

MORTAR GUNNER ON THE EASTERN FRONT

VOLUME II:
RUSSIA, HUNGARY, LITHUANIA
AND THE BATTLE FOR EAST PRUSSIA

THE MEMOIR OF
DR HANS HEINZ REHFELDT

FOREWORD BY GILBERTO VILLAHERMOSA



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Volume II: Russia, Hungary, Lithuania and the Battle for East
Prussia

Hans Heinz Rehfeldt

Foreword by Gilberto Villahermosa

Translated by Geoffrey Brooks



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Foreword

Dr Hans Heinz Rehfeldt's second volume of *Mortar Gunner on the Eastern Front* has been published on the eightieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War in Europe and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the D-Day landings in France. Despite the passing of eight decades since the beginning of the global conflagration that resulted in the death of 50 to 80 million people and left much of Europe and the Soviet Union in ruins, interest in the Second World War remains strong as a new generation of readers seeks to come to grips with the history of the world's most destructive war. Books like *Mortar Gunner on the Eastern Front* are important not only because they remind us of the cost of global conflict and the sacrifices required to bring down a monstrous regime that ran rampant across Europe and Russia and slaughtered millions, but also because they provide new and important insights on all aspects of warfare, from the political-economic at the strategic level, to the operational and tactical on the battlefield. *Mortar Gunner on the Eastern Front* shows us the war from the perspective of a single German soldier.

Heinz Rehfeldt was no ordinary soldier. A member of the Hitler Youth before the war, he volunteered for the *Grossdeutschland*'s panzer arm in 1940, joined the unit in October 1941, and fought with the *Grossdeutschland* for almost the entire duration of the war. By the end of the war he had been decorated with the Iron Cross First (of which only 300,000 were awarded) and Second Class for valour; the Eastern Front Medal (*Ostmedaille*), presented for service in Russia during the winter campaign period of 15 November 1941 to 15 April 1942; the Close Combat Clasp (*Nahkampfspange*), bestowed for hand-to-hand fighting in close quarters; the Infantry Assault Badge (*Infanterie-Sturmabzeichen*), given to

those who had participated in infantry assaults with light infantry weapons on at least three separate days of battle on the front line on or after 1 January 1940; and the Wound Badge (*Verwundetenabzeichen*), awarded for a wound or wounds received as the direct result of hostile enemy action. These awards attest to the fact that Rehfeldt was an exemplary soldier, placing him in the top 1.5 per cent of all Wehrmacht personnel during the Second World War. Yet from 1937 to 1946, this model infantryman kept a detailed diary throughout the war – a major security violation of German military regulations punishable by death if discovered.

The *Grossdeutschland* was one of the most elite German Army formations of the war. Formed in the 1920s as a ceremonial guard unit, it had expanded into a regiment by the late 1930s. In 1942, it expanded again into the Infantry Division *Grossdeutschland*. By May 1943, it had been reorganized and renamed Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland*. Its unofficial title was ‘Bodyguard of the German People’. Lavishly equipped with Tiger tanks and armoured personnel carriers, it fought exceptionally well throughout the war on the most critical sectors of the Eastern Front. As the Wehrmacht’s ‘Fire Brigade’, it was shuttled to wherever the situation was most critical. In November 1944, several of its subordinate formations were expanded to division status and the group of formations was reorganized as the Panzerkorps *Grossdeutschland*. The men of the *Grossdeutschland* fought fiercely until the very end of the war, suffering some 17,000 casualties by January 1945. Only 4,000 men surrendered to the British in May 1945.

Although some German histories of the formation mention only that ‘draconian measures’ were occasionally required to bring the civilian populations of conquered territories into line, the soldiers of the *Grossdeutschland* Regiment, like too many of their comrades fighting on the Western and Eastern Fronts, were complicit in war crimes. Most notable were the execution of black French Army prisoners in France in 1940 and dozens of civilians during the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 by men of the regiment. These atrocities occurred before Rehfeldt joined the regiment. The author claims never to have witnessed any war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht. While readers should give Rehfeldt the

benefit of the doubt, they should never forget that the myth of the ‘Clean Wehrmacht’ has been decisively debunked by a new generation of German historians who have proven conclusively that the German Army and Waffen-SS were complicit in atrocities on a massive scale in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Most of Rehfeldt’s diaries cover the German–Russian War on the Eastern Front, which was waged on a truly titanic scale. During Operation *Barbarossa*, the Wehrmacht and its allies marshalled more than 3 million men, 3,000 tanks, 600,000 motor vehicles and more than 600,000 horses for Nazi Germany’s invasion of Soviet Russia. In the first six months of the conflict, the Wehrmacht shattered almost 200 Soviet divisions of Stalin’s Red Army, inflicting more than 4 million casualties (including almost 3 million killed and captured) and destroying or capturing 18,000 combat aircraft, 20,500 tanks, and more than 100,000 artillery pieces and mortars. Rehfeldt, who fought at the Battle of Moscow at the end of 1941 and Kursk during the summer of 1943, makes it clear that Hitler’s war against Stalin was no simple walkover. Noteworthy are his comments on the ever-present Red Army Air Force bombers and fighter-bombers. Particularly worthy of respect, according to Rehfeldt, were the Il-2 Sturmoviks armoured ground-attack aircraft that mauled German columns regularly with bombs, rockets and cannon fire in 1943 (when the second volume begins). The Red Army’s medium and heavy tanks, for which the Germans had no equivalent at the time, also caused soldiers like Rehfeldt nightmares. Likewise, Soviet artillery and multiple rocket launchers hammered German positions relentlessly. Finally, no matter how many Soviet divisions the Wehrmacht destroyed, there were always more waiting in the wings to attack. Rehfeldt’s survival on the Eastern Front seems nothing short of a miracle. Some 80 per cent of the almost 19 million German soldiers that served in the Second World War fought on the Eastern Front. Of the 5 million that died, 2.7 million – more than half – died fighting the Russians. So Rehfeldt had about a one-in-three chance of surviving the war in general and less than a one-in-two chance of living through combat in Russia.

Like most soldiers in a war zone, forced to spent months at a time living either constantly on the move in the hot, dust-filled summers or in

waterlogged or frozen trenches or bunkers in the brutal winters, memories and details of food and home fill much of Rehfeldt's narrative. Writing with excitement of a meal of white bread, pancake, bacon and milk in Hungary in March 1944, he says: 'And a soldier can always eat!' His insights into the commanders, soldiers and equipment of the *Grossdeutschland* are important. He records, for example, that even a unit as elite as the *Grossdeutschland*, equipped with state-of-the-art Tiger tanks, had to make do with 3.7cm and 5cm anti-tank guns in April 1944. These weapons were totally incapable of stopping the first generation of Soviet medium and heavy tanks, let alone newer armoured combat vehicles like the Red Army's 50-tonne Joseph Stalin series tanks or assault guns. Such observations say a great deal about why the overstretched Wehrmacht, outmatched and overproduced by the Red Army, was unable to stop the Russians in the east.

The second volume of *Mortar Gunner on the Eastern Front* is lavishly illustrated with an abundance of maps, photographs, diagrams, copies of orders and official reports, newspapers, letters, postcards, illustrations from German and Russian field manuals and magazines, and propaganda material. Rehfeldt draws an astute and original connection between the influx of first hundreds of thousands, and later, millions of German prisoners of war and the increased effectiveness of the Red Army's propaganda machine against the Wehrmacht as the Soviets put those prisoners to work designing and printing propaganda material to be used against their comrades on the Eastern Front. 'Good photography and a refined text', notes Rehfeldt about one example, 'presented the hopeless situation for the German Army.' Regarding another, he writes: 'Fair words buoyed up false hopes for a better world. Committed German Communists were never offered it in the Soviet Union.' By the end of the war, some 3 million Wehrmacht soldiers were captives of the Red Army.

On 3 May 1945, Hans Heinz Rehfeldt marched into an American prisoner-of-war camp with a fellow soldier from the *Grossdeutschland*, 'clenching our teeth, our wounded feet inflamed, but proud and upright. For us the war had ended – and we had survived!' Rehfeldt remained in custody only a short period of time compared to millions of his comrades imprisoned in Russia, more than 90 per cent of whom would never see

home again. He made it home to Hagen after a wartime journey almost too fantastic to believe. His memoirs *Mortar Gunner on the Eastern Front* are more than just a testament to one German soldier's loyal service to his country, while striving to survive a regime and a conflict more brutal and unforgiving than any in history. They are a valuable reminder of what war looks like at the sharp end of the spear.

Colonel (US Army Retired) Gilberto Villahermosa

Translator's Note

Throughout his military service in the Second World War, the author was a *Grossdeutschland* soldier (rank at the capitulation Unteroffizier = full Corporal) serving with the mortars at battalion level. The Rheinmetall 8cm Granatwerfer 34 (GrW 34) weighed 64kg (141lbs) and consisted of a smoothbore barrel, bipod and baseplate dismantled into three parts for transportation. The mortar was a muzzle-loader, the bomb weighing 3.5kg: at a muzzle velocity of 172m/sec the maximum range was 2,400m. Rate of fire was fifteen to twenty-five rounds per minute. The barrel could be traversed between 10° to 23°, and elevated to between 45° and 90°. A panoramic sight was mounted on the yoke of the traversing mechanism. The spread at maximum range was 65m, therefore crew training was considered of the greatest importance for accuracy and rate of fire. The mortar team consisted of the mortar captain, No. 1 and No. 2 gunners and two or three ammunition runners. A group leader had charge of two mortars, a platoon leader charge of four or more.

Upon entry into the British Army, a soldier is at once a 'Private'. The German equivalent was or is 'Grenadier' or 'gunner' etc. The rank of 'Gefreiter' indicated a trained private soldier with some time served who had shown himself worthy to be entrusted with some authority although not having the status of NCO which attaches to the rank of a British lance corporal. The next rank up was 'Obergefreiter', on a par with lance corporal as evidenced by lace on the jacket collar, but still not of NCO status. The lowest NCO rank in the German army was 'Unteroffizier' (Corporal) for which the candidate had to successfully pass through the appropriate course of training. The next *Grossdeutschland* NCO ranks up were 'Feldwebel' (Sergeant), 'Oberfeldwebel' (staff sergeant), 'Stabsfeldwebel' (Warrant Officer II) and 'Hauptfeldwebel' (CSM, Warrant Officer I), also known as *Spiess*.

Author's Introduction

Before continuing my diary notes from August 1943 until after the end of the war, I would like first to summarize my war experiences up to that point, which appeared in my first volume.

After obtaining my *Abitur* [school-leaving certificate] – in 1940 I volunteered at once for the *Grossdeutschland* regiment's panzer arm. At that time we looked upon the war as a kind of 'experience'. We learned to handle infantry weapons and could soon dismantle, assemble and use them blindfold. After the first review I was promptly assigned to the infantry's field mortars

After a short stay with the Reserve Battalion of 'Reinforced Infantry Regiment *Grossdeutschland*', directly after our period in training in October 1941 we were shipped to the Eastern Front. 'At last!' so we thought, but even during the railway journey we saw the traces of war: wooden crosses – the first graves of German soldiers. At a stroke our morale changed.

In the battle for Tula I got to know the feared 'Stalin organ' rocket launcher. Now I was right up at the Front and saw the point of the often-quoted motto: 'Who digs deeper has more chance of survival.' We were not only involved in a struggle against the enemy. The endless worries about the rations and supply vehicles which often never got through to us, banal things like lice, waiting for a letter from home, or when the next issue of cigarettes would be: these concerns plagued us. Nothing had prepared us for the icy cold of the Russian autumn and winter of 1941 when we had to fight in our summer uniforms. Nobody had imagined that the war would go on for so long. If we did not know the location of a comrade in order to wake him at the right time, he would freeze to death. One's rejoicing over the first

letter to arrive from home – ‘Rehfeldt, you have post!’ – is scarcely imaginable. That sentence was like music to my ears.

Up until then, I had escaped from the jaws of death on several occasions. Frequently it was simply a matter of luck. The question of when one’s time would be up was always there. ‘From killing to being killed in war is no great distance.’ Our losses were high and had no end, but we received constant hope and were reminded of our responsibility: ‘Germany must live even if we must die.’

Then came 1942. The winter war came to an end and spring arrived with full force. I had my first home leave. Several glorious spring days with my family. Back at the Front we prepared to strike a blow with the major 1942 summer offensive from Kursk to Voronezh. The successful offensive to the south, Stalino (Donetz), the crossing of the Don and the advance to Manytsh-Liman formed part of it.

Then in September 1942 – Rzhev. The fiercest defensive fighting. We were forced by Ivan’s anti-tank guns to lie low. I was unharmed but my friend Gottfried Fritsch had most of a leg shot away. I opened an emergency dressing pack with trembling hands and tried to stem the flow of blood. Gottfried was not interested in this kind of first aid. ‘Shoot me, shoot me!’ he cried. I called for the *Sanitäter* [medic] but Gottfried was beyond help and died in our arms. We had to live with such personal tragedies and carry on. My turn came that same month at Rzhev. I received a shell splinter in the knee but remained at my mortar, the result being that a relatively light wound deteriorated into a nasty case of bursitis, and after a stay in a Warsaw military hospital I was awarded home leave, convalescent leave – Reserve Brigade, Cottbus.

Major battles awaited in 1943. After rejoining my unit at the Front east of Kharkov I fought in the city itself! Then we drew back to beyond Poltava. In March we launched a successful counter-attack as far as Tomarovka. How we longed for peace. I was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class and sent on the Unteroffizier’s [Corporal’s] course, then came the preparations for Operation *Zitadelle*. After breaking through and penetrating powerful Russian field fortifications and strongpoints, this operation was called off because of Badoglio’s treachery in Italy. SS units were withdrawn from the

Front and transferred in haste to Italy. Even we ourselves were pulled back to our starting point.

We had no peace. *Grossdeutschland*, the ‘Fire Brigade’, was sent to the Front north-east of Smolensk and Bryansk and directly into the Karachev Woods where Ivan had settled in for his counter-offensive against Orel. Bitter defensive fighting led to serious losses and we were transferred to Achtyrka. On the journey there our own retreating troops insulted us as the ‘War Prolongation Division’. We could hardly believe our ears but had to admit that after *Zitadelle* had been called off the Wehrmacht was no longer capable of waging an offensive war. That was the sad truth. Our losses in panzers and men had been too great. Instead we were going to have to defend and defend until such time as the miracle weapons would be deployed. That was the plan. We wanted to believe in it – had to believe in it, otherwise all was lost. We could not accept the unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies. *Vae Victis!* Woe to the Defeated!

And so we carried on to Achtyrka. To keep on fighting.

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Verlagshaus Würzburg produced an authentic two-volume work from my notes, pictures and documents and published the first edition in 2008. This translation into English is based on the sixth German edition of 2017.

I dedicate these two volumes to my Fallen and War-disabled comrades of the *Grossdeutschland* units.

Dr Hans Heinz Rehfeldt

1943

Chapter 1

Defensive Fighting in the Achtyrka Area

Between 8 and 23 August 1943 the author was attached to the Officer's Reserve as Unteroffizier zbV [Corporal for special purposes] with the close-up *Tross* [rear services] at Chernetchino.

11 August 1943

Back at Chernetchino via Achtyrka we find the Russian air force to be very active! Ivan attacks everywhere he can. A proper Front has to be set up again. At present there is total chaos. The enemy breaks through the main battle line again and again. Russian tanks appear suddenly amongst the *Tross* and cause great confusion. The town of Achtyrka is a battlefield. Our stragglers from beaten units stream back to the collection point. Our *Grossdeutschland* men, used to rolling from one area of shit to another, maintain an inscrutable facial expression for these demoralized soldiers. We are the fire brigade, and even our *Tross* has to keep the sharpest watch. In such a situation it is often safer to be at the fighting front. We grabbed some schnapps and many eggs from the provisions warehouses and made an egg liqueur.

At first light the Russian bombers and ground-attack fighters appeared, attacking with bombs and cannon. A house caught fire. In 1941 and 1942 the Luftwaffe had air supremacy. Now the Luftwaffe is very much weaker and Ivan has air supremacy instead, and we are experiencing for ourselves what that means! We despatched a Kübelwagen to establish where 9 Company was in action. It could not be found. Next we sent out a motorcyclist to find II Battalion and get the precise location of 9 Company from them. Somewhere two T-34s broke through to the outskirts of Achtyrka town and occupied the southern part. Our light 10.5cm howitzers

and 15cm heavy howitzers opened fire at a range of 500m. They knocked out a 52-tonne tank with a direct hit. Driving on the Rollbahn has now become very dangerous, big formations of Russian bombers or Il-2 Sturmoviks fly along it. Not even half of our division had been unloaded from the trains before Ivan arrived. We are missing our other regiment, the ‘Fusiliers’ and our panzers. It is rumoured that SS units are coming here from the Mius Front. I ask myself, ‘What will it be like here when winter comes? Will the miracle weapons get here in time?’

12 August 1943

Today I led the advance party of the entire II Battalion *Tross*. We had to return to Lebedin using the Rollbahn over long distances. Every kind of vehicle imaginable was striving to either get to the Front or back to the rear. The fighter-bombers are active every day – and feared! Men ask, ‘Where are our fighters?’ The ‘committed’ aircraft rake us with bombs, rockets and cannon. They make three attacks and then after a wide turn come for us at low level, fire pouring from all barrels! Lorries halt! Everybody out of the vehicle and take full cover! But where? We dash into the field and hide behind a shock of corn sheaves. The rounds from the machine cannon impact into the earth near us: we hear the ugly swish of the rockets. The MG salvos pass close above our heads, most of this stuff going into the ploughed field 5–10m behind us. Everything that fifteen Russian aircraft had to offer within a few minutes! We all thought: ‘We’re done for!’ Incendiary bullets ignited the straw and the harvested corn. Three men were wounded by ‘light anti-personnel bombs’. Hardly was it over than we leapt into our lorries and roared away at top speed, trailing long banners of dust behind us. This made it difficult for the drivers to see out. Some of the lorries stood abandoned and burning by the side of the Rollbahn. Finally we reached the new accommodation area, a village just off the Rollbahn. The men chalked on the doors, ‘*Nahtross* [close-up services], 9 Company, weapons and equipment or field kitchen, drivers, etc.’ I had to take a lorry back to fetch II Battalion. The sky was cloudless, we raced along the Rollbahn at 70km/hr. Huge plumes of dust trailed behind all the vehicles. Speed had to be reduced for oncoming traffic, whose visibility was down to

a few metres. Our uniforms, the weapons, everything was coated with this brightish-yellow dust. On sweaty faces it formed a yellowish-brown layer. It got between the teeth. At 1300hrs I led the battalion back along the Rollbahn. There were numerous other convoys, all driving much more slowly because of the reduced visibility. I thought of the many ground-attack aircraft which had given us such rough treatment just three hours ago. I do not know from where and how this word ‘rake’ (*beharken*) came to be used in connection with gunfire. But one must be lucky. We reached the new accommodations without being spotted. The individual companies were shown to the houses allotted to them. The infantry then dug foxholes. ‘Whoever digs deep has more chance of living.’ I reported to the battalion officers that everybody had arrived without loss. One good report: the *Ferntross* [static rearward services] still a few kilometres behind was bringing up mail. During the night Ivan pestered us with his accursed Il-2 ‘sewing machines’, roaring up and down.

13 August 1943

The forward positions could be held. The orders now are to pull back to the Vorskla (small river). Achtyrka is still in our hands. Reinforcements are coming up! But only very few men! SS units are also arriving from the Mius as reinforcements. We shall soon be in action again as per the saying, ‘Attack is the best form of defence!’

Chapter 2

Retreating as Far as Kremenchug

14–17 August 1943

I am in charge of *Tross I*, i.e. the *Nah Gefechtstross*, the front-line support services. We are in the small town of Chernetchino again. During the night we patrolled the town. With things being in the state they are at present, one must always expect the impossible. 9 Company is being relieved. Billets in Achtyrka. Only a short pause for washing and sleep.

18 August 1943

Today we advanced! Powerful formations of Stukas softened up Ivan beforehand. Ivan bombards the Rollbahn with his 15.2cm heavy artillery. All we have been given as our objectives are the names of places. We made good headway! Our *Grossdeutschland* panzer spearhead made contact with the SS units coming up from the south-east. The ‘*Nahtross*’ is heading for Achtyrka. During the night we had continual Russian bombing raids. Damn! Where is Ivan getting all these aircraft from? Heavy bombers and those ‘sewing machines’ we love so much! They are going to be our companions right through the war!

