, the paper with the address on it, and the matter was closed. Karl didn't have any relatives and didn't know to whom he could have sent anything.

He died soon after his release at home.

One wouldn't believe it, the box arrived in Germany in the summer of 1946. My father could pick it up undamaged at the custom's office in Landau.

A few days after the action with the package, we went to the movie theater in the evening. Karl was part of it and when we stepped outside after the performance, the comrades stood together in groups and debated.

“ We are being released!” That was the newest announcement. We took that in with some disbelief because rallying cries of that type were not always true. But this time it was correct. A few days later we had to exchange our cloths. Everything we received – pants, shirts and a coat – was dyed black. This way they were distinct. Everybody had two suits, and everything else was of course olive green and had to stay here.

I am jumping ahead with this photo that shows how the men looked in their black dye uniforms. It was taken in the English camp 279 in Yaxley in the summer of 1946. I am standing all the way to the right.

Here also follow the melodies of the hits from my time in the USA that I still have in my ears today. The song with the title *Don't Fence Me In* sung by Frank Sinatra is still well known. For a long time it was part of the repertory of dance bands. Especially performers of the Dixieland Jazz played this melody.

Chapter 5 - In English Captivity

from March 16, 1946 until December 9, 1947

In the beginning of February 1946 we climbed onto big semi-trucks. Each of us carried a big duffle bag. In the port of Tacoma we took up quarters on the "Sea Quail." It was an 8,000 ton large freight ship that was equipped as a troop carrier. Four Japanese flags were painted on the bridge for four airplanes that had been shot down near Okinawa. During the following night we put out to sea. For four weeks the ship was our apartment. Under beautiful weather we moved southwards. The Pacific Ocean is also called the "Still Ocean" in German. It was wonderful. The calendar told us that it was the middle of February, and we enjoyed the warm days on the upper deck. The men sat around in groups and chatted or played games. Some played chess, others cards and still others with dice. A boy from Pirmasens had slung a hammock and lay in the sun dressed only in swim trunks and read a book. Presumably, he had fallen asleep and when he woke up, he had a bad sunburn. He had to go to the infirmary and had high fever for a few days. He came through it all and was healthy again.

One morning we were awoken by loud hooting of the ship's horn. There was a thick fog, and the ship was only moving slowly. We heard over the loudspeaker that the boat had engine trouble and had to enter the port of Long Beach to be repaired there. Obviously, there was no reason to keep something secret. We were always informed about the current situation. These communications generated an atmosphere of contentment even inclusion. Everybody cared about the ship, and we knew that we were near the coast and therefore there couldn't be any danger.

The men's conversations revolved around the future. We were on the way to Europe – home – at least that's what we had been told. What did it matter then if the old boat had to take a break for a few more days on its journey. However, there were also a few people who didn't know exactly how "home" would look like. One example was Alfred from Silesia, a true friend. The people from Silesia and the Palatinate have always liked each other.

"In the worst case," I said to him, "you come with me." We pictured how the "later" would be. Certainly there were no big problems to be expected. Where there is work, one can also earn money, and many were left with nothing and had to start anew.

The journey continued southwards. We moved through the Panama Canal, and we were at anchor in the port of Colon for two more days. The journey through the canal was very interesting – the tropical vegetation and the elevation difference in the locks. We were lucky. Once we had a US Navy heavy cruiser, whose name I regrettably don't know anymore, next to us. It was on its way from east to west. Then our ship moved in direction Europe on a route that is traversed by many others. Frequently, we saw other boats between Haiti and Cuba on the way to the Atlantic. Of course we didn't see anything of the islands, but we informed by the on board announcements.

The Atlantic grabbed us, and the waves plummeted against the ship's side. It was real pandemonium. After a short while there was a terrible stench in the large cargo hold where our berths stood, the pipe frames with the clamped on canvas tarps. Alfred and I stayed on the upper deck as much and in the evenings as long as possible. When it got dark, everybody had to go into the ship's interior. Then we visited our friend Alfons in his berth. We had adapted to the swaying and enjoyed the fresh breeze and the choppy sea. We could also fetch the food and keep it down. Alfons not so much – he was lying on his berth and was half dead.

“Come up on deck with us some time. It's so fantastic. You can't imagine.”

Alfons growled at most and what he said likely amounted to, “Kiss my ass.” There were better days, but the water never got completely still and only when our ship reached the port of Liverpool, he dared to come to the upper deck.

But by that time we had already been shocked by news that had been wisely kept from us as long as possible. Quite officially we were told, “The camps in Germany are currently overcrowded. We have to take you to England first – temporarily, until there is room again over there.” That was a lame excuse. I am sure that the command on board had been in the know. I had been in the USA for ten months, but 20 more months would pass until the final return home.