19 August 1943

Our vehicles are well camouflaged, the men have deep foxholes. At this moment all hell has been let loose in the sky! Ivan’s bombers arrive in endless streams during the night. But our Luftwaffe is more active! All day the drone of aircraft engines, artillery fire and heavy Flak. Tomorrow we will be resuming our advance.

21 August 1943

We're attacking! Ivan is putting up a fierce defence! No backsliding here! It was so pleasant with the platoon and now we're coming!

22–23 August 1943

The combat *Tross* is heading for Ochuchra where we encircled Ivan and gave him a thrashing. The place is devastated, destruction and ruins everywhere. Now we're going via Kotelva-Oposhnia to Dikanka. We know it because we spent a few weeks 'resting' there before the *Zitadelle* offensive.

24 August 1943

We rolled all night! The bombs of the 'sewing machines' erupting everywhere. A searchlight emits a beam of light so that their pilots can find the airfield after their mission. We call these pale beams 'fingers of death'. They have to fly through our Flak to do this, but these 'crows' are very difficult to damage. During my four years at the Front I only ever saw one shot down. He had left it too late to set off back, and we could see the small training machine at low level with the naked eye. That was his misfortune. The wings have canvas covering and apparently our shells go straight through them without effect!

25–27 August 1943

Our division is being relieved. So what next? We hear that the 'New Sixth Army' (a revival of the old Sixth Army after the Stalingrad disaster) is to take over from the SS units and *Grossdeutschland* after we get it in shape. Fresh orders for the fighting troops. I am leading the *Nahtross* to Lyutyshya-Budechiya, northwest of Poltava.

28 August 1943

9 Company has spent a day and night at the Front mopping up. Something not quite right there again.

29 August 1943

Relieved! The word is going round that we're off to the Mius Front. Beforehand, this evening there's going to be a convivial company and NCOs' evening. 'Whoever has troubles also has liquor' (Wilhelm Busch). We have enough of both here, God knows! Soon we will be drowning our sorrows!

30 August 1943

The transfer out seems to be going ahead. Parts of the division are moving out to Poltava for train transport. That definitely sounds like another 'fire brigade' operation?! But just before Poltava a Fieseler Storch landed ahead of the convoy: 'Stop! Turn around, go back! Await new orders!' A fresh operation. We all rolled back again!

31 August 1943

The division has assembled and is ready. What's in store for us?

1 September 1943

The fifth year of the war begins today. We are at Gadyatch.

2 September 1943

I went with the lorry to the *Grossdeutschland* Field Reserve Battalion. The journey took us through Birki to Sorochinzy. From there I had to pick up four *Sanitäter*. It was about 30km. I sat with the driver, the safety catch of my submachine gun off. Another soldier sat in the rear of the lorry, also ready to fire. The partisans make it necessary. The road went through fairly unpleasant woods to Lyutyshya-Budetchia. But all went well.

3 September 1943

We set off for Dikanka but at Birki received our operational orders: 'Turn around, march! Fire brigade! To Syenkov.' A gap between two divisions had to be closed. In the evening we made a strong attack on Syenkov and took the village. The Front is still not stable.

4 September 1943

We are making our advance with new panzers! I have heard of ten Tigers, Panzer IVs and Panthers. Adding it all up, about fifty new tanks.

5 September 1943

There is a lot of movement at the Front. No peace there. We took the combat *Tross* to Daidalovka. Scarcely had we got there than the Il-2 *Sturmoviks* graced us and the Rollbahn with their presence. Wherever does Ivan get them all from? As their enemy we say without any trace of envy that what the T-34 achieved on the ground, these Il-2 ground-attack aircraft (designed by Ilyushin) have done the in the air. But our Stukas also keep on flying long operations.

6 September 1943

Our division was relieved at 0300hrs. An hour later Ivan broke through as far as Syenkv with almost thirty smaller tanks. Our *Tross* people, who had already abandoned their accommodation to the relief, turned back but found a new rest area halfway. I found out that our 'Fusilier Regiment Grossdeutschland' is in action south of the Grenadier Regiment. Thick smoke on the horizon. Thick yellow-grey dust hangs over our convoys on the Rollbahn. I have never see so much dust in my life!

7 September 1943

The Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* has been sent south to Oposhnia. There is much aerial activity by both sides, unfortunately the casualties amongst the 'fire brigade' units are increasing. The men forward (age group 18–24) get no rest. They often find themselves in the most difficult situations without a 'reliable' unit on either side of them. The fallen are brought to us at the *Tross* in the provisions lorries. It is also my job to 'prepare' these poor boys. First I break off the ID tag for collection by the *Spiess* [CSM], then I go through all the pockets. I pack in the fallen soldier's washbag private belongings such as purses, other papers, pipe, photos, letters, harmonica. I remove still usable boots. Finally the body is sewn into a woollen blanket or groundsheets and later removed to an easily recognizable place near some salient feature and then interred. There will

often be many comrades lying side by side. Each grave receives a wooden cross. The orderly office keeps a precise plan of the cemetery. The Spiess then writes to the parents or wife or other family member with the report of death, these letters being signed by the company commander. A sad task. So many men whom I had known well and in whose company I had spent many difficult hours I now have to lay to rest in Russian soil. The weapons and equipment corporal is constantly busy making crosses during heavy fighting. Then the legend is inscribed on the crossbar of the cross, often branded with the *Grossdeutschland* symbol, then follows the rank, forename and family name, often also the company and sometimes the words 'God – Honour – Fatherland'. And naturally the date of death.

8 September 1943

People are rather angry. A staff sergeant arrived in 'our village' wanting quarters for his general, von Knobelsdorff. After a short but noisy discussion in which the staff sergeant thought he could deal with me by virtue of his rank, he was forced to retire complaining. When his general turned up later and wanted to be shown to his quarters, I informed him that his staff sergeant had gone on to the next village. The general thanked me and left. Then came a messenger with orders for us to abandon the village within three hours. We are having to evacuate all territory east of the Dnieper and form a new front line to the rear of it. Furthermore all grain, cattle, horses, everything of value has to be brought back behind the river, even the remaining civilians. An emigration of nations! I looked on as crops in the fields were harvested, threshed, loaded aboard lorries and driven off. The Russians will arrive in a land bereft of everything. All the large haystacks, often the size of a house, were set afire, and we watched the flames eat their way through the stubble still standing in the fields. Dense smoke and fumes everywhere; we heard many explosions, and even the railway lines were torn up by the 'rail ripper'.

'Scorched earth' – what Ivan left for us in the winter of 1941, and for Napoleon in 1812.

By night it burned, glowed and glimmered all around us. Many houses were on fire too – a ghastly scene. '*C'est la Guerre!*' Total madness. And it

is not as though it will hold the Russians up for very long.

9 September 1943

Today I took charge of 9 Company's *Tross II*. I took three lorries on reconnaissance to Sorochinzy, about 40km west. On the radio we heard that Italy has capitulated. 'Badoglio treason!' What is that going to mean? Here the damn' war is going to go on.

10 September 1943

Yesterday evening when supper was being delivered to a farmstead at the Front, Unteroffiziers Spiegel, Ahlburg and Muggenburg plus four grenadiers were killed in a shower of mortar bombs; another four grenadiers were killed in bitter fighting during the day. Eleven comrades in one day! When I heard, I wrote to my company commander offering to go to the Front to take over a mortar group or platoon but contrary to my expectations he replied, 'You stay where you are and as you are!' I am disappointed! I haven't yet found out how many men were wounded in this attack. None of my last mortar crew came through it unharmed. A shell exploded against a tree, causing the death of the No. 2, Gefreiter Stomberg, and wounding the mortar captain and No. 1 gunner. Shit war! This was the first time in the whole war that we had suffered casualties from a shell exploding against a tree. I have noted down the strength of 9 Company. We have only two heavy MGs and four mortars (8.14cm) operational – 45 to 50 men (authorized company strength 150 men). The clearance parties are working feverishly to evacuate villages and towns. Everything moveable and usable is being taken, then lorries loaded up with grain head in convoys to Mirgorod station.

11 September 1943

I took my three lorries west to Velika Bahachka (about 70km) and past Poltava. It rained again, turning the dust into slippery mud, like driving on wet soap. We passed large collective farms and barns burning, heard explosions at many places. Ivan must not be allowed to find anything

usable. Our troops are pulling back ‘according to plan’. Unfortunately Ivan often sets the pace and destination.

Meanwhile our battered division finds itself in a continuous rearguard action at the Front, always as the ‘fire brigade’. A Russian message was intercepted: ‘We are going to encircle *Grossdeutschland* and wipe it out.’ Ha ha ha. Wipe us out? It won’t be as easy as that. How often have we held a position to the last while Ivan outflanked us on both sides and raced ahead. Other units would have decamped long before. And when we actually are encircled, a couple of panzers and assault guns, 3.7cm and 2cm Flak and a loud ‘Hurrah!’ get us free. Ivan would dearly love to bag us here. Our presence here causes him much anguish. We have often struck out his far-reaching plans. I always remember the words spoken to us by Major Tode (commanding officer, Reserve Battalion *Grossdeutschland*) as we left for the Front: ‘Wherever *Grossdeutschland* is to be found, there is always something going on!’

12 September 1943

Today I was given the job of locating the field post office. It had moved off somewhere.

13 September 1943

We were told about some more intercepted Russian radio messages. Example: ‘They’re all pulling back, only Hörlein’s *Pimpfe* are still holding firm!¹ We shall encircle them and wipe them out!'

On the same day as when we were attached to Eighth Army, Ivan’s message read: ‘Hörlein and his bandits are rushing from Army to Army!’ The use of the word ‘bandit’ shows how much our presence upset Ivan. Otherwise all passed quietly today.

14–17 September 1943

Tross, II Grenadier Regiment Grossdeutschland. We pulled out at 0800hrs and rolled via Bahachka along rutted mud tracks to the small town of Rechetilovka (70km) as far as we could go today. We had a fifteen-minute rest in front of the soldiers’ hostel. We are very short of lubricants and fuel.

Where next? We slept exhausted in the cabs. When we woke up the weather had cleared.

18 September 1943

We overtook a Hungarian motorized unit. We traded one bottle of vodka for 20 litres of lubricant and one canister of fuel ‘decided to come with us’. On the big IVC Rollbahn, which had dried out well, we headed for Kremenchug, luckily hardly bothered by Russian aircraft. We had the SS unit’s *Tross* rolling with us, other *Tross* being back behind the Dnieper. There was a Flak group amongst the columns. We reached Kremenchug on the Dnieper around 1600hrs without arousing much attention. A traffic jam at the single big bridge over the river meant we had to stay overnight on the eastern side of town.

19 September 1943

We had just found quarters and were ready to sleep when there was an air-raid alert. Heavy 8.8cm Flak barked, searchlights swept the sky. A few bombs fell. At 2100hrs peace returned. We noticed the many heavy Flak batteries in position here: the large bridge is well protected on account of its vital importance.

Note

1. *Pimpfe* – colloquial name for boys before their voices broke . In the National Socialist period, *Pimpfe* were boys aged 6 to 10 who formed the youngest section of the Hitler Youth. (TN)

Chapter 3

Crossing the Dnieper Towards Kirovograd

20 September 1943

We pulled out at 0400hrs. *Tross* I rolled past us then we followed. We crossed the big ‘Rundstedt Bridge’ over the Dnieper towards Kirovograd via Alexandriya. All the various *Tross* arriving from the east head for this bridge and then fan out again after crossing it. Our journey took us through Kirovograd where the ‘peacetime economy’ was in full swing. Then we headed for the villages of Krasnozilka and Stavidlo, our rest areas north of Kirovograd. From its airfield a fleet of probably a hundred He 111 bombers operate along the Front. Huge ‘transport gliders’ are towed by conventional aircraft. I saw two enormous sixengined machines taking off, the first time I have ever seen such large aircraft. Are they bombers or transports? Later I found out they are the Gigants. In Kirovograd there are German girls working as auxiliaries on the staff, in signals units and as nurses.

21–22 September 1943

We saw Russian auxiliary troops, partisan hunters, Cossacks and Ukrainians. Wild, daring, brave men! They ride like the devil! Their songs are wild melodies but nearly always tinged with melancholy. They wear German uniforms with blood-red collar patches, some wear fur caps. They carry captured Russian weapons and are led by their own officers. All sworn enemies of Bolshevism! They have three German officers with them.

23 September 1943

Our company commander Oberleutnant Schmelter is back. In the Karachev Woods operation he had been sitting on the hull of a panzer when the turret

turned, crushing his leg. I met him again during my study-leave in 1944.

I was advised to contact the senior vet of the slaughtering company and I visited him at Kamenka. He gave me some interesting information and I gained some insight into a slaughterhouse. That is only a minor part of veterinary medicine of course. I observed meat inspection and processing.

24 September 1943

I was active today in my ‘special purposes’ role. There is heaps to do even here.

25–27 September 1943

So as to forget the strain of the past weeks, we all imbibed as an ‘antidote’. It was also a very special occasion, for our Hauptfeldwebel Oskar Gellert is twenty-seven. I was twenty in April this year. We were ‘paralytic’ for almost three whole days.

28 September 1943

Alarm! Anti-partisan pursuit. An alarm battalion set out with anti-tank guns, Flak, heavy MGs and mortars. The wood around the village was surrounded and then combed through on a broad front. Unfortunately the village itself was only given a superficial search and nothing was found. Back to Krasnozilka. Our battlegroups funnelled back to Kremechug and the important Dnieper bridge, the Russians following up rapidly.

29 September 1943

Once all our men have crossed the Dnieper, the great bridge is to be blown up, and the fighting troops will fan out along the river in order to form the new Front.

30 September 1943

In a new operation against partisans our Field Reserve Battalion combed the woods while we stood security at the edges. I had to go to Kamenka to fetch their baggage. During the search of the woods the battalion came across a village where the partisans were ready for them with MGs. The nest was

captured, but unfortunately we lost three comrades in the skirmishing. Thirty-four partisans were taken together with weapons, ammunition and maps.

1 October 1943

Today's post brought bad news. My mother wrote: 'Heavy terror attack by the Anglo-Americans on the town of Hagen. 260 killed, 23,000 homeless, much destruction.' I also received a telegram: 'Serious bomb damage'. At that I immediately submitted an application for home leave. The next few days were much alike. I have plenty to keep me busy.

2–6 October 1943

I had to get ammunition ready and finish off a lot of paperwork. The term 'zbV' (*zur besonderen Verwendung* = for special purposes) means that the Hauptfeldwebel can set me to work anywhere he thinks I am needed. I certainly don't get bored but I have this unhappy feeling. My comrades serving the mortar at the Front – I am always thinking of them, especially when mortar bombs have to be loaded. Often I get the feeling of being a shirker, but when I wrote to the company commander offering to take over a group or the mortar platoon after it suffered heavy losses in a bombardment, all he said was 'You stay here, do your job, then we'll just wait and see.' I have another assignment tomorrow.

7 October 1943

I led the advance party to Novo Praga in the new accommodation area via Kirovograd. We stayed overnight at Korssenivka. Next we stopped at the village of Nyaedivoda (free translation: 'I give no water'.) In one of the houses I met a young Russian field-hospital nurse whom I identified by her white uniform. I asked her how the village came by this peculiar name. She explained: 'When the Tartars under Genghis Khan conquered the village they asked for water. The inhabitants replied, "We give no water." At that they destroyed the village and raged at the inhabitants, so now this place is called *Ne dai vodá*.' Previously it was called Katharinovka. I found that very interesting.

Then I searched for a billet for myself and my driver. It was easy to talk to the young nurse; many Russians were taught German at school. With pistol drawn, my driver and I went door to door accompanied by her. We looked over the rooms and then chalked the front door with the names of those who would be lodging there. The field kitchen always got a house close by the village well or spring. I also took the opportunity to give the inhabitants of each house a look-over. In one house a woman sat making a kind of winter dress using an old sewing machine. In the same house we found a man of somewhat suspicious appearance: he was of military age and had his hair cropped short in the Red Army style. When I questioned him, he told me he was infirm, and acted like it. We continued our search for quarters. I thought to myself, ‘Blind eye, be watchful.’ On the first night my driver and I worked shifts, one sleeping while the other kept watch. But all remained quiet.

8 October 1943

Next morning we were surprised by the arrival of Ukrainian police who had come to arrest a partisan leader hiding in the village who had been denounced. My driver and I accompanied them. They strode in determined fashion to the same house where I had spoken to the man yesterday. When the two of us got there, the partisan had already been overpowered and stood in the living room with his hands tied behind his back and a mocking expression on his face. The whole village was now searched very thoroughly. In the house we found military papers, a German haversack and a concealed bicycle. The Ukrainian police chief asked him: ‘Have you any weapons? Where is your rifle?’

‘I have no rifle.’

Meanwhile the house and garden were searched again. In a shed we found a Wehrmacht belt with full ammunition pouches, a German uniform and a Wehrmacht carrying frame! From which poor comrade of ours, to whose back it had perhaps been strapped, might he have taken it? At that the Ukrainian police chief took a whip to the bare upper torso of the prisoner, shouting: ‘Where is the rifle? Where are the weapons?’

‘I have no rifle!’

One of the police auxiliaries spoke with the onlookers. He asked them something and then came to me; ‘Sir, the people say the woman hid a rifle in the ground. Come, let us look.’ I went with him into the garden and found a fresh depression in the earth. We dug down with our hands and found the rifle, a German carbine. Hardly had we got it free and held it aloft than the Ukrainian police boss punched the lying partisan hard in the face which made him stagger. The police set fire to the small shed and soon the ammunition hidden inside it began to explode. It was evidence enough. The prisoner was led away, his wife too. In order to reach the police station, we had to cross a high bridge over a river. I called out, ‘Take care he doesn’t try something here!’ No sooner said than done. It happened in a flash. With a leap and a bound he was over the railing and head-first into the river, all done with his hands tied behind his back. The courage born of despair. He did not get far, however. One of the police hauled him out, also the haversack and papers. From the harsh interrogation there and then it transpired that he was a lieutenant in the Red Army and, as he also admitted, had ‘worked’ with four accomplices. More he would not reveal. Suddenly he gave the police corporal interrogating him a powerful kick to the stomach. The immediate response was a blow to his head with a cudgel, repeated until the prisoner fell senseless. I saw here at first hand an example of the hatred which exists between Russians and Ukrainians. To prevent any further aggression by the prisoner when he came to, he was bound hand and foot. I had seen enough. ‘Shit war!’ He was taken to the police station where I doubt that his treatment would have been any better and very probably he would have been shot dead.

Chapter 4

Transfer to Seleni

10 October 1943

We were ordered to change location. The battlegroups in the line are having great difficulties, not least by being greatly outnumbered by the Russians so that the Front is frequently breached. We are to transfer to Seleni.

11–12 October 1943

I am alone with the company. *Tross II* has not yet arrived, only a 9 Company Kübelwagen being here so far.

Assessment of Unteroffizier Hans Heinz Rehfeldt
12 October 1943

To: Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland*

II Battalion Grenadier Regiment, heavy Company, 8 Company

Open, honest character, modest, obliging. He has worked at carrying out his duties to the satisfaction of his superiors. Rehfeldt is a determined and energetic NCO, an example to his subordinates. Good aptitude, quick in the uptake, physically powerful, equal to all situations. Rehfeldt has good technical knowledge of weapons and equally good grasp of the principles of all areas of service. He has proved himself in the face of the enemy, and is decorated with the Iron Cross II and Infantry Assault badge. His demeanour towards higher ranks is satisfactory. He is well liked by his colleagues.

Schmelter, Hauptmann and Company Commander.

13–14 October 1943

At first we were in the village alone, then *Tross* II arrived on the 14th. Now I can have my ‘bomb damage leave’. Then came an order for all *Tross* people at a loose end to go forward to help dig in. We drove with weapons and tools to the No. 1 General Staff officer. I wanted to get my hands on my leave pass! I reported myself out and accompanied a *Sanitäter* NCO to the 14 Company forward *Tross*. At the main dressing station the new Knight’s Cross holder Oberleutnant Konopka, who had been ill or wounded, came to take us to the front line. The sky was clear blue with only a few stray white clouds. At the Front loud thundering and the aftermath. Probably Ivan advancing again. Since we kept a frequent watch on the sky for enemy aircraft, I saw some broadening circles, rather like when one drops a stone into calm waters. The sky looked just like that. I had never seen anything like it before. I pointed it out to the lieutenant but he also had no idea what made it. How had this physical phenomenon been caused?

15 October 1943

Because the lieutenant already knew me from my promotion to Unteroffizier in the Karachev Woods, when the opportunity presented itself I asked him about a leave pass. He had just arrived to take over II Battalion. He laughed and said, ‘Not today, but tomorrow. I am not your battalion commander yet.’ Because of the persistent danger of low-level air attack we maintained a high speed to the *Tross*. On the horizon we saw shells exploding and Ivan’s ground-attack aircraft. Ivan already had a bridgehead over the Dnieper and matters were proceeding accordingly. Ivan was preparing a major offensive. At 14 Company, because our orderly office was not nearby, after a short explanation I got my leave pass. In the evening a quartermaster drove me in a Fiat car back to Seleni. My home leave has been approved!

Author’s Note: On this day the Russians launched their major offensive from the bridgehead either side of Mishurin-Rog. Heavy fighting occurred as German forces attempted to halt the advance southwards towards Sofiyevka (east of Krivoi Rog).

16 October 1943

Now I can make my preparations for leave! The important thing apparently is that I have a new uniform. One must look smart when arriving home. Also important is to have as much egg liqueur made up as possible. Finally everything was completed and at midday I went to the Rollbahn and spent half an hour thumbing a lift until a lorry stopped and took me to Kirovograd. He was going to the main dressing station there. We arrived at 2000hrs. I caught a service train to Snamenka where I spent the night.

17–18 October 1943

Early in the morning I went to the control office for leave monitoring and got a travel warrant. The train was more often stationary than in motion. Partisans had blown up the lines at various places ahead. Well, I thought, that's a good start!

19 October 1943

We rolled slowly but surely! Finally the train drew into Fastov and stayed there until 2200hrs. Scarcely had we pulled out than Ivan's air force arrived to bomb the station.

20 October 1943

The journey took us through Berditchev-Stolbunov. Here I left the 'snail express' and got aboard a leave train.

21 October 1943

We arrived at Kowel, well known to our infantry for its 'Delousing Unit for Front Leave-Takers'. Here we had to emerge 'fit for home'. To our surprise we also received here a so-called 'Führer-Parcel' (contents; 5kg flour, 1 litre oil, 0.5kg peas, 1kg semolina, 0.5kg millet and 0.5kg sugar). I was lucky: a fellow traveller returning home to his farm gifted me his parcel. My parents were overjoyed! On the train the occupants were divided up between the coaches. I was nominated a 'watchkeeper'. This was necessary because of the partisan activity. We pulled out at 1600hrs.

22 October 1943

I am heading for home! We passed through Warsaw – Lodz – Magdeburg – Hannover and pulled into Hagen at 0600hrs.

23 October 1943

I have twenty-one days home leave. These were wonderful days. Unfortunately the air war had also found Hagen, but luckily my parent's house was only slightly damaged. The first HE bomb dropped exploded in the middle of Buchhain Street, another was a direct hit on a villa in Wasserlosen Tal Street. The town itself had been very badly damaged. I applied at once for ten days additional leave from the company. Unfortunately the telegram authorizing it arrived three days after I had left for the Front.

12 November 1943

Author's Note: Major Remer, commanding officer, Armoured Infantry Carrier/ Panzer Grenadier-Regiment *Grossdeutschland* has received the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross.¹

14 November 1943

End of my leave. From Hagen 0518hrs – Hamm Front-Leave-takers' Train (special additional train) 184 – Hannover – Leipzig – Cottbus – Litzmannstadt – Warsaw – Kowel. From there connection to Odessa.

Note

1. Oberst Otto Ernst Remer (1912–93) was taken into American captivity at the end of the war. His decorations besides the above were the German Cross in Gold, the Close Combat Clasp in Silver and the Iron Cross First and Second Class. He was the *Grossdeutschland* officer who played the decisive role in Berlin in putting down the attempted coup d'état against Hitler on 20 July 1944. (TN)

Chapter 5

At the Front Again

16 November 1943

As a result of the changed situation at the Front (the Russians had advanced further), the train diverted via Shepetovka to Criopole in Romania. Here partisans were also active! We saw a train of ten wagons loaded with 8.8cm Flak guns which had been derailed after an explosion. The actual damage was only slight. One partisan was hanging by the neck from a tree. The weather is misty, moist and warm. On the neighbouring track the train was full of evacuated *Volksdeutsche*. They spoke good German and we chatted. They were heading for Oppeln. They said jokingly: ‘We want to help finish off England. That would end the war!’ I agreed that the war had certainly gone on too long.

18 November 1943

The train continued via Migaero – Razdelnaya – Vhygoda to Odessa. At every station the local populace approached the train to sell us butter, oil, wine, milk, apples and fried chicken! And because soldiers like eating, we bought plenty!

19 November 1943

The journey ended at Odessa. We heard ships’ sirens hooting in the harbour and saw searchlight beams come on. There are two means of getting to the Front from here: 1. Nikopol. 2. Apostolov. By route 2, I can get back to my division.

20 November 1943

After proceeding at a snail's pace on a single-line track, where we always had to wait to let the oncoming train pass first, we finally arrived at Nikolayev. Dead tired, I spent two days here resting with two comrades. We had a wander through the large town, which in earlier times would certainly have been a very pleasant place. In the harbour we saw the big docks and cranes and some of the Black Sea. We ate in the soldiers' hostel at midday and in the evening. Then we went to the soldiers' cinema. I noticed here from the programme that as a soldier I had seen a huge number of films.

21 November 1943

We spent the night in the soldiers' hostel – and next morning I had my first louse! Oh, woe! It will not be the last. First we saw a film, then went to a Russian theatre. There we saw *Der Mann ohne Kopf* ('The man without a head'). Using clever effects of light and shadow it really seems as though the man does have no head. Black head sunk down against a black background, the torso in bright light. Impressive! In the evening we returned to the soldiers' hostel. Not much good news coming from the fronts.

22 November 1943

We set off early and the train rolled into Apostolov around 1900hrs. We spent the night in quarters there, after which lorries brought us finally to Michailovka (a few kilometres west of Krivoi Rog). The rearward ammunition warehouse for our division is here. We are waiting now for lorries to take us to Battalion: it has been raining heavily and so none are coming today on account of the mud. We are passing the time playing cards and writing letters.

23–28 November 1943

For the time being we are stuck here. No lorry can make it through. Ivan is very busy bombing Apostolov railway station. We have 8.8cm Flak there which makes it hot for him.

29 November 1943

A lorry attempted to get from here to *Tross* I of II Battalion today but failed on account of engine trouble. We got as far as Felsenhut, a town founded by German emigres. We searched for a house to spend the night near where our lorry was parked. We found an empty one and took it over. Ivan is still constantly bombing the station at Apostolov. We got close to the wall and slept despite everything.

30 November 1943

We were really stuck fast here, in ‘the arse of the world’ as the infantry calls it, until a heavy artillery tractor took us back to Michailovka. From there a grenadier regiment lorry selected an alternative route, not via Felsenhut, for the onward section to II Battalion. By hook or by crook we finally reached Company in darkness! ‘Company – we are back!’ Company has become our second home.

1 December 1943

My 9 Company/Grenadier Regiment is at Wodyane, some kilometres west of Kirovograd. There has been a lot of rain, therefore plenty of mud on the tracks and roads. Frost would be better, but it’s not really winter just yet. Then friend and foe will both be hindered to the same extent in their movements. Not a pleasant situation!

2/3 December 1943

The provisions have not arrived. But it is our third year in Russia and we know what we have to do. There are always pigs and poultry around somewhere, then all we need is a fire. In the evenings we relax to light music from the radio in the orderly room together with our *Spiess* Oskar Gellert, Oberfeldwebel (Staff Sergeant) Baerwald and other ‘*Tross* lads’, the quartermaster, the weapons and equipment maintenance NCO and me.

4 December 1943

Oberfeldwebel Ernst Baerwald has applied to be an officer! He came back from General Hörlein and is leaving for officers’ academy in the Reich. We celebrated with a leaving party and much booze!

5 December 1943

Today it snowed here for the first time, and it settled. However it is not cold and the layer of snow is thin. Civilians and Hiwis [Russian auxiliary volunteers] are in the hills building a position with field bunkers. We returned to Kremenchug hoping to find well-prepared and extensive field positions with bunkers on the Dnieper. But there is nothing!

6 December 1943

The area behind the Front is being evacuated. The evacuees come with their belongings either in a horse-drawn wagon or on foot. It's a very sad sight to see people forced from their homes with pack and sack! I have now been with the *Tross* long enough to see how well one can live with it. But at the Front comrades lie in foxholes in the line and under constant fire in this damp, cold miserable weather! Of course, in the *Tross* we have annoyances and drudgery, but what is that compared to all the deprivation, difficulties and danger forward in the main battle line! Here we have houses, can sleep in the dry, though perhaps disturbed now and again by a 'sewing machine', but that is nothing in comparison. My duty is still 'zbV' – special purposes. I never asked for it, but I suppose it has something to do with my application to study. So I make myself useful wherever needed. I write battle reports for the company, i.e. for the War Diary. The worst thing for me is to prepare the bodies of the fallen brought back from the line. I have already described what that involves. I look once more at the face of the casualty, close the eyes and then have the body buried at a place appointed for the purpose marked by some striking feature. I place in the grave with the body a sealed flask with details of the fallen man so that he can still be identified even if for some reason the wooden cross is removed.

So, what is the *Tross* composed of? Here one finds the orderly office, field kitchen, the weapons and equipment maintenance team, the uniform storage lorry with bootmaker and tailor, the motor-pool supervisor, responsible for everything to do with machinery, motors and vehicles. Here also are the *Spiess*, the lorry and car drivers and the signals detachment. Here, in the service of the fighting troops, potatoes are peeled and food cooked or roasted, belts of MG ammunition packed into boxes, and the

mortar bombs wiped with a rag soaked in petrol for protection against rust. The motor-pool supervisor's repairs troop adds parts to engines, repairs them or builds a working hybrid from one or two damaged engines. It is not easy for the supervisor because the Wehrmacht uses many different lorry and car types from all over Europe. Even captured Russian and American Studebaker lorries wear German colours! In the evening the meal prepared by the field kitchen and the cold fare are driven in the provisions wagon to the Front together with the mail. I know from my own experience how much the men look forward to it. Ammunition is also brought up, with spare parts and replacement men for the heavy MG and mortar groups. In the night, often early morning, the provisions lorry returns to the *Tross* with the wounded and dead. In especially difficult situations the provisions lorry may not come back to the *Tross* (very frequently in 1941–2!) On days involving major fighting, when it is not clear in the evening where our own front line is, the provisions lorry will not go forward. I have to say, however, that the rations, whether hot or cold, are always very good at our 8 or 9 Company. We have cooks who can always put together better meals from the basic food provided than cooks in other companies can manage from the same raw materials, as evidenced by our MG or mortar groups on temporary detachment. I mention here our cooks Feldwebels Berbrich and Reimann. In icy winter their tea spiced with rum does one good! (I often go voluntarily to 'fetch coffee'). And in the summer heat their tea tastes cold!

13 December 1943

At last the day has come! Today I had to report to the IIa/2 General Staff Officer (Supply) at the regimental command post at Petrova-Dolina. Detachment to the Army Veterinary Academy, Hannover. We are two men of corporal's rank: my companion will be studying medicine. When we arrived, all hell was being let loose only a couple of kilometres ahead at the Front, although Ivan also ranges his artillery this far. Every night at the line the men dig: bunkers, communication trenches and firing emplacements. Straw is brought up for the damp and cold individual foxholes. Our heavy guns are close behind the Front, well concealed and protected. Every time Ivan pushes forward it invites a very fierce response: I saw standing around,

some dug in, two batteries of Do-rocket launchers on armoured personnel carriers, 10.5cm to 15cm calibre field guns including the Hummel¹ and a battery of 10.5cm guns: pretty good firepower! After we presented ourselves to the IIa/2 General Staff Officer, we got the feeling that our movement out was going to go well. Then I drove back to Woldana.

14–15 December 1943

It is rumoured that a bend in the river held by *Grossdeutschland* is to be downgraded, our division withdrawn and sent to Lemberg for rest. Here the wish is father to the thought, though we would certainly have deserved it!

16–17 December 1943

I have been awarded a new assignment (zbV!). Christmas is coming and the Spiess said, ‘Find some Christmas trees!’ I drove into Novo-Zhitomir, the nearest big town. Long lines of evacuees traipsed through its streets. Men and women, resigned to their fate, accompanying horse-drawn carts often in a very poor state of repair, children in rags stowed on top of the few belongings. There were no fir trees in the town. Here in the Ukraine there are few woods, so from where should I get the necessary trees? I drove on to Krivoi Rog, thinking I might find some firs in the ‘Culture Park’. Unfortunately the infantry billeted in Krivoi Rog had taken them all for themselves, though we did find a few branches of pine and fir. Driving through the streets we almost captured a fat goose which the infantry had hung on a wire outside the house wall. This was their ‘refrigerator’ and also a fairly good way of keeping an eye on the food. It made our mouths water but unfortunately ‘the grapes were too high’. There are ore mines and coal mines right in the middle of town, just as at Kirovograd. Either caused by careless engineering or military demolition, a collapsed open, flooded pit winds its way across town. Red earth, from the workings? Jagged, weathered sides lead steeply to a river. The town has a wild look about it. I found out that Ivan was here a few weeks ago but was driven out.

21 December 1943

German service offices are being hastily put up (or taken down?). There are steelworks and mines around the town. From here Rollbahn IV leads to Lemberg. By late evening we were back at Woldana but with only a few bits and pieces of pine and fir.

22 December 1943

Once again I reported to the IIa/2 General Staff Officer at the regimental command post Petrova-Dolina. There I met my corporal companion who will be studying medicine. After waiting an hour we were instructed, ‘Make yourselves ready to be presented to the general.’ First we reported to his adjutant, Major Theo Bethge (previously company commander 8 Company and battalion commander II Battalion ‘Grenadiers’). He looked us over from head to toe, spoke to us encouragingly and then said to me as he opened the door to the general’s office, ‘The first slow.’ I had no idea what this meant. Then we made our introductions in the ‘snappy’ approved manner: ‘Unteroffizier Rehfeldt, 9 Company, Mortar Platoon Leader, II Battalion, reports himself for the study of Veterinary Medicine at the Army Veterinary Academy, Hannover.’ My companion followed suit. General Hörlein now gave us both a very searching look. When he saw our decorations he said, ‘Well, you have certainly both given very good service, you should now be able to proceed to your studies. And you, you want to be a cow’s arse astronomer – a vet? You want to leave our glorious Panzer arm?’ To that I replied simply, *‘Jawohl, Herr General!’* Now he had us stand at ease, reached under his table, brought forth three cognac glasses and a bottle of Hennessy. He poured it out carefully, took hold of his glass and raised it. My companion took a cautious swig and coughed. I watched the general savour a sip and then copied his action. ‘I see that my corporals know to appreciate their drink,’ he said, looking at me. Then he poured for himself and me a second glass. My companion declined after the general gave him a brief ‘explanation’ on how to quaff nobly. He asked a few personal questions: ‘Where do you live? Married? In love? Engaged? Well, you’re still young, there’s time yet.’

‘*Jawohl, Herr General!*’ we replied in chorus. We came to attention, saluted and about-turned. Major Bethge was preparing the paperwork in the

anteroom. We were being ‘simply transferred’. Nearby I met Feldwebel Walter Pfeil from Hagen who had come up with the field kitchen and we chatted for a while. The same day I returned to Woldana. Here Stabsgefreiter [Lance corporal] Willi Klein was spending a few days away from the Front waiting to receive his award of the Iron Cross I. He had the nickname ‘Chingchan’ because he sang the Chinese song of that name at our platoon or company evenings. He came from the Münsterland.

23 December 1943

We built a Christmas tree. Because we had neither a fir tree nor much greenery, we bored some holes in a wooden pole and inserted fir twigs inside. ‘*Oh Tannenbaum!*’ I made some tinsel out of silver paper, finely-plucked cotton wool was ‘snow’ on the branches and with that the tree was finished. With the remnants of the branches we decorated the walls of the orderly room. Now it looked Christmassy. As old soldiers we made pancakes and doughnuts.

24 December 1943

We had a cosy get-together in the orderly room. Post had arrived, two full sacks for our company. Spiess Osker Gellert joined us later. He had gone to the fighting troop at the Front to give the boys Christmas greetings and presents. He reported that all the ‘high animals’ had also visited there, even General Hörlein and all the senior officers.

This is my third Christmas spent far from home. We took photos with a flashbulb. Our Spiess made a speech, emphasizing that our company (MG and mortar) had never been so widely scattered as now. In the forward positions are twenty men (two MGs and two mortars) as against the authorized strength of 125 to 150. That is our total fighting strength. We, *Tross I*, are here at Woldana. Men of our company have been sent to neighbouring villages on protection and staff assistance duties. Far to our rear at Novo Ukrainka is *Tross II* with the repairs troop and then, in field and war hospitals, or in hospitals on home soil, are our wounded. Even our company commander is not with us, but wounded somewhere in the Reich. Our company no longer has an officer, and is being led by sergeants and

corporals. Gellert then looked back at the year 1943, which had brought us so much hardship and suffering. But we must not let it get us down! There is one word we do not know – Capitulation! Finally we remembered our fallen comrades. It was too much and after that we fell silent. Only later did things become more convivial!

25–26 December 1943 – Christmas at Woldana

The company is very generous with presents. First the men of the forward fighting troop were visited yesterday and received their gifts, then the *Trosses*. Each man received two fruit cakes, cigarettes, schnapps, sausage and other items from the Army stores. There is more cake available than we can handle and so we sent it forward to the line in the evening. Alas we have no winter weather. During the day it rained, and at night it froze, forming black ice. The tracks and roads have a ‘sugar coating’. Never seen anything like it before. As expected Ivan attacked the Fusiliers on Christmas Eve. He was driven off by a counter-attack, and those who had broken through were annihilated. The Front held. By radio we learn that Ivan has become aggressive at Zhitomir, Ryechitza and north of Newel.

27–30 December 1943

I have got my things in order and prepared for the journey. Today I received my transfer to the Army Veterinary Academy – Hannover from the *Spiess*. Now comes the important question: how do I get from Woldana to a railway station?

31 December 1943 – New Year's Eve

We celebrated cosily in a large room with punch and tasty cake. But the pleasant atmosphere had an abrupt ending! The men of the 14 Company *Tross* in the neighbouring village thought it would be hilarious if they suddenly tossed some smoke flares into our peaceful circle. We tumbled out coughing and gasping and decided on an immediate counter-attack. Hot on the heels of the fleeing 14 Company we entered their orderly room, in which New Year was also being celebrated, and opened fire with tear gas. This forced them to abandon the room and we too had to stay clear of it

until the yellow-orange smoke had dissipated. Peace was restored at midnight and we watched the Front horizon as flares rose up from left to right and before us. The whole Front was illuminated! There was also some shooting and the crack of hand grenades here and there. In earlier celebrations though we had made much more of a racket. The situation now is more serious for us than at this time the previous year.

Note

1. The Hummel was the 15cm-sFH 18/1 Sd.Kfz.165 24-tonne howitzer on a Gw. III/IV Nashorn chassis. Though intended as an interim design, it remained in service until the end of the war: 666 entered service together with 150 ammunition carriers, needed because the Hummel had space aboard for only eighteen rounds. Alexander Lüdeke, *Panzer der Wehrmacht 1933–1945*, Motorbuch Verlag, 2010, p. 112. (TN)



Рис. 34. Режущий удар справа: Б — момент захвата винтовки противника после отбива и замах для режущего удара справа

Основные (боевые) приемы

32. Нападение сзади — тихо подойти к противнику и, в правом или левом боком к нему и захватив руками

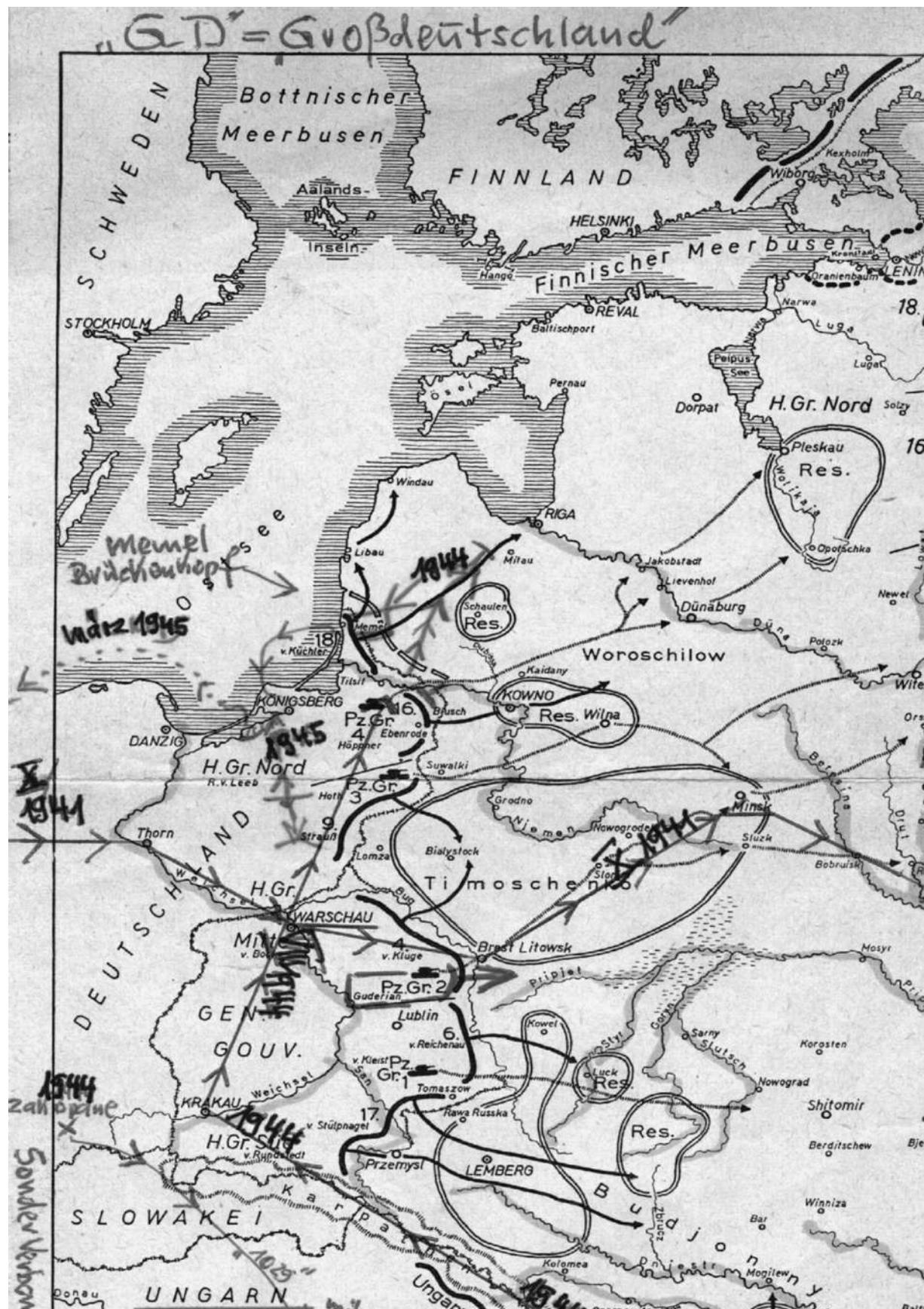


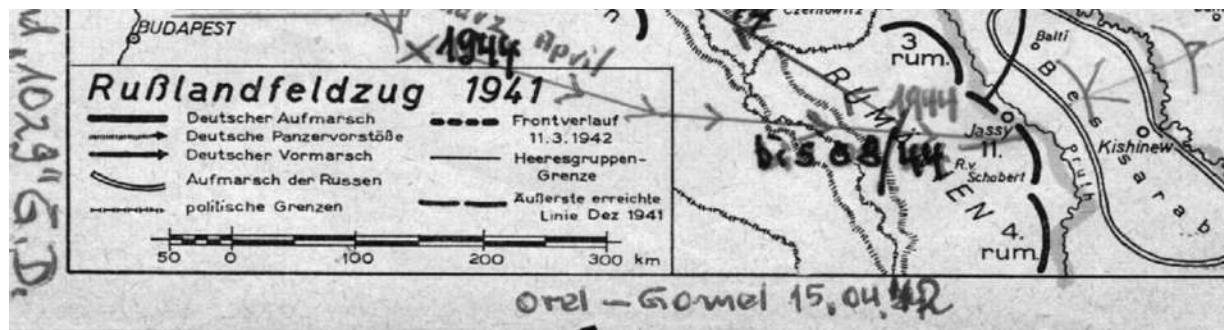
Рис. 41. Нападение сзади на вооруженного противника:
A — газват руками ног



Рис. 35. Режущий удар слева: А — момент отбыва влево

Three sketches from a Russian close-combat handbook.





General map showing the author's 'military actions' in the Russian campaign with Grossdeutschland from 1941 to 1945.

Meine Kampfeinsätze

1941-1945
(in set*)

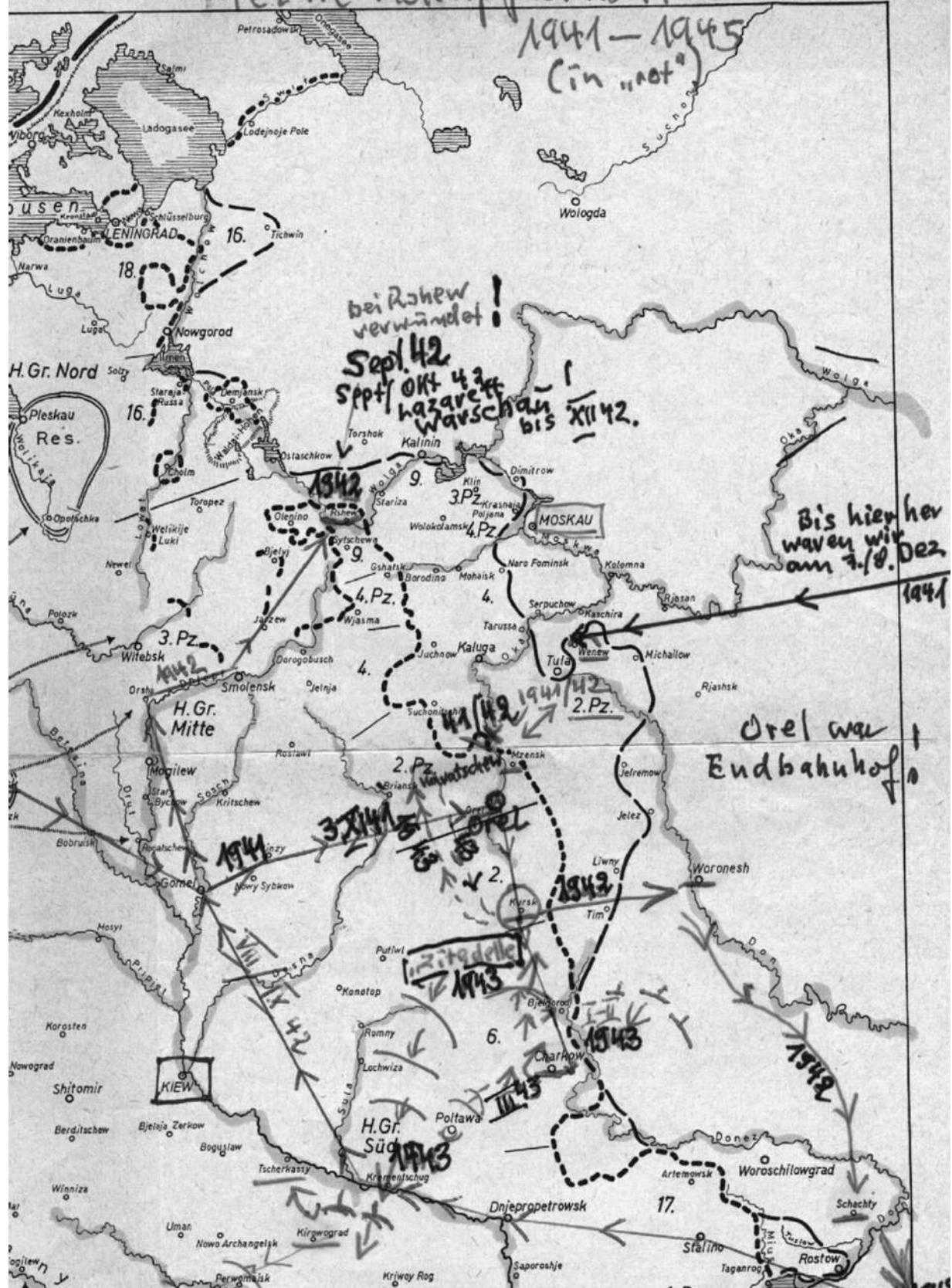
Cin "not

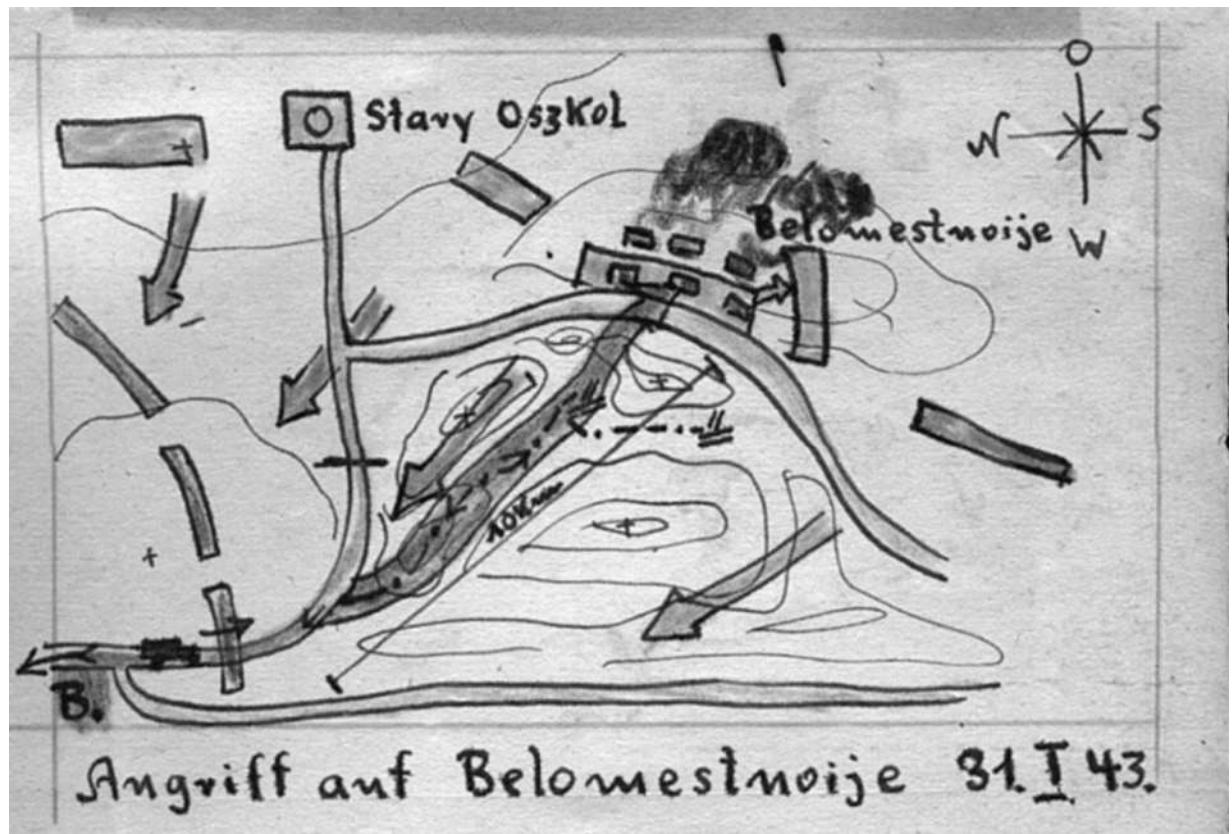
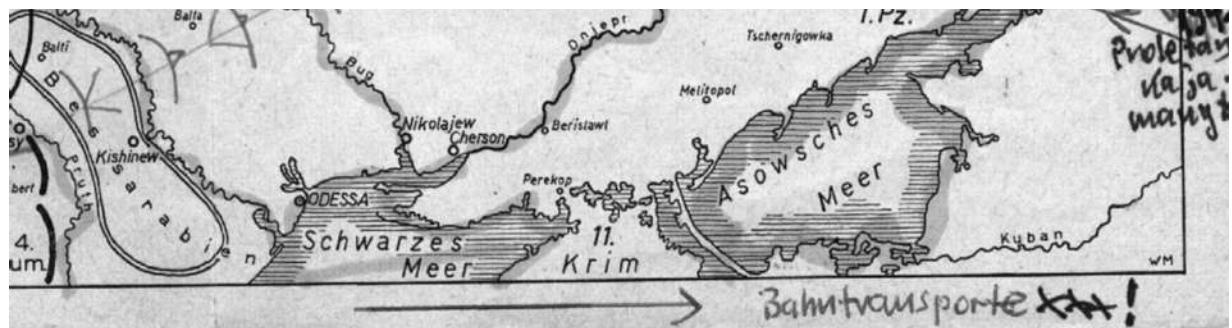
bei Röhren
verwundet!
Sept. 42
Sept/Okt 42
hazarett
Warschau bis XII 42.

Bis hierher
waren wir
am 7./8. 022

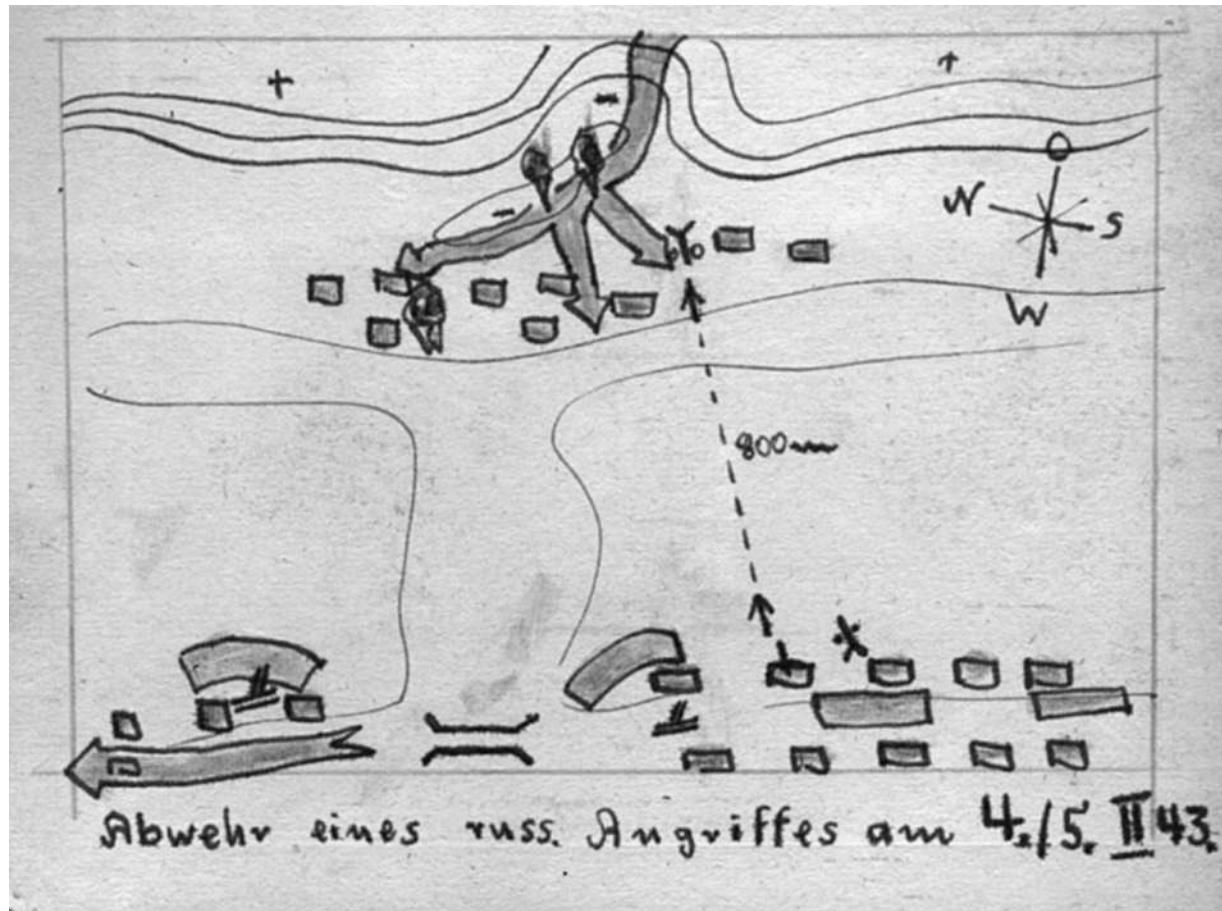
1441

Orel war
Endbahnhof





Attack on Belomestnoye [TN: this is referred to in volume 1, 31 January 1943].



Defence against a Russian attack on 4 February 1943. [TN: This is referred to in volume 1. The Russians are in the high ground at the top of the map. The 800m vertical line indicates where the author shot down a Russian MG crew. The author's mortar is by the house nearest the bridge (notice how it is exposed to Russian view, as he says); he had to change position and the mortar was then installed between two houses north of the bridge (north is to the left side of the map).]



A one-rouble banknote with Lenin's portrait.



A five-rouble banknote showing pilot with parachute.



A ten-rouble banknote represented a lot of money for a simple Russian peasant.



Jupp Dörfler (left) with two comrades in front of a peasant farmer's simple cottage.



General Wolff signing his autograph on the shirt of Hitler Youth member Manfred Pösch.
The Hitler Youth boy at the right already wears the *Grossdeutschland* initials on his shoulder strap.



Group photo of three mortar crews (the author is kneeling, second from the left).



On the right Unteroffizier Pfeil, uppermost Schirrmeister (Quartermaster) 'Ohm' Krüger.



9 Company *Tross*, Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*.



The Zhitomir military hospital, March 1943. Jupp Dörfler on the right with bandaged left leg.



Mortar groups take a break during an advance. The author is at bottom left.



Jupp Dörfler (right) wearing the Close Combat Clasp in Bronze, seen above his left jacket pocket. His other awards on the same pocket are the Wound Badge in Silver and the Infantry Assault Badge. The Iron Cross Second Class ribbon can be seen in the second buttonhole.



Three Unteroffiziers of 9 Company, unfortunately not identified by name.



Jupp Dörfler (right) seen with a Kfz 15 Horch in 1942/43 winter camouflage.



Obergefreiter Jupp Dörfler having a chat with comrades.



Group photo, Ukraine 1943.



In June 1943, before Operation Zitadelle: 9 Company Tross vehicles well camouflaged in a small wood. Unfortunately no photos are available that were taken during the operation itself.



A billet at Achtyrka, Ukraine, August 1943.



Jupp Dörfler (second left) with others near a mulberry tree.



Frying during a quiet period.



UNTEROFFIZIER

IM GROSSDEUTSCHEN HEER

M E R K W O R T E F Ü R D I E B E R U F S W A H L

K R I E G S A U S G A B E

'Unteroffizier in the Greater German Army'. A recruiting brochure for army corporals (NCO status). The photo was modelled on the *Grossdeutschland* unit.

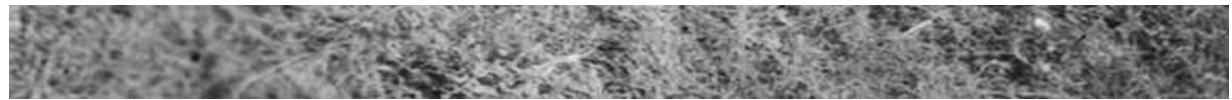


The author was promoted to Unteroffizier on 1 August 1943.



An 8cm mortar in action. The crew takes cover to avoid the report and air pressure at firing.





The author and Helmut Geick recovering from wounds/disabilities with the *Tross* at Chernetchino, 16 August 1943.





The author on leave, September 1943. In this photograph he is seen wearing a tie with his army uniform, which was not common practice.

1944

Chapter 6

To the Army Veterinary Academy – Hannover

1 January 1944

Today I received my marching orders. I took my leave of my comrades in the company and wrote a brief letter to my company commander in hospital. Heavily laden with the ‘Treasures of the Orient’, as in the song, I was driven at midday by ‘Wilhelm’, Feldwebel Berbrich, to Rollbahn IV. There a last farewell and I had to wait hoping for a lift. Finally a lorry stopped and took me to Dolizevo (about 6km from Krivoi Rog). From there I took the train to Apostolov.

2 January 1944

From here another train to Nikolaiyev, and then I got a lorry to convey me all along the Black Sea coast route to Odessa. Once I saw a wrecked Russian gunboat lying beached. It took a good six hours to get to Odessa. I had little time to see the town. I bought a bar of perfumed soap then went down to the water and saw the famous broad steps (as seen in the film *Battleship Potemkin*). Early in the afternoon I caught the ‘service train’ to Transnistrien in Romania and let my thoughts roam ahead. Where was the Army Veterinary Academy exactly? Did I need books? Many unanswered questions.

3–4 January 1944

The rail route ran via Shmerinka – Lemberg – Przemisl. Here there is a large delousing centre for all leave-takers from the east. Then I continued my journey to Cracow in company with a comrade from the Black Sea fleet.

5–6 January 1944

I changed trains at Dresden for the through-train to Hannover. In error I went to the Veterinary High School. From there I was directed to Möckern Strasse, to the Army Veterinary Academy where I was formally assigned to Lehrgruppe II (L II – Reserve Officer). I found some difficulty in getting accustomed to barracks life once more. I applied at the orderly office for a short leave.

7–8 January 1944

My application was approved and so I went to Hagen on 8 January. It was a complete surprise for everybody! Nobody expected it. Unfortunately three days is all too short.

8–9 January 1944

I am with my parents who are naturally glad that I am going to be away from the Front for some time. How wonderful life can be! I breathe a sigh of relief!

10 January 1944–1 February 1945

I returned to Hannover at night. I attended some lectures, then I had to report myself to the general. Initially I wanted to be an ‘active veterinary officer’. Then I would move up into the ‘LI’ group. They have lectures in the second semester. Better ‘trimester’, because in wartime there are three semesters in a year. However, the gentlemen have found that my so-called drafting here by my general has defects. Probably some kind of error in the documentation. My problematic papers have been forwarded to the Inspectorate in Berlin. Until further notice I am attached to L II. Every morning we are driven to the high school aboard a wood/gas-burning double-decker bus. I have meanwhile acquired some books, including the Ellenberger Baum anatomy book and the newest edition of the Z.A.G. (Zietschmann-Ackermann-Grau). Looking through the latter I realized what a great deal of information is going to have to be packed into my head. And that is only one book!

There are many air-raid alerts over Hannover. The Anglo-Americans come almost every night. In this first trimester I am not going to get far with anatomy, physiology, chemistry or physics! The important thing is that I have an enrolment number! The students are all in uniform, are of all ranks and there is a very close relationship between us. One day I was invited by one of the officer students to his home. He is Erich Hagena, leader of a student association known as 'Kameradschaft Leibniz'. There are several of these associations, all of which were active before the Nazi seizure of power. They still have duelling, although nowadays it is illegal. I like the people of this association. I learned the rules of such associations and spent many fine hours with these officers. Once we 'toured the local area' and got fairly drunk. In order not to lose our way back to the academy on Möckern Strasse, one of the students changed the tram points to Vahrenwald, and we clung to his coat tails until we got to the depot where the points were changed again for our 'onward journey'. We could not go through the main gate at the academy because it was after curfew. Fortunately we knew of a hole in the fence from the neighbouring signals barracks and so slipped through it silently, went individually to the building and up the steps to our rooms. We were not detected.

I am now waiting for the report from the 'Berlin Inspectorate'. The commanding officer of Lehrgruppe II is also a member of the Kameradschaft Leibniz, Oberfeldveterinär Dr Gerhard Schulze (Bockenem). We can also be trained in riding, but unfortunately I can't spend much time doing that. It is always interesting after lunch. When the CO finishes, we all stand up, finish eating and come to attention as he leaves the dining hall. As soon as he is gone, everybody grabs a ladle and transfers potatoes from the tureens into a handkerchief placed previously in their uniform caps. In the evening in the dormitories we roast potatoes on the round iron stove. Not only the mind but the body needs nourishing! In this way we pass the beautiful days in Hannover.

2 February 1944

I had to report again to the general. He told me that the Berlin Inspectorate knows nothing of my transfer to the academy. I am being transferred to a

reserve troop unit in Hannover. I insisted that I am transferred only to the Reserve Battalion of my division *Grossdeutschland* at Cottbus. There is an insertion in our Soldbuch: ‘May not be transferred to other units. Home garrison Cottbus. Reserve Battalion *Grossdeutschland*.’

3–9 February 1944

When I went to fetch my travel orders from the orderly office, I told the clerk: ‘Make the note, “Will be travelling via Schwerin for service reasons”, and he did so. This gave me the opportunity to make a ‘quite official’ deviation to Mecklenburg/Schwerin. A great surprise for Uncle Adolf, Aunt Trudi, Ursel and Jürgen! I stayed there with them for two wonderful days.

I headed back to Berlin. Meanwhile the Anglo-Americans had stepped up their aerial bombing campaign. I managed two extra days ‘Berlin Leave’. Whenever the train pulled out jam-packed and I couldn’t get on, I got a certificate to that effect from the station officer. So, two more days’ leave here, all as per regulations and correct. When I finally arrived at Cottbus and reported to Reserve Brigade *Grossdeutschland*, I was naturally asked why it had taken me four days to get from Hannover to Berlin. I told the lieutenant: ‘Just be glad that I arrived here at all. You wouldn’t believe how the aircraft shoot up the railways and bomb. Especially in Berlin, it is very bad!’ At Cottbus they weren’t sure what to do with me at first. I had not come from hospital as a convalescent, but from the Army Veterinary Academy. I had to explain how a *Grossdeutschland* corporal had managed to be sent there in the first place, and how I had been dismissed. So they made me an Unteroffizier ‘zbV’ again and I didn’t have to take part in any troop activities. I submitted an application for leave but in the orderly room they told me that our leave is blocked.

I went to Frankfurt/Oder as a courier. At Fürstenwalde I visited Uncle Willi, who used to be an engineer at Peenemünde. I spent very pleasant hours with Aunt Else. Next I went on OKH business to a barracks to fetch secret *Walküre* (Valkyrie) material, a sealed envelope in a safe which the Duty NCO had to watch over and which could not be opened unless ordered. I was told, ‘If you can find somebody to fill in for you for three

days, a corporal or sergeant, then you can travel.' I soon found one and was given three days' leave in Hagen. On the third day I received a telegram from Brigade, '*Walküre* summons'. Therefore back to the Cottbus garrison. Once I got there, the place was almost deserted. On account of *Walküre* almost everybody had been put aboard a train heading for the High Tatra – Zakopane. And I had to follow with a few others!

[There now follows a gap in the diary of about one month.]

Chapter 7

Operation *Margarethe I* – The March into Hungary with Reinforced Infantry Regiment (mot.) 1029 *Grossdeutschland*

8 March 1944

Today I was transferred into this new unit. On account of the approaching Front there were concerns that the Axis allies Hungary and Romania could soon begin to ‘waver’. I joined 4 Heavy Company. There I met Feldwebel Gerber and another NCO of my old 8 Company. Lodgings were provided in the basement of the Sachsendorf barracks. Something very unusual seems to be afoot – but what? Initially we could discover nothing. Everything seemed odd. ‘All secret!’ There are rumours of a Special Unit 1029 *Grossdeutschland*.

9 March 1944

‘Make ready!’ At 1700hrs we set off for the railway goods yard at Neuhausen near Cottbus. No train there. We waited in the inn, naturally discussing what the real purpose might be of all this activity. Until now the Hungarians had been good and loyal allies. Not so the Romanians. In the First World War they had fought against us.

For us the oilfields at Ploesti were of quite special significance! I remembered our advance in the great summer offensive of 1942. On several occasions we had had to break off for lack of fuel. Perhaps we were to secure the Romanian oilfields? It had now become known to us, however, that certain persons in the Hungarian government were no longer so honourable and trustworthy. If the soldier is given an order, an assignment, he does not have long to question it! Everything must be done that serves

Germany's security. I sent a telegram home. In the waiting room we passed the time playing cards. We had a young lieutenant, Hartwig, and we old hands put one over on him. This caused us all much hilarity. I knew about twelve card tricks at the time, which impressed the lieutenant very much. He was a very calm and comradely officer. Since he had no Front experience he depended on us very much. At 0300hrs we began loading and finished at 0400hrs. Then we slept until 0600hrs in the station waiting room. Finally we all got aboard and the train left. From Cottbus we passed through Sagan–Liegnitz–Reichenbach (Eulengebirge/Silesia)–Kamens–Neisse–Beskiden. The train wound its way through the mountains. Glorious scenery, snow everywhere. Lachowice–Carpathians–Neumarkt. Here the train halted. Everybody off and unload! Then by motor transport to Poronin, a few kilometres from Zakopane (High Tatra).

10 March 1944

We were given quarters in a small hotel at a spa. Almost all the buildings are of wood though very attractive in appearance and well maintained. Dark pine and fir trees stand on the snow-covered, steep slopes of the mountains: bare rocks can be made out, scattered clouds drift above the heights. One could spend the war very pleasantly here. It began to snow and the mountains were lost in the mist. There are many winter spas locally. The Tatra Goralen, a native folk, have a very becoming traditional costume.

11–12 March 1944

When the mists cleared one had a wonderful view of the High Tatra and its highest mountain, Giewont. From the window of my room I have a view of the beautiful mountain world.

13 March 1944

The March sun already seems warm. We exercised in the snow with the young, not yet fully trained recruits. The region is uniquely beautiful – and then we still have this damned war!

14 March 1944

There is a cable car to the mountain top: a cross stands on its peak. We held shooting training and mortar instruction in the snowy terrain. We soon all had a facial tan from the sunshine. And training the youngsters goes on.

15 March 1944

The weather often changes within a few minutes, snowfall alternating with cloud and sun. The Goralen are skilled woodcarvers. They made me a letteropener and a serviette stand. The motif is often an edelweiss. I still have the letter-opener today!

Today we walked to Zakopane, a very good and well-known winter sports venue. Many of its large hotels function as reserve hospitals. Hearing music coming from the Hotel Meerauge we went there and met German girls (nurses and Wehrmacht auxiliaries). We drank with them in the ‘Arcadia bar’ while conversing. After exchanging addresses we headed back. The young soldiers had meanwhile returned to the soldiers’ hostel and marched back in ranks to Poronin. We veterans hired a horse-drawn sleigh there. A romantic journey! Two horses, a Goraler in the driving seat and ourselves wrapped in a thick woollen blanket. My companion, Unteroffizier Heinz Spiess, has a wonderful singing voice. The horses puffed and panted, the runners slid through the snow, the coachman shouted occasionally ‘*Via, Misha, via!*’ to urge the horses into a trot. Then Heinz Spiess sang an aria from an operetta and other songs in the stillness of the night. At my request he also the ‘Song of the Volga Boatmen’. The Goraler coachman said only, ‘Good, very good, sir!’ It was an unforgettable winter sleigh ride!

16–18 March 1944

The young soldiers had to be kept at it. Our company commander, Hauptmann Brinken (good officer!) had them exercise in the snow and fire live rounds, even in snow flurries. As close as possible to reality! In the evening we watched the Goralen at their carving work. While planning an NCOs’ evening, we were completely surprised to receive orders to prepare to move out at once. Everything was loaded up swiftly and then we sat waiting in our quarters. A messenger arrived with news that departure had been postponed until 0400hrs.

A group of us went to an inn and chatted with the Poles over a schnapps. Back in quarters we convinced our sergeant Pan Gerber to release a bottle of ‘Grüne Pomeranzen’. It did the rounds and with much conviviality we emptied it.

19 March 1944

Sunday! The traditional day for *Grossdeutschland* to move out. We mounted up at 0800hrs and rolled through snow flurries and cold via Neumarkt on the river Dunayec. There were we told our mission. Since 0400hrs, German troops had been marching into Hungary! The reason was the government crisis there. Our assignment was a lightning-fast advance to the river Theiss to secure the crossings at Tiszadorogma. Our journey took us through the deep snows of a mountain world: on both sides high mountains, their peaks hidden in mist and fog. The roads were icy, snowdrifts hindered our advance. Snow ploughs had preceded us and partially cleared the way. We drove along serpentine roads through the passes. Away from the mountains and snow we arrived at the Slovak General Government border, from where we continued through the Dunayec valley. Left and right steep slopes of karst with fir and pine. As a result of the thaw, the river raced between the rocks as foaming wild water. We often came to a stop because some of the vehicles were not able to proceed on the icy roads. In the valleys between conical rounded hilltops stood ruined fortresses. We reached the frontier where a wooden bridge spanned the Dunayec: it forms the border over several kilometres and snakes through the mountains with many bends. It is striking how the facial expressions of the people on the former Polish side of the river are cool and grim: the Slovaks are more cheerful. In all their villages the people stand and wave – or even shout ‘Heil Hitler!’

We continued our journey into more mountains. Once more on both sides slopes thick with snow. Here we see many advertising boards put up by the Czech shoe manufacturer Bata and also the good *Neheran robi saty dobre* is another advertisement seen everywhere. Until late at night the Slovaks stand in their streets of their villages watching the columns roll by. Because of the cold we sit three-up in the driving cab singing like world champions

in order to keep the driver awake and ourselves warm! We are in high spirits, heading for unknown towns and regions. Hungary – we had never been there before. Rumours fly as to our destination: Nettuno (where the Anglo-Americans landed in Italy)? Russia again, or France? No, wrong direction. We are looking forward to seeing the Hungarian plains about which we have heard so much in songs. Our convoy continued with dimmed headlights through the night and valleys. We stopped at a village from 2300hrs to 0700hrs. Part of the Feldherrnhalle Regiment then emerged from a side street and passed us. We set off again into a fierce snowstorm and came eventually to Stara Lubovna on the river Poprad. The roads were icy, but even so the pace was stepped up! Next stop was Presov, along serpentine and icy tracks. Here again the local people waved to us and we waved back. Approaching the Hungarian border we were interested to find out what the attitude of their military would be. They were still our allies. The road went uphill until in the middle of a wood we suddenly came to the border and customs post with the tollbar in the respective national colours. On one side Slovak, on the other Hungarian. It was a very short stop. The Hungarian sentry looked disinterested, his rifle slung. From the border we drove fast towards Kosice/Kaschau and soon saw the towers and buildings of the town. Feldherrnhalle remained in Kaschau, and we carried on beyond it. The population lined the streets and waved. German female signals auxiliaries stood on the pavements and threw us cigarettes.

The Hungarian military was not disarmed, for we had come to protect the Hungarian state which filthy profiteers intended to drag down to wrack and ruin. We were also told that the Minister-President had been collaborating with Jews and had made himself a fortune by dirty dealings. After this treachery he had fled abroad. In order to prevent important state papers from disappearing, we were to build a ‘barrier’ at the Theiss to intercept all traffic attempting to cross. That night we drove through the big town of Miskolc. Here there were many commercial streets, inns and shops. Initially we skirted the town and then got on the road for Budapest.

21 March 1944

In the morning, after the stop to divide up the battalion, we reported to our company command post. Mazökeresztes. Here we were assigned our battlegroups. Our 3 Company is to protect a 24km-long sector of the Theiss. Battlegroup Gerber, II/3 Company drove down a very poor track to the indicated position at Tiszadorogma. We arrived with the radiator boiling. Hardly had we alighted from the vehicles than we were invited to take wine with the very friendly population. Our quarters were quickly found and the first sentries posted. Here too we had a specific stretch of river bank to guard. All traffic across the river, irrespective of its direction of travel, has to be halted. We are here in the middle of the *puszta*, the floodplain of the Theiss. The people stood around giving us a curious and critical inspection. The Hungarians see us as model soldiers. They are all very friendly. We saw young people, the Levente Youth, who wear the Honved (military) field cap as a uniform.

We three NCOs have very good quarters. Since one of us will always be on night watch, the other two have the matrimonial bed at their disposal. Unfortunately Hungarian is one of those languages which is not easy to pick up, so we have a very good relationship with the Hungarians but no conversation. They are very clean people, their yards are swept, not what we are used to in Russia. In the evening Lajos Rusnyak, our host, sent us some of his (Tokaier District) home-made wine. For supper we had white bread – like cake and big, half a metre in diameter. Additionally paprika and bacon. These are all things we have only heard spoken of! We ate until we were full.

22 March 1944

This morning we paid a courtesy call on the Mayor. He speaks fairly good German and helped us wherever he could. He provided us with bread and potatoes without charge. After that I went with Feldwebel Gerber to look at the positions and patrol areas. A fairly cold wind was whistling across the river which is 200–300m wide here and has many bends and tributaries. The period of extreme high water is not yet due. Here in the *puszta* we also saw the Hungarian cattle famed for their huge long horns. Also present are the typical draw-wells! The many horses are very well cared for – and

naturally the pigs. Hungary is known for them! The swineherd goes through the village quite early in the morning with his horn and long leather whip. Whenever he blows the horn the brown animals come running from all the gardens and yards, and when he lays the whip on them they grunt and squeal.

I was able to speak with a Carpathian-Ukrainian in Russian, and so I have an interpreter. Our Lajos Rusnyak is a master blacksmith and also has a mill. We are at an outpost here, fairly cut off from the outer world! The advantage is that no uninvited guest finds his way here so easily. At certain times we listen to music on Radio Budapest, but at very low volume because the battery is weak. In the afternoon we climb the church tower in order to survey the surrounding territory. From there we can see far into Hungary. The broad plain of the *puzta*, some draw-wells and the water courses of the Theiss. Today I had watch from 1800hrs. Upon my arrival at the watch room some Hungarian girls brought me a large round loaf and almost five kilos of bacon! I accepted these ‘supplementary rations’ gratefully. The night remained quiet.

23 March 1944

Today for the first time our cook prepared our midday meal in a large cauldron on an open fire. In my room I had a tasty semolina soup with an almost fist-sized slab of fat, yellow bacon. The paprika gave me a fine thirst, however. At midday we received the order to be ready to leave before 1530hrs. Everything was loaded in haste and I relieved my sentries. The ‘comrades’ had had a lot of wine: they and two drivers were fairly *pianye* (well over the limit) which meant we could have a fiasco. With much effort we got the departure time fixed for 1530hrs. The Hungarians came, kissed our hands and brought bread, bacon and wine and other tasty things. Almost the whole village turned out to see us off! Those honest and upright Hungarians stood there waving, tears in their eyes, as we roared away trailing a plume of dust in the direction of Aröktö. The drivers set out over the bad road at crazy speed, slowing down only to drive through herds of pigs, and then off again like greased lightning. In the village of Meszökát, when one of the lorries got a puncture, the other lorry drivers stopped and

did a patchwork repair. Meanwhile I had walked up and down the street with Unteroffizier H. and we soon fell into conversation with two Hungarian girls who spoke some German but were somewhat confused regarding the accusative and dative grammar, which caused a lot of merriment. Next an old Magyar came up. He spoke a little Russian and so I had an interpreter again. I was approached by a diffident Honved soldier who asked if he could walk with his girlfriend. ‘But of course, comrade. We would not wish to separate you from your Ida!’ He gave us a stiff salute and left relieved. And soon we struck up another acquaintance, from whom we were hoping for cigarettes and wine. We got only cigarettes. There were many pretty girls here to eye up and they eyed us up back! Here was true international understanding! After this pleasant interlude the drivers reported the vehicles ready to proceed. ‘Everybody get in!’ Then we roared off down the curving roads. It had grown darker. After one sharp bend, cornering almost on two wheels, we nearly collided with a lorry carrying hay. At a variety of speeds we reached our destination Mezőkeresztes and rejoined the company. We were given quarters in a farm.

In the evening a *Volksdeutscher*¹ joined us, but his German was so muddled that it took some time to understand his invitation. At the bar there was much to keep us laughing. ‘I am a Hungarian person, I am a teacher, I am very industrious,’ he told us. I replied, ‘I am a Westphalian person and lazy. *Magyar ország!*’ Then he broke into a Hungarian drinking song and after that an old German song from 1870. In order to avoid accidents on the way I had him escorted home. That night I slept on my greatcoat on straw. Far better than in a foxhole outside!

24 March 1944 – Mezőkeresztes

To make them mindful of their reason for being here, the young soldiers were given strict drill. ‘Hour of the young nation!’ At 1400hrs the still-missing fighting groups arrived. With my close comrade Unteroffizier Spiess we were invited into a house and had a good time. It was the Mayor’s house, but he was away. There was only a servant girl present; she spoke some German but was very shy. We soon made ourselves comfortable. It was warm in the parlour, where she offered us a Barrak-

Palinka and cigarettes. We engaged in some laughing and flirting but when we noticed our convoy pulling out we had to dash after a short leave-taking. Our next stop was 20km further on at Emöd, where we were given private quarters. Unteroffizier Spiess and I occupied a house. In the evening we went to a pharmacy. The proprietress was a *Volksdeutsch* lady, the widow Wattay Cornelne. She had a five-pointed crown on her visiting card! She welcomed us with wine and small cakes, then sat at the piano and played some very beautiful pieces for us. By candlelight it was a very cultural evening. Later we visited her often.

25 March 1944

The lower ranks are being kept at drill. Some of them are not yet fully trained. We had a look around the village meanwhile. The people are all pleasant and friendly. We are given white bread, pancakes and milk. And a soldier can always eat! We have established a very close relationship with our quarters-hosts, who are also very friendly. We have Laszlo Veresz in our quarters, he was a soldier in Russia and got frostbite in the first cold winter. He is a very kind-hearted soul. Our hosts have let us have their marital beds. Thus Unteroffizier Spiess and I have a proper bedroom with thick eiderdowns. Outside it is still very cool.

In the evening I went with Feldwebel Gerber to the pharmacy to visit Frau Wattay. She enjoys these visits very much and asks us to tell her all about Germany. With the good wine this is not difficult.

26 March 1944

Sunday, the church bells toll and everybody goes to Mass. We note with interest how the leader of the Levente Youth reports his troop present to the priest in military style before they enter the church for the service. We walked to the estate where our orderly office is located, received our orders and then left. In the evening Feldwebel Gerber and we two corporals visit Frau Wattay at the pharmacy. We talk, drink good wine and Frau Wattay plays lovely melodies on the piano. My comrade Heinz Spiess has a fine baritone voice and accompanies her. Thus in the midst of war we experienced a beautiful, cultural evening. Sleeping beneath the thick

eiderdowns is heavenly. One prefers not to think of the wet and cold foxholes in Russia.

27 March 1944

The schedule provided for ‘weapons training – heavy MGs and mortars’. Last night it snowed again. In the shops I bought a bottle of perfume (violet concentrate) and a bottle of wine. In the evening we had a starry sky and a very fresh breeze. The moon was seen as a thin sickle between fine swathes of cloud. In the quarters I wrote a long letter to my parents. It will be comforting for my mother to know that I have been out of the front line for quite some time. We never think of the real ‘shit-shit-war’ here. My God, how great life can be! In the evening a young Hungarian visited us. He is the brother of our host, speaks some German and is a primary school teacher by profession. (After the war we had reciprocal visits to Viktor and his sister. The contact lasted for many years.)

28 March 1944

Upon returning to our quarters this evening we found on the table a large decanter of wine and a visiting card, ‘Kassay Viktor, teacher from Emöd.’ On the rear of the card he had written in pencil: ‘Dear Hans! I was here waiting for you. Here is a litre of wine, enjoy it, it is for you and Heinrich. Write to the address on this card. Auf Wiedersehen. Kassay Viktor.’

Note

1. In general, in the National Socialist period a *Reichsdeutsche(r)* was a German national with two German parents. A *Volksdeutsche(r)* would be a person of some German lineage but of other nationality, and able to understand the German language. Whether or not a person was a *Volksdeutsche(r)* grew in significance if the territory in which he or she was domiciled was annexed into the Reich. (TN)

Chapter 8

Through the Wild Carpathian Mountains

29–31 March 1944

The ‘Big Situation’ in Hungary has been cleaned up. We have been able to discover little about the reason for our being here. Probably it was to stiffen the backbone of our ally by our presence. The Russians have advanced as far as the eastern border of Romania. We have to stop them in the Carpathians! We are told that our ‘Regiment 1029 *Grossdeutschland* (mot.)’ is to assemble around Miskolc for loading aboard trains. The new mission: The ‘Reinforced Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* 1029 (mot.)’ is being rushed to the Hungarian– Romanian border to block the passes because the Russians are already on the eastern slopes of the Carpathians. These mountains have to be held at all costs. The train journey is via Scerenc–Tokay Nyireghyaza–Debrecen.

4 April 1944

Our train crossed the border and headed for the town of Vatra-Dornei. On the road we saw long columns pulling back – a sad sight. We do not know if this was ordered or not. Progress was very slow. We saw Russian prisoners on the other track, trotting with heads hung low. Now and again in the trenches along the railway line we see the body of a dead Russian who tried to escape. In the narrow valleys are anti-tank obstacles and barbed-wire entanglements. The railway line passes steep mountain slopes, on the other side far below is the valley. Because of the many bends the serpentine track goes through about ten tunnels, the longest about 1km long. Romanian sentries are posted at the tunnels, viaducts and bridges. We hear that the town of Czernowitz has been recaptured by Hungarian troops, but we do

not know exactly how things stand along the whole southern Eastern Front. At one of the small stations was a transporter loaded with lorries and cars which has been there four weeks. Its destination was Odessa, but on account of the changing front situation it is waiting here for new orders. We arrived at Vatra-Dornei station. On the adjacent track was a train with *Volksdeutsch* refugees. The stop lasted two hours and then we proceeded. The night sky was starry, with a bright moon. The wild mountain landscape with deep snow looked fantastic in the moonlight. We four corporals sat listening to music on the accordion. After a few more hours the train stopped at Zodoweie/ Campolo where we unloaded. In the early hours we drove through the wild Carpathians. Our destination remains a mystery. The moon was hidden partially behind clouds, giving them silver edges. A barrier had been erected at every road bridge. The Moldau winds its way through the mountains. We stopped in the town of Gura Humorului and found quarters. It surprised us to find that the town seemed empty, abandoned. From the Romanian troops stationed here I learned that when the Eastern Front suddenly and unexpectedly receded, the population and service offices fled in haste. The Jews were given a two-hour deadline to get themselves ready. Nobody could take very much with them. Our quarters are in a building near the church. Together with Romanian troops we secured the town and the road to the pass. Farther ahead are units with orders to offer delaying resistance and if necessary fall back on our positions in the pass. We lay in readiness. The greater part of the population remaining behind is *Volksdeutsch*, with whom we can converse easily. We had a long talk with our quarters-host. With great enthusiasm he told us of his time as a soldier in the KuK (Kaiserlich und Königlich) Austro-Hungarian Empire before the 1914–18 War. He praised everything – administration, post and business dealings. He described in a droll and dramatic manner the difference between the German and Romanian armies. His 18-year-old son had been on the Russian Front and described some of the maltreatment he suffered at the hands of the Romanian higher ranks. He himself praises everything German and expressed the wish that Germany emerge victorious. He had also been in America for some years and provided the proof by his ability to speak English. It really does sound as

though he picked it up abroad. After I had washed and made myself ‘morning fresh’ we had to change quarters. While the infantry were getting organized, I went through the empty houses. The Wehrmacht auxiliary troops, mostly Cossacks and Tartars, had plundered them, as is their custom. It was pretty bad, wreckage scattered everywhere. Sad, sad! We Germans have a very good relationship with the civilian population. Most speak very good German. On the streets barter prevails: we paid in tobacco and cigarettes for bacon, eggs and butter. Initially we mortar crews are not being deployed. Our company is securing the passes with two 5cm anti-tank guns. We are on standby.

5 April 1944

The day passed with the usual routine. In the evening we corporals and the antitank gun corporals sat with our sergeant in a cosy living room. In the afternoon, we had gone from house to house ‘organizing’ potatoes and eggs. The Ivans, who had occupied the place for a short while, had ravaged it. Our *Sanitäter* provided music with his accordion while Heinz Spiess sang for our pleasure. Towards 2200hrs we took our leave, and after checking in with the sentries went to bed. In the middle of the night we were awoken suddenly by the shout: ‘All NCOs at once to the commander!’ We assembled quickly for Hauptmann Brinken who gave us a short report. Retreating civilians and German soldiers had reported that twenty Russian tanks had occupied a village about 25 to 30km ahead. Their general direction of advance was towards Gura Humorului! Therefore: ‘Tank alarm!’ On this sector of the Front we had only stragglers and retreating German troops ahead of us, lacking heavy weapons and anti-tank guns. Therefore it was up to us, with our armour-piercing weapons, to prepare to confront the enemy force. Actually we had only the old 3.7cm and 5cm antitank guns which could not penetrate much armour and were known as the ‘door knockers’, but everything was made ready.

6 April 1944

We wanted to prepare our young soldiers by explaining and demonstrating how to engage an enemy tank. A brief instruction by NCOs in anti-tank

close combat work was arranged. The men had to learn the new methods. These were the Panzerschreck or ‘stove pipe’, and the ‘glass lightbulbs’, both familiar to us since 1943.¹ The latter were filled with two different liquids in separate chambers and released a cloud of tear gas when crushed.

The weather was warm and sunny, the mountains reared up brown and bald from the valley. Most of the snow had thawed. Pines and firs grew only sparsely up to the highest peaks. We awaited the Russian tanks but by midday none had come. The alarm was cancelled, not having been based on fact. It was the usual anxious and apologetic talk of fleeing soldiers and townspeople. Many of these soldiers began to return from the Front, many demoralized. We went back to our positions and made ourselves comfortable. On the road I bartered 50g of tobacco for a kilo of bacon. Amongst the civilians was an old gentleman who had fled here from the Caucasus via Kuban – Kerch – Crimea – Odessa. I had a chat with him in Russian. He had no time for the Reds or Bolshevism and had come to Romania to be safe. I hope that is not his mistake! In the evening we three corporals, Hans, Heinz and Adolf, went on an errand to the foremost barricades on the road. The sentries were alert. The weather is springlike.

7 April 1944

Today we had a field exercise. Our soldiers are mere recruits, not up to scratch in weapons training. They have a lot to catch up on! We went into the countryside up to the highest mountain with full gear, the mortar equipment and ammunition boxes. Towards 1100hrs we faked an alarm in order to follow it with a forced march. We came back at top speed, crossed a stream and headed for our firing positions. There I told the cursing and sweating men that it had been a drill. They all looked very annoyed.

In the afternoon at the position we gave instruction in anti-tank combat and how a soldier can protect himself against tanks. Halfway through there came a genuine alarm for my platoon. Get ready to pull out in twenty minutes! We rushed here and there so as not to forget anything. Finally everything was loaded on the vehicles. We were informed: 2 Company with our mortar platoon will proceed to secure the village Vama about 20km back. My lorry would not start. Therefore I had to remain behind for two

hours while they replaced the dynamo. At 1900hrs we headed for Vama at high speed. The road was narrow but had a firm base, with many bends and bridges through the Moldau river valley. Everywhere roads and anti-tank barricades were in place. Our commander warned us that the Romanians had so narrowed the approaches to the barricades that we would have difficulty getting through. How then would our own panzers and larger vehicles manage it? Romanian soldiers stood guard everywhere. The bridge-demolition squads were all Wehrmacht, however, for fear that the Romanians would blow the bridges before our own troops had passed. This was a fine state of affairs! We roared through the valley and overtook a transporter loaded with wooden barrack hut parts and other materials. Finally we got to Vama-Judetui Cimpolung where we occupied the quarters already prepared for us. The first night I slept on a heavy diplomatic-type writing table.

8 April 1944

Civilized behaviour does not take a back seat unnecessarily in wartime: I searched out an opportunity for bathing. I found a bathtub in a new building being converted into a military hospital, and after many preparations, at midday I had my glorious bath.

New units are rolling through the town with 7.5cm anti-tank guns and light howitzers. I see from my diary that tomorrow is Easter. We heard from a motorcycle messenger that our fighting group which remained behind at Gura Humorului had an exchange with the enemy. Ivan came from the north-east, from the Czernowitz area. We have introduced a higher level of alert here.

9 April 1944

Easter! We had wounded resulting from mortar fire during the first contact with the enemy at Gura Humorului. Ambulances came back from the line bringing wounded German and Romanian troops to the military hospitals. While we freshened up for Easter, the order came to begin preparing a position at the outskirts of the town of Vama. We reconnoitred and then selected the positions for my mortars on a height at the eastern end of

Vama. Mortars on the reverse slope, observation post at the edge of town directly behind the infantry positions. We had finished the job by 1400hrs and returned to our quarters. We posted sentries for observation and laid a telephone line. In the evening a Romanian invited me to his house.

His old mother told me many interesting things! ‘The Russians are evil, they don’t believe in God. They are as stupid as cattle. The Jews run things there. God forbid that the Russians come here!’ Then she told me about the First World War.

In 1914 the Russians were Christians, but very evil people. Many, many came at that time, but on the height near the town of Dorna-Vatra they dug in. Romanians, Czechs and Germans beat them. In 1916/17 the Russians were here for almost two years, then our people threw them out. It was very bad. The waters in the rivers and streams ran red with blood. The Russians had many thousands dead. God forbid that they come here again.

I asked her where she had learned such good German. She replied:

I am old, I lived in the times of Kaiser Franz Josef, when we had justice, law and order and the Romanians were very happy! It was good in Austria. After the First War was lost the Romanians came and then the misery began. Whenever you wanted anything you always had to bribe, no law and order any more. The poor small people had to pay and join the Army. The big, the rich, still do not become soldiers. Romania is a rich country, but we have remained poor – look around, everything is only for the nobility!

I asked her for her opinion of the Romanian leaders. In an excited voice she said, ‘May the three-tailed devil take Antonescu!’ This shocked me. She went on: ‘Antonescu has two faces. One for Hitler, because he is afraid of him. He would prefer to side with Anglia [England]. All the upper class gentlemen are not good!’ That was the opinion of the people, very clearly stated.

10 April 1944

Easter Monday. Situation with Battlegroup Brinken: The Russians tried an attack yesterday with about 200 infantry. The Romanians came out of their holes and the Russians were beaten back, leaving two 4cm anti-tank guns behind, but unfortunately only one case of ammunition. Our Lieutenant ‘Bubi’ Hartwig brought back both guns. The Russian company has two tanks, two artillery batteries, 7.62cm dual-purpose guns and mortars. Their forward positions are still forward of the town. Our artillery destroyed their *Tross*. This morning was very quiet, the air is warm, glorious Easter weather – all in beautiful mountain scenery. Snow is still lying only on the north and north-eastern slopes. Suddenly at midday came an alarm! My mortar platoon has been transferred to a so-called Carpathian Battalion led by the *Grossdeutschland* Rittmeister [cavalry captain] Kühn. This ‘association’ is made up of stragglers. (With this kind of unit a close watch is always advisable.) We located our mortar firing position about 10km north of the Carpathian Rollbahn II/III at Vatra Modavita. My quarters are in a former clinic.

Late in the evening I stood outside – full moon, starry night, spring air! I drove to Gura Humorului to fetch coffee for my people. The Carpathian Battalion to which we have been detached is securing the whole area for 10 to 15km left and right of our village. As regards the enemy the night passed quietly, but at midnight – witching hour! – the ‘Holy Ghost’ was needed. Comrade R, who has already made a bad impression on all, received a well-deserved beating. It was dark and I was asleep when I received several blows to the head with a leather belt which woke me. I jumped up, and hearing the men apologizing at length on behalf of Comrade R., I said, ‘Lay into him. He deserves it!’ I shone my torch on the ‘battlefield’ and for probably five minutes they gave him a thrashing. Suddenly it stopped, everyone returned to bed, breathing heavily, some sniggering. He really did deserve it. Next morning on parade I asked from where he had received the red weals. He replied angrily, ‘In our first action, you get the first bullet.’ I said that from now on I would always be keeping an eye on him, and he should look out for himself.

11 April 1944

This was the first time in almost four years of war that a refractory soldier had required the ‘Holy Ghost’. (I shall write about ‘the first shot’ later!) Kloster Monastir Vatra Modavita: we bargained five packs of tobacco for a calf. The Carpathian Battalion had no field kitchen and so we had to live off the land. I went with my friend Unteroffizier Heinz Spiess to several houses and discovered one in which a girl lived with her mother. She agreed to make us mashed potatoes with milk and a bacon-onion sauce. We ate this very tasty meal there at midday and also had maize cakes for dessert! We received ‘cold fare’ from 2 Company.

We found a large batch of Russian mortar bombs and I decided to experiment firing them from our barrels. I removed the warhead from one and fired it with the second charge. As soon as I dropped the bomb down the tube I jumped into the foxhole, my platoon watching from a respectful distance. It hissed and puffed like a rocket, the barrel rocked to and fro. Curious I peered out and watched the bomb emerge slowly to a height of 50cm and then fall back near the baseplate. So we could not fire at Ivan with his own mortar bombs. Our 8.14cm barrel was too wide by several millimetres so that, after the firing bolt ignited the charge, the propulsive gases escaped along the sides of the barrel.

Carpathian Battalion Rittmeister Kühn was responsible for protecting 35km of valley. The following units each held one locality:

I Company Mackert

II Company panzer crews without tanks, employed as infantry

III Battalion command post with mortar platoon Feldwebel Gerber and Company Schulz

IV Company Böhler at Frumoasa village

In these ‘Carpathian Companies’ can be found stragglers, *Tross* people, bootmakers, tailors, drivers, office staffs and similar ‘heroes!’ We, the Reinforced Infantry Regiment 1029 *Grossdeutschland* (mot.), are the only regular unit, and we have recruits – with hardly three months’ training! Our few officers, sergeants and corporals are the only soldiers with fighting

experience! Really good defensive positions have not yet been found, let alone worked on. We understand that Ivan is 12km from us. The villagers and civilians here are all very pro-German and help us as so-called ‘cross-country walkers’ observing the Russians. Amongst other things, they have reported to us that White Ruthenians are active against us from a village 6km away. They have taken three ‘partisans’ prisoner and disarmed them. This gives me cause for thought. With so few men with Front experience will we be able to hold these positions? We are standing here on ground fought over in the First World War. The Romanians were our enemies then. In the mountains one can still come across old earth fortifications and infantry trenches. It is still relatively quiet ahead of us at the moment.

12 April 1944

At 0200hrs there was an alarm! Group *Unteroffizier Spiess* went to join Company *Böhler*, and at 0700hrs a third group was asked for. My group remained here, I acted as the platoon commander’s representative. On the heights ahead of us are defensive positions and reconnaissance troops. Company *Schulz* is preparing trenches.

Our ‘wood walkers’ report that the Russians are in a village about 12km distant with infantry and mortars. Two companies of Ivans are advancing towards Company *Böhler*’s sector. Towards 1930hrs I drove up to the two outlying groups with hot food in canisters. When I returned the battalion commander had a defector but he couldn’t tell us much. I was given the following assignment: ‘Bring Group *Unteroffizier Block* with me on the way back, supply provisions to Group *Unteroffizier Spiess* and the 3 Reconnaissance Group with Company *Schulz*.’ After endless back and forth we set off. Along a narrow road, over hedge and ditch, over railway tracks and through the road blocks protected by MG posts. I found fairly easily the spot where Group *Block* is in position. We honked and Morsed with the torch. ‘Unload equipment immediately and form up behind us on the road!’ I brought them back to the platoon command post, then returned to Group *Spiess*. We greeted each other joyfully! After the distribution of food I went to command post *Böhler*. It was 2300hrs, and I brought orders. A lorry drove up to take the three reconnaissance units. Finally we were three

lorries, all overloaded. Headlights pierced the darkness. We were back soon and I reported to the battalion command post the successful completion of my mission. Then back to my quarters for a quiet night's sleep.

13 April 1944

Here we have still had no contact with the enemy. Our battalion command post is staffed by the CO, Rittmeister Kühn; his adjutant, a leutnant zbV and a writer. Our telephone installation is incomplete and we have no typewriter, only pencils and writing pads. As with the ancient Germans, we have to make do! Weather: dull and damp. A motorcycle despatch rider visits our battlegroup with news. Since we have no radio and no newspapers, we know nothing of the situation at the various fronts, in particular of course the situation here beyond and around the Carpathians! Here one finds a vast difference to Russia. There we were used to huge flat expanses of land over which one could see for miles. Such territory is ideal for the deployment of large mobile formations. Tank battles often occurred in billowing fields of sunflowers or corn, but also in the dusty steppe and on dusty Rollbahns. Or after rain, on slippery mud. There we got to know the sheer endlessness of Russia. Here in the Carpathians on the other hand we have narrow winding valleys and steep mountains, thick pine forests and narrow gorges. What matters here is the possession of passes or villages and towns. Our force here is not yet in a position to set up a strong, cohesive front line. Our troops here are few in number and short on weapons. Our assignment is to secure a valley 35km in length, and that with only partlytrained young soldiers! In order to avoid incidents at night in which local inhabitants might be misidentified as enemy I had a large board prepared with the legend: *Nu este voie seara de amere prin sat moartea.* Free translation (so a Romanian told me): 'Being on the street at night is forbidden. It can mean death.' I took my motorcycle to Frumoasa to Group *Unteroffizier Spiess* and looked over the firing position of the mortars and the observation post. These were very good! I returned at top speed, for one never knows whether a Russian reconnaissance party might not be beyond the next bend and then curtains. It had rained and the road was slippery: once I almost came off! Next morning in conversation with a Romanian

civilian he said, ‘Give us rifles, we will fight the Russians!’ The local population here is on our side, which they consider their own! They capture suspicious strangers as spies or partisans. Occasionally they go too far. Everywhere we are invited in for food and drink. Today I drove with two Romanians to Gura Humorului to the company command post to see Hauptmann Brinken. I learned that Feldwebel Gerber is being ordered here with our platoon. I loaded a hundredweight of wheat flour at a mill before returning at top speed to Vatra Modavita. When I arrived, everybody was ready to pull out. I handed out the post, none for me. Today is my mother’s birthday; I had written congratulating her a long time previously. Initially I set off on my motorcycle, but the roads were slippery and I transferred to a lorry. I am not tired of life! We reached the battalion command post around 2300hrs. We went into Gura Humorului, where lodgings were assigned.

15 April 1944

We awoke next morning to Ivan’s first bombardment of the small town. I went to the company command post to find out where my firing positions are located. A mortar group was moving up to it. The holes were being dug behind the cemetery, near a wall. ‘It’s not up to much,’ somebody said. My observation post is being set up to the left on a slope in the woods. Ivan was firing fairly randomly into the area, probably hoping to tempt us into revealing our positions by our reply. Therefore, no return fire! I went to the other group to look over their position. It lies in a deep depression, but immediately ahead of it is an artillery observation post which Ivan has already located. Not so favourable! I went back up the slope to my observation post. From there we have a very good view over the terrain. While I was making the necessary measurements for ranges, Ivan fired two rounds into the mountain with a 7.62cm gun, the shells hitting not too far from here! At the company command post, Group *Unteroffizier Spiess* zeroed-in the mortar while our young Lieutenant Hartwig looked on. I shared my platoon command post with the leader of the Pak platoon. This command post is a small house on the floor of a wide valley about 150m from the cemetery. The house even has a piano. Ivan hit the gabled roof with a 7.62cm round. Being optimists, we told ourselves that he wouldn’t

hit the house again. In the night we checked the sentries twice, but otherwise slept well.

16 April 1944

This morning I took over 3 Mortar Group. The positions are to be dug in a gully behind a ridge, two firing positions and an earth bunker for the men, and each man also has to dig his own foxhole. Young, still inexperienced soldiers work slowly. When Ivan fired two more rounds into the forward slope and the shrapnel came whizzing towards them, suddenly the spadework got faster. It was good to have Ivan's help! The observation post is being built on the forward slope for better all-round vision, but will become dangerous if located by the enemy. Therefore good camouflage and cautious movement. The Russians are not firing often, and then only with the anti-tank gun. To avoid detection I am having my observation post built only during the hours of darkness. The ground is hard and rocky. Towards 0400hrs, I became convinced that I needed to make more progress but the ground conditions are against it. All evidence of excavated earth and rubble have to be carried away and then everything covered over with moss and brushwood. The distance between my observation post and the firing position is about 250m. Contact is maintained by field telephone.

Note

1. The Panzerschreck (Raketen Panzerbüchse 54) was an 8.8cm shoulder-fired anti-tank rocket launcher with a range of 150m based on the American bazooka. It was known as the 'stove pipe' for its tail fire at discharge. (TN)



A letter to 'Unteroffizier Hans Heinz Rehfeldt' bearing the coveted air-mail field post stamp.

mein lieber Junge! Hagen 4. 10. 1943.

Wenn ich doch nur wüsste, wie es Dir ging.
Wir machen uns sehr viel Sorge um Dich, denn seit
dem Du die letzte Post am 8.9. geschrieben hast, haben
wir noch nichts wieder von Dir gehört. Dass wir zwischen
1. bis 2.10. Terrorangriff hatten, nicht Dir gehört haben. Ich
gab am 2.10. ein Telegramm auf folgenden Inhalt "Sollten
bomben geschädigt. Leben alle. Komme sofort." Nun
hoffe ich, dass man Dich gehen lassen wird, weil doch
sonst Dein Urlaub fällig war. Jedes Haus in Erkthal
war abgebrannt. Rundherum um uns waren die Keller-
fenster erleuchtet vom Brand der Fließbandbomber, sodass wir
nicht raus kommen. Mit einem Mal fielen Fr. H. in Trüne ge-
schürt in. sagten bei uns brannte es. Nach 5 Minuten kam Herr Fr. H. des befohlenen
Angriffs vom Bahnhof n. Es war lief n. müssen seien, dass wir gesagt sein Häuschen

The field post was the most important means of maintaining contact with family in Germany. Telephone calls were reserved only for the very fortunate few. This letter begins: 'Hagen, 4.10.1943. My dear boy, If only I knew how things are with you. We are very worried about you for since your last letter on 8.9 we have heard nothing more from you. You will have heard that we had a terror raid on the night of 1.10. I sent a telegram on 2.10 saying, "Heavy bomb damage. All alive. Come at once." Now I am hoping that they will release you because your leave is due . . .' The writer then goes on to describe the damage to neighbouring houses caused by the bombing.



The author in an infantry trench east of Krivoi Rog in November 1943.



Frost froze the mud in the trench.



The first snow of autumn.



The author with sub-machine gun in the observation position of the foremost trench.



Grossdeutschland unit graves, November 1943: The names of Obergefreiter Heinz Heuke, Werner Williamroth and Gerhard Zopf are visible in the front rows.



The author posing with sub-machine gun and 'Bolshevik cap'.



The author in the winter of 1943 at Krivoi Rog/Kirograd.



The 9 Company uniform-issue lorry with shoemakers' unit.



The author at the door of his billet in November 1943.



The author on patrol with Walter Pfeil. The latter fell in East Prussia on 17 January 1945.



A cigarette break behind a haystack.



At the observation post, November 1943.



Aiming practice by a heap of frozen dung.



Winter camouflage clothing was finally issued in adequate quantities.



At an observation position. Where are the Russians?



Only a good marksman with a steady hand could hit the target standing freehand with the 98k carbine.



Posing before the crater made by a Russian 15.2cm shell.



In order to survive one had to be constantly watchful.



A defector being searched. The treatment of many Russian soldiers by their superiors was such that they preferred to surrender to the Germans than be ordered to certain death.



After being searched, a captured partisan awaits interrogation.



Jupp Dörfler and the author were good comrades.



Jupp Dörfler (left in the photo) with another colleague, November 1943.



Butcher 'Bobby' Raimann.



Christmas 1943: from the left, Berbrich, Spiess Gellert, Dörfler, Patzke.



Group photo at the Christmas celebration, 1943: In the foreground Oberfeldwebel Raimann, behind his head Hauptfeldwebel Gellert.



Hours of relaxation, Christmas 1943.

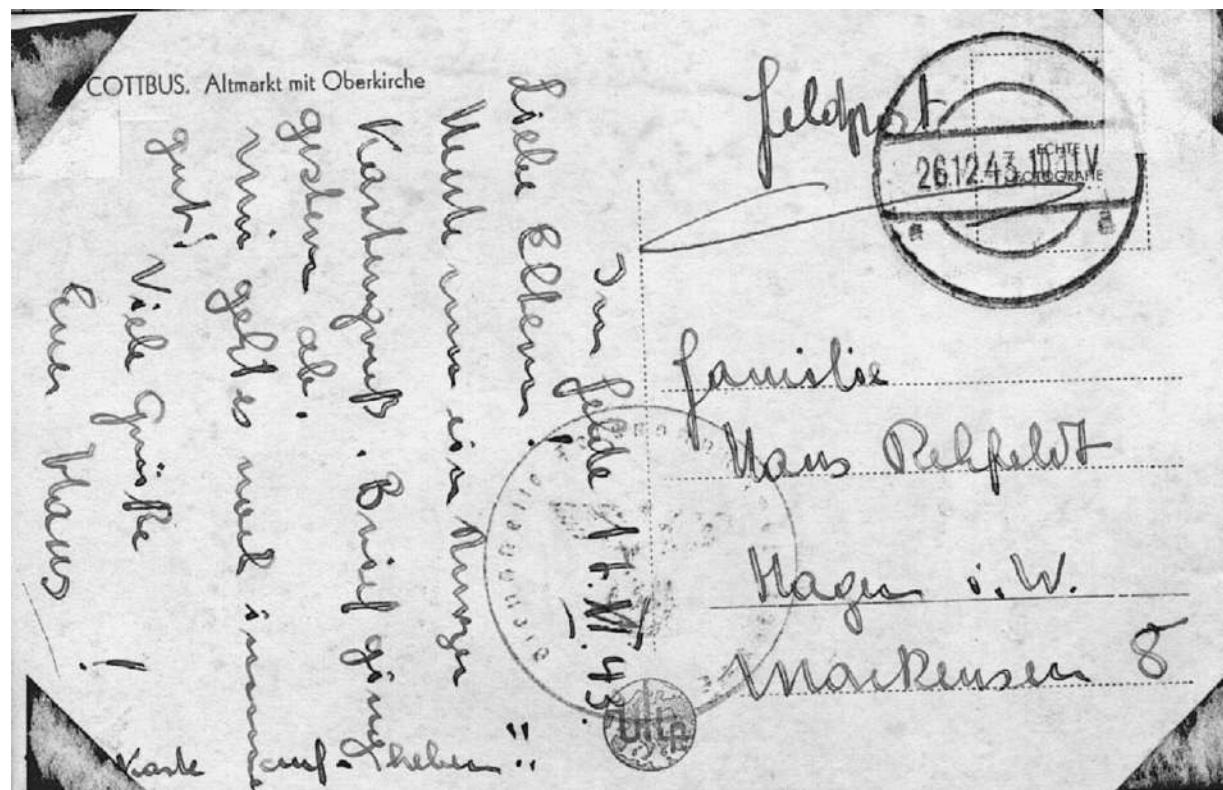


A Christmas card from the company to the author, at that time at Woldana with the Grossdeutschland Reserve Brigade.

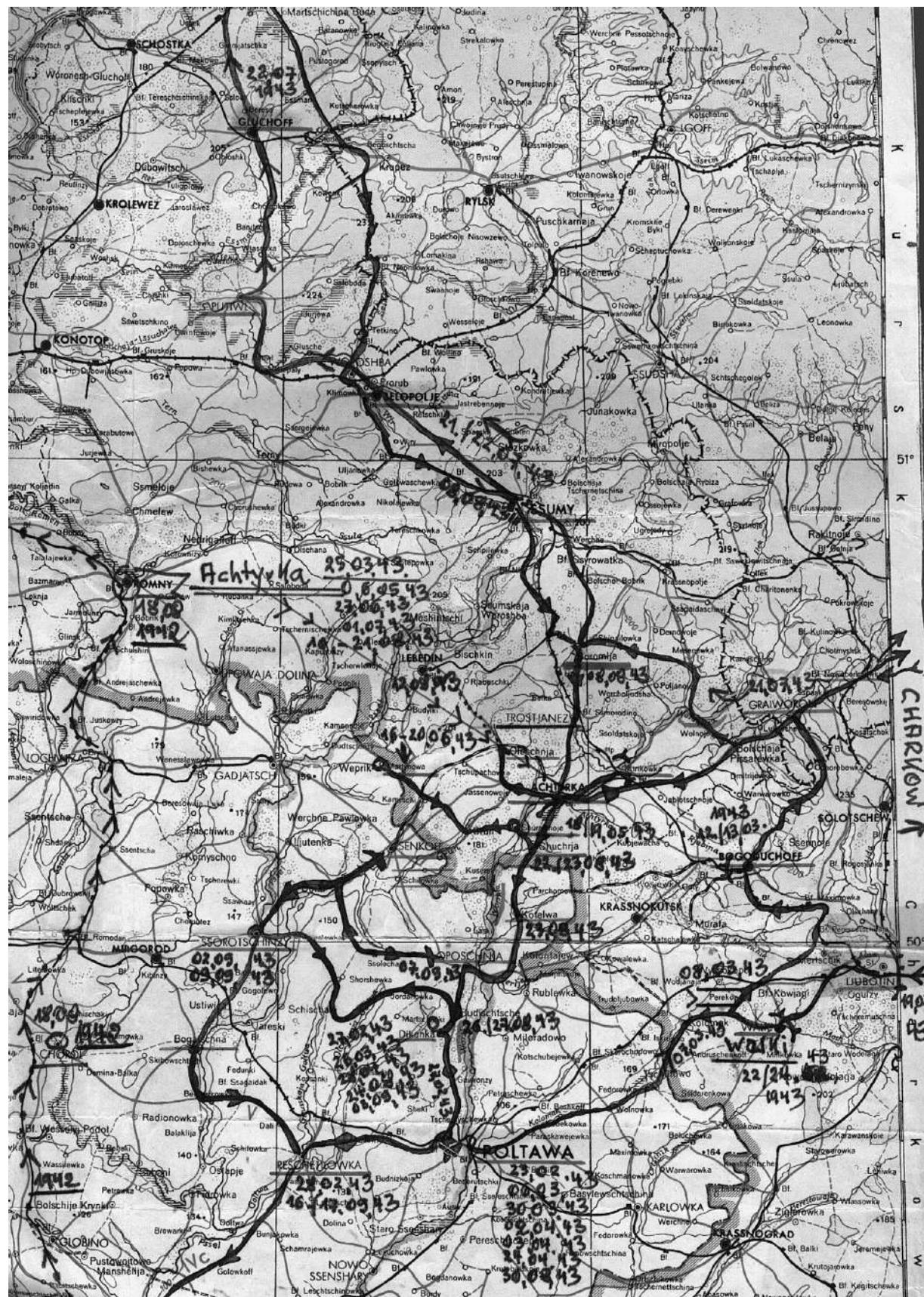


Cottbus

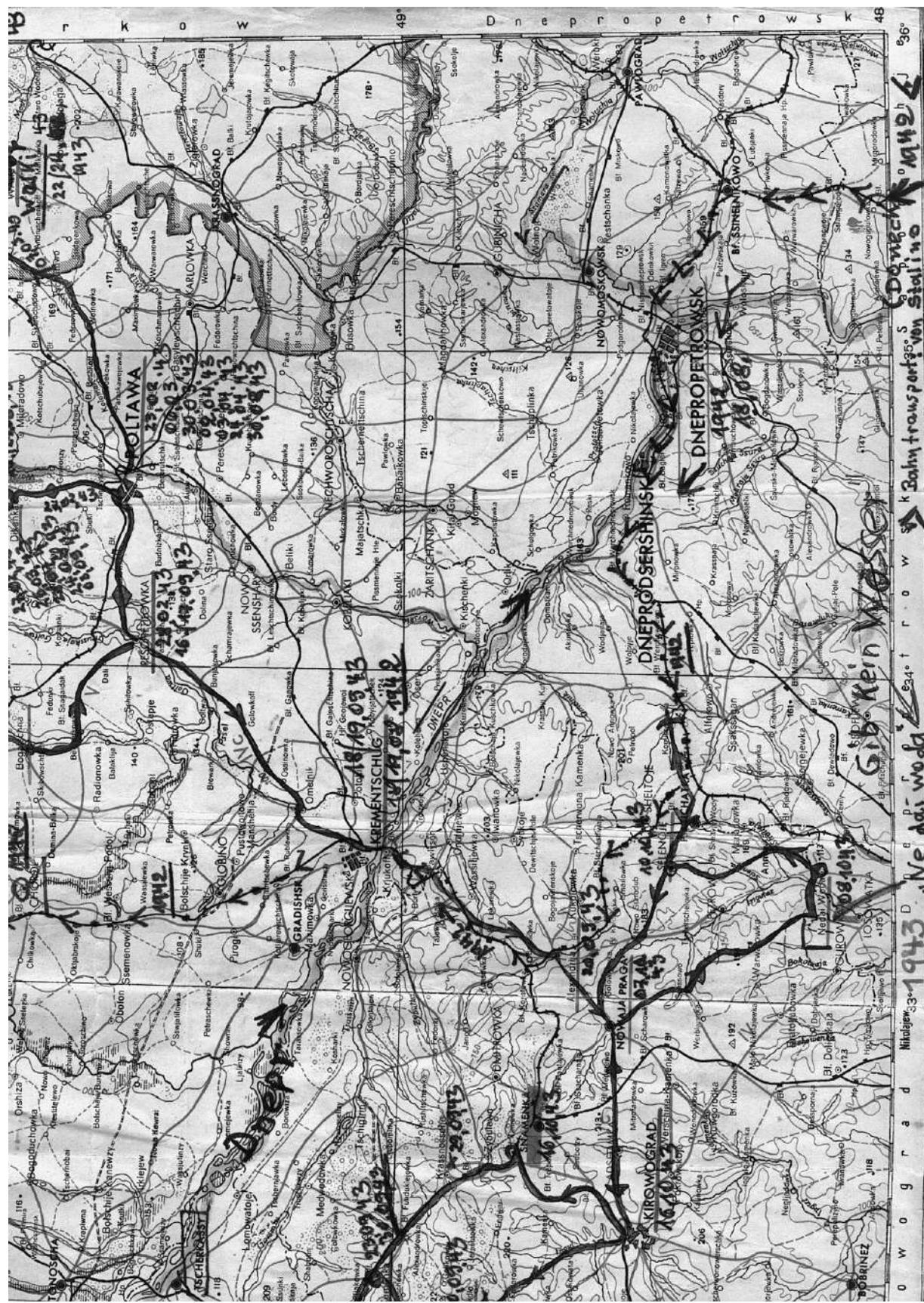
The market square at Cottbus.



A field postcard from the author to his parents sent on 26 December 1943 advising that he had sent a letter the previous day and he was still OK.



Photocopy of an original Wehrmacht map with entries made by the author showing his movements and days in action during 1942–43.



The lower section of the same map.

Chapter 9

Securing the Carpathian Passes

17 April 1944

My observation post is completed. When the sun shines in the morning it is in my eyes to the south-south-east. That interferes with vision, and bright light makes it easier for Ivan to spot us. Therefore we have to make ourselves small and inconspicuous, not moving around without good reason. After midday, with the sun behind us until evening, vision is very good. The artillery observation post is not far off. They have a very good earth bunker and also a scissors-binoculars. Our advantage: we are higher up than Ivan and can see over the terrain for many kilometres. I have taken over the group alone. Unteroffizier K. has gone to the company command post in the 'zbV' (special purposes) role. I have built my command post on the back slope. It is excellent and ready by evening. My mortar firing positions, my men's 'earth bunker' and also my command post are not in the direct line of fire (e.g. from anti-tank gun fire). The observation post has to be improved though. Today there was hardly a round fired. Our artillery is shooting from some side-valleys. The mountains and narrow valleys make it difficult to fire over the mountains, the elevation is too great. For our mortars on the other hand, steep-trajectory weapons, this is ideal country. Now and again one can hear a mortar being fired, the soft 'plop – plop' because the muzzles are elevated at over 50°. Then twenty-two seconds later comes the short, hard explosion at impact. The sound echoes loud across the valleys.

One of our infantry companies went out at night to surround the Russians in a village and attack, but the enemy had gone. Towards evening the coffee- and rations-carriers come shuffling down from the heights on both

sides. They hang the field flasks and mess tins on poles. As they pass I attach my rations carrier behind them.

At 2000hrs it is dark enough to continue work on my observation post. I have had the communications trench and my foxhole deepened to prevent Ivan seeing into my position on the forward slope. I have fitted a camouflaged door. We worked almost all night on it.

18 April 1944

Our bunkers are now complete! It is sunny and warm. The clear waters of a happily murmuring mountain stream flow through a gorge not far behind my positions. The first willow catkins are in blossom, one could almost forget the damned war. Suddenly a rifle shot rang out! My men shot dead a stray dog. After skinning it they roasted the carcass. I had some of this Carpathian roast dog – and survived! It was very tasty, but at that time I knew nothing of trichina. This rifle round was the only shot fired all day. Was Ivan up to some dirty business? We went to the highest alert status, especially for the hours of darkness and early morning. Tomorrow I am going to a forward position with my mortars.

Through the scissors-binoculars of the artillery observation post near me I surveyed the ground ahead. I recognized earth embankments and enemy movements. We prepared sketches, accurately marking in all enemy positions, bunkers and notable features. My men are digging industriously at the observation post. While two men stand sentry, the other two hack and dig. To hide it from Ivan, the earth is brought behind the slopes in groundsheets. We had been able to identify his positions because Ivan simply dumps the earth in piles.

19 April 1944

There was shooting up in the mountains during the night! Flares went up and then explosions – like hand grenades going off. The echo resounded very loud in the mountains. At night it can often be eerie here!

20 April 1944

I have reason to be joyful: finally a letter from home arrived. Dated November 1943! We are pleased to receive all letters but in one I discovered that in heavy defensive fighting, my old, proud company had been wiped out almost to the last man and gone down in glory. I read this in the letter from my comrade Rudolf Dietold. From January to March 1944 I was in Hannover and then in Cottbus. Now I am here in the Carpathians at Gura Humorului and am shocked. All my loyal comrades in arms fallen or wounded more or less seriously and in hospitals. Which ones will I be able to meet again if we return to Division in due course?

21 April 1944

My twenty-first birthday! Glorious spring weather! But after my colleagues have congratulated me and wished me much *Soldatenglück* there are things to do. Today we made a reconnaissance along half the mountain slope, given cover by bushes and trees as far as spot height 775. The Front situation and the course of the main front line here is very unstable. It consists almost exclusively of small bases. At Paltinoasa north-east of Gura Humorului, a broad valley (Moldava) separates the territory from the south-east from Capu Codrului to the west as far as Gura Humorului and to the north to Ilisesti and Balta. We set out with only one group of mortars (8.14cm), one group of heavy MGs and a platoon of infantry as 'escort'. We also had with us one radio detachment and two artillery officers. We wanted to take a look at the valley towards Balta, if possible find the 7.62cm anti-tank gun battery and destroy it with our artillery. Watching out constantly for the enemy, we struggled up the mountainside and reached the peaks without being observed. We called a halt amongst some old beech trees so tall that they towered over the others. We set a circular defence and then fitted crampons to the highest tree. I went up with the artillery spotter. The view was terrific! And we were in luck, for just then the Russian anti-tank battery opened up with its daily ration of nuisance fire at Gura Humorului. We got a fix on the battery very quickly and spotted it on a plateau behind a chalk-cliff on the edge of a wood. We could see the Ivans serving the guns. The artillery spotter telephoned his own battery at once with the coordinates and the order to fire. I watched through binoculars for the impact. The

sound of the round being fired from the Moldau valley resounded against the mountain with a sharp echo. There was no impact. ‘That one went to Kishinev!’ I laughed. We heard it thunder in the distance. New range! Another round. This one we could see! The third round fell short but directly in front of the enemy guns. Ivan now realized that we must be able to see him. Soon horse-drawn limbers appeared from out of the woods. Ivan wanted to save his four guns! But then we heard an impressive growling from behind us and four 12.8cm shells howled over and exploded in the midst of the Ivans and their artillery! Smoke, earth flew up: limbers, guns and horses disappeared from sight amidst fumes, smoke and flying clods of earth. ‘First class! Excellent! Another salvo and then increase range 100 metres!’ I watched the Ivans through binoculars from my high perch. Four more shells exploded amongst them. The horses had shied and bolted, the Ivans ran back for the protection of the woods. Twice more our battery fired, their ammunition exploded and some of the shells impacted against trees precisely where the Ivans believed themselves safe. It had been a successful action!

Now it was my turn to send Ivan some ‘friendly’ greetings with my mortars. We moved a fair distance northwards, always in cover, found a favourable firing position with very good observation possibilities at spot height 774 near Magura, obtaining a good view of the road to Balta running through the valley. I zeroed-in quickly on the road with its double bend directly below us. Before any rewarding targets made their appearance, I fired on bunkers and trenches identified near the road and obtained some good hits. When a convoy of vehicles approached from the Paltinoasa area bound for Balta, I used the remainder of my mortar bombs to engage them and destroyed some lorries and other vehicles. Unfortunately I had to cease fire then for lack of ammunition. I had mentioned this problem before, at the time when I submitted a suggestion through channels for a steerable, fully-tracked, motorized low-profile cart for the carriage of mortar ammunition such as the Italians have. Nothing came of the idea. When one thinks of the damage inflicted on us by Russian mortars, the rejection of my suggestion was a serious mistake. Therefore now I had to have our mortars dismantled and head back from Magura. During our return our artillery

fired several times into the woods and valleys, the echoes rolling even along this supply road. With justifiable pride we took the shortest route back via Picioru-Inali and soon reached our departure point where the mortars were reassembled in the firing pits. It being my twenty-first birthday, I carved my initials ‘H.R.’ and the date into the trunk of the tall beech tree we had climbed for spotting the fall of shot, but unfortunately I did not have the opportunity after the war to return to Romania to find it. In the evening, however, we celebrated in my ‘headquarters’, a small house only a few metres behind a cemetery in the valley. My friend Heinz Spiess played the piano: we had a lot of fun, plenty to drink and eat. During the night our singing resounded through the valley. Suddenly we heard shooting! Weapons at the ready, we all ran out, to investigate the situation. Halfway up the mountain slope we heard the chatter of a sub-machine gun, then some rifle fire. Had Ivan decided to home in on our singing? ‘Unteroffizier, there is a flickering light over there in the cemetery,’ one of my men said. We saw it and advanced cautiously in threes between the gravestones and grave mounds towards the light. Finally we saw a small ‘eternal flame’ burning in the little chapel. All fell quiet, the reason for the shooting unexplained. The remainder of the night passed peacefully, in the morning we increased the level of alert for the sentries and then emptied the last bottles. At midnight I was one year older. I was roundly congratulated and wished much *Soldatenglück*, and even our Lieutenant ‘Bubi’ came to wish me good luck and a safe homecoming at the war’s end. In a war like this one, one cannot have too many wishes of good luck! Our young lieutenant (Hartwig, 19 years old) is a fine type and allows us veterans to give him tips on how things should be done. He has only a few months’ Front experience while we already have several years!

22 April 1944

My birthday resolution is to be less sweaty and unwashed this year. Accordingly I prepared and went into the small town of Gura Humorului. Going along the houses to find an ‘opportunity for a bath’ I was addressed by a middle-aged, well-preserved man able to speak German: ‘Dear Herr German soldier, I do not know your rank, but are you looking for

something? Can I help you?' I was very surprised and was invited into the house to be introduced to his wife, and there was a pretty 17-year-old girl there too. I was the guest of an Emeritus Professor who had studied in Vienna and also in Romania. We discussed the war and the chances of the Russians breaking through, or if we would be able to contain them. I attempted to appear as optimistic as the situation allowed, but I had to leave the question unanswered whether we could stop the Russians. The couple then fell very quiet. We drank wine from their own cellars and ate delicious cake-like white bread with home-made marmalade. To finish off we two men drank schnapps. Later the gentleman of the house took me aside and asked if I would have the opportunity to take the girl to safety when it was clear that the Russians were coming.

Our supply vehicles often drove to Vienna and I kept up his courage with my promise that I would find a way. 'Pack a trunk for the girl and get her ready to go at a moment's notice. I am telling you to do this now because the opportunity may come at any time.' Upon leaving the parents hugged me. Actually they were aunt and uncle to the girl. In the evening I heard that next day a lorry from our repairs unit would be driving to Vienna for spare parts. After roll-call and arranging the sentry roster, I visited the professor with the news. There was only a brief discussion and then all three agreed. Now I made my enquiry, would there be a chance of a hot bath? I was shown into a conservatory with a large 'pre-Flood zinc bathtub'. It took quite some time until enough hot water was present in the tub and then I got in with a bar of 'well-known' Wehrmacht soap which never lathered. My God, what a wonderful feeling. All I needed now was clean underwear but I had none and so had to redress with the previous ones. My olive-green shirt was impregnated with 'Lauseto', guaranteed lice-free, and so despite everything I went back into the house as if new-born. I was invited to dine but had already eaten a full mess tin of goulash and noodles and was forced to decline, although I stayed and did not say no to wine and schnapps. I noted the name of the family and the girl but with the passage of time I can no longer find the slip of paper. The girl already had her baggage packed, her clothing and documents ready for the journey. I told her that I would call for her next morning and introduce her to the

driver, an absolutely trustworthy elderly man. After a last glass of schnapps I took my leave.

23 April 1944

Immediately after morning roll-call I went with the driver who parked his lorry in front of the professor's house. He wanted to pay the driver a large sum, but the latter merely laughed and said, 'Get in, we're leaving at once.' There was a tearful farewell and then I gave the girl my hand and wished her good luck. At that she embraced me and kissed my cheek. I was quite taken aback and said only, 'Have a safe journey and good luck.' At that the lorry pulled away. The professor and his wife stood at the doorstep waving until the lorry was out of sight. I saw a hand waving from the side window and then the lorry was gone. I thought only, 'I hope everything goes well and in Vienna she finds the people the professor knows.' I patted the shoulders of the couple at the garden gate and then left. The problem was not necessarily resolved, of course: a few months later the Russians were in Vienna as well!

24 April 1944

Ivan is keeping quiet in our vicinity. We have scheduled an official bath-day. There is a house in the town with a proper bathing room where large quantities of hot water are on tap. Bathers enter in order of rank. Ivan saw smoke coming from the chimney or just fired at random for nuisance value, and it was very unpleasant for me when several shells exploded not far from the house. I was naked in the tub: the bathroom window stupidly faced towards the east. I got out quickly and then came the next round. Despite Ivan we all had our bath and survived unharmed. We can exchange our underwear for fresh from the lorry. I never hand in my shirt dowsed in 'Lauseto'. Better a dirty shirt than damned lice again.

25 April 1944

We have been improving our positions, otherwise all is quiet. Because our special unit '1029 Grossdeutschland (mot.)' has recruits, all of whom count as 'only partially trained', I pair the sentries at night. These are relieved

after each two-hour spell. It has worked well so far. Whether these boys are especially tired of digging or what else I have no idea.

26–30 April 1944

When I went to check the sentries this morning at 0700hrs and shouted loudly, ‘Sentry 4 Platoon report! Where are you?’ everything remained quiet. I went to the firing position and called out again angrily, but received no reply. At the mortar pit I got an awful shock! One of the mortars was missing its barrel. The bipod support lay with the baseplate and everything was covered over with a groundsheet. The Russians don’t do things like that! Next I went up to the height and asked the artillery spotter what had happened. He told me that at first light, the battalion CO had come up from the village with some officers and messengers to inspect the positions. When he found the firing position unguarded, he had the barrel removed and one of the messengers went off with it on his shoulder! Rage seized me and I shouted at the top of my voice, ‘Sentry, Mortar! where the hell are you?’ At that something stirred in the nearby bushes and then two overgrown schoolboys arose, still drunk with sleep. I gave them a standing dressing-down and then they spent the next fifteen minutes lying down, crawling, standing up, lying down, crawling . . . This brought them to their senses. One of the two was Grenadier R. While lying on the ground he dared threaten me again, gasping, ‘You watch out. On the next attack you could get a bullet.’ I replied, ‘I shall be keeping my eye on you. And you can bet your life I shall be taking the greatest care!’ This soldier had made himself very unpopular in Hungary. I cautioned myself: ‘Keep your eyes peeled!’ Then I went with my messenger into the valley to report and no doubt receive a bawling-out. Having arrived I proceeded to the battalion command post to see how the land lay. I went from room to room glancing inside and then saw my mortar barrel. The duty Obergefreiter [Lance Corporal] saluted¹ and said unconcernedly, pointing to the window, ‘Are you looking for your barrel? It’s over there.’

I said, ‘Well, thank God. Difficult to fire a mortar bomb without it’, with which he agreed. I called my messenger, who shouldered the barrel and then we made off on the quiet. No sooner said than done the barrel was

back at the firing position, fitted to the mortar and aligned on targets chosen based on reports. Next I went down into the village and reported to the battalion commander. He heard me out, gave me a look and asked, ‘Have you nothing out of the ordinary to report?’

I replied, ‘Herr Hauptmann, the mortar barrel which mysteriously disappeared has been found and refitted. The mortar is ready to fire!’

‘Where did you find that thing? Not here?’ He grinned and wagged his finger. I gave him the whole story and added for good measure, ‘When we receive young and not fully-trained recruits, we can hardly be surprised at anything.’ I received a strong rebuke and then peace was restored. It is a good thing that we had got to know each other much better over the last few weeks.

The last week of April passed relatively quietly, without unusual occurrences. Our division is fighting in the area around Jassy and there are rumours circulating of our being relieved here and transferred to Division. Meanwhile officer-instructors have arrived from the unit which is said to be our relief. This will be 8 Rifle Division. We know the procedures and so everything will go smoothly. They enquired and we gave them the most important information.

(Later) 8 Rifle Division is taking over our positions and we are assembling in the village near the vehicles. The lorries drove up, we did the usual count again and then I reported that we were ready to pull out. The driver who took the young girl to Vienna has been back for some time and I was able to tell the professor of her safe arrival there. He embraced me and kept saying, ‘Thank you, thank you, you are a good person.’ It was almost embarrassing. We took our leave of each other with mutual best wishes. We drove first to Cimpolung to assemble and stayed a few days. The relief went off well and Ivan appears to have noticed nothing of it, for it has remained all quiet on that Front.

Once the whole ‘1029 Grossdeutschland (mot.)’ was present we began to consider how long this murderous war will continue. Our hope is invested in the new ‘miracle weapons’. We already have the V-1 and V-2 as reprisal weapons, but what else will come and what sort of ‘miracle weapons’ will they be?

9 May 1944

Back to reality! Leutnant Hartwig arrived with my marching orders. I reported all correct and that the lorries were fully fuelled. ‘Very well, have your weapons ready to fire and keep your eyes open. Have a good journey.’ This journey took us through wild, romantic mountainous scenery more or less near the Wilden Bistrita. We travelled over a high pass, now called the ‘Schörner Pass’ (1,790m). Our brave Opel-Blitzes and the other lorries such as the Peugeots or Tatras had to struggle valiantly at this altitude. Coming down the steep mountain sides and negotiating the often very narrow road bends made my hair stand on end. It was hard going and slow. The Romanians have put up many road blocks of tree trunks, big boulders and rocks. These make the road so narrow that passage is very difficult. Often bits of vehicle are knocked off, and for lack of skill many vehicles became stuck fast. In the end we all got through without other problems.

10 May 1944

We drove by night under a full moon. I sat in the cab admiring the scenery. In the narrow beam of the headlights the road was easy to follow, the white froth of the fast flowing Wilde Bistrita near us, the dark pines towering above us against the sky. The journey was a wild, romantic one!

11 May 1944

We made a stop at Piatra Neamt as ordered so that the strung-out convoy of the battalion could reassemble. A number of vehicles had problems during this mountain journey. Now we continued along a highway leaving the Bistrita Valley for Romania. Once there we learned that our ‘Reinforced Grenadier Regiment 1029 *Grossdeutschland* (mot.)’, formed as an emergency measure (convalescents, half-trained recruits and all imaginable branches of service) which nevertheless has proved itself in the Carpathian mountains, is to be disbanded here. The men and vehicles are to be transferred to the well-tried Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland* whose CO is General Hasso von Manteuffel. The proud old unit suffered heavy losses in the defensive fighting at Targul Frumos between 2 and 5 May, as a result of which the whole division has been reorganized and

restructured. The battle strength of each regiment has been reduced from four to three battalions, each with four companies: I Battalion/1–4 Companies, II Battalion/5–8 Companies, III Battalion/9–12 Companies. We are also being given better weapons, with thicker armour for the assault guns and other fighting vehicles. This influx of personnel and new weapons will convert the division into a ‘fire brigade’ which can always be deployed where the enemy is threatening to break through our lines, or as an iron fist for the counter-attack to repel the enemy after a breakthrough has occurred. We will be known as ‘the Fire Brigade *Grossdeutschland*’.

12–13 May 1944

I am back in my 8 Company of the mortar platoon with a few convalescent men and some recruits. Oberleutnant Schmelter is still commanding it, but hardly any of the good old comrades have come through. Our old Spiess Hauptfeldwebel Osker Gellert is on his way to us. We had a short rest before moving to a new position near Cortesti. I went to the observation post from where I will direct fire on three curtain-fire areas, then returned quickly to the firing position, where the bunker is too narrow for three men. I rang the corporal there to tell him that in precisely fifteen minutes ('Synchronize watches') I would attempt to sprint there under his covering fire despite being in full view of the enemy. He should fire the occasional mortar round in order to keep Ivan's nose to the ground and so not see me running. Looking at my watch I waited for my mortar to fire. Then it did so, but why so fast, one round after another? When the first bomb impacted I jumped out of the foxhole and began my race. This was good for the first 100m but then the mortar ceased fire. I cursed. The mortar was supposed to keep firing until I reached the firing position. A quarter-right behind me a Russian Maxim MG began to chatter and the first bursts drilled into the damp loamy soil ahead of me, even a few individual rounds landed to my right. I had bullets flying about my ears! Damn! Where would I find cover immediately? Between the firing position and the main front line a number of foxholes had been dug. The first was directly ahead of me and I dived into it almost head-first, landing on two infantry telephone linesmen who had also sought cover there. They squeezed down to make room for me and

grinned. After a while the MG gave up. After my pause for breath I embarked on the last 100m, running made more difficult by the cloying mud on my boots. Cursing loudly, I skidded more than I ran. At the firing position I almost ran down Oberleutnant Schmelter then threw myself to the ground and cursed the bungling mortar protection and even more the Ivan on the Maxim. In the evening, making the routine report to the battalion command post, my company commander asked the other officers and adjutants, ‘What is that? He runs with two hundredweight of mud on his boots, the machine-pistol on his back, binoculars swinging from his neck, cursing and complaining: “Those accursed Ivans – firing a machine gun at a lone soldier. How easy is it to hit a man like that?” – Ha ha ha! It’s the forward observer, mortar Unteroffizier Rehfeldt, who ran from his observation post back to his firing position pursued by Russian MG fire. Ha ha ha!’ I thought to myself, ‘It’s easy for him to laugh.’ In the evening after this ‘fright’ I had a pick-me-up.

14–19 May 1944

My observation post has the codename ‘Simon’. In no man’s land lies a shotdown aircraft. Here also I have my three ordered areas for barrier fire. The terrain rises lightly up to the main front line. To the left, a little behind the firing position, it goes steeply down into the village of Cortesti. At night our heavy MGs wander from one firing position set up during the day to another in order to irritate Ivan with ‘nuisance fire’. The targets will already have come under fire in the daytime. This is ‘the wandering circus’ but we know from our own bad experience that many of our own men get hit in this way. For the mortars too it is disruptive and irksome.

We are now ‘8 Company/II Battalion Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*’ once more. This is the consequence of the previously-mentioned ‘reduction’. Are we short of men, soldiers? In my platoon is my old comrade Jupp Dörfler as mortar leader. I have known him since November 1941. Unfortunately there are hardly any other old comrades here: they have fallen or lie more or less seriously wounded in this or that military hospital.

Nature is glorious at this time of the year. There are many vineyards in this region and fruit trees with magnificent white blossom. My platoon leader from '1029 Grossdeutschland', Fahnenjunker-Feldwebel (officer cadet, senior grade sergeant) 'Pan' Gerber is with us. We get on very well, he is a first-rate type!

Whitsun 1944

We are all sitting in the position, very tense. We are expecting a Russian attack. I am in front of my 'bunker'.

It remained quiet all day.

O.U. 24 May 1944

To the Mortar Platoon

Battalion Order

For the expected attack by the Russians I am ordering again:

- 1) Every man must defend his allotted post to the last breath. Whoever leaves his post without my order will either, if I see it, be shot dead or have to answer to a later court martial. We have no room for cowards in our ranks!
- 2) During the enemy preparatory fire only a few observers will remain outside, everybody else, especially the light infantry weapons, are to remain in full cover.
- 3) If the enemy infantry attacks, they are to be engaged by calmly aimed fire. The calmer you are, the more accurate your aim. And the more accurate your aim, the sooner the enemy attack will come to a halt.
- 4) Do not open fire too soon! The closer the enemy gets, the less his heavy weapons can support him.
- 5) If tanks accompany the enemy attack, the infantry is the priority target. It is possible that enemy tanks will approach our main front line through our sector. Do not be intimidated by them! No enemy tank will come any closer. If you have a properly constructed position, nothing can happen to you. The worst mistake you could make would be to run away from an enemy tank. That is certain death! You can be assured

that behind you are enough assault guns and other armourpiercing weapons to handle enemy tanks successfully. If enemy tanks come up without infantry, or with infantry very far ahead, you must observe from cover without giving yourself away. The tanks will be engaged with armour-piercing weapons – you will engage the infantry!

6) Should the enemy break into the position, you must immediately seal the breach and counter-attack. The quicker and harder your reaction, the more certain is success.

7) Always bear in mind that the enemy infantry is poor, much worse than ever before. The mass of the enemy infantry have only been soldiers for a few weeks. They shoot poorly. If despite that they seem to be making a spirited attack, it is only because they know that any lying down or going back means their certain death. Don't let yourselves be bluffed by their shouts and numbers but shout back even louder 'Hurrah!' You will see that that helps! If the enemy approaches very close to our own positions, it is often better to make a brief attack than to await the enemy breach of our trenches.

8) Remain well within your positions, for our own heavy weapons fire over you from behind, often with a low, flat trajectory. For this reason, any running back is perilous. You must place your full trust in our heavy weapons. They see you, and the closer they can lay their fire to you, the more they help you!

9) The wounded must only be brought back when the enemy attack has been beaten off. The fallen are to be retrieved by the Hauptfeldwebel [CSM] and members of the *Tross*.

10) Numerically we are very strong again in men and weapons. We are in a good, deeply staggered position whose development depends on your industry! Behind us are strong fighting units in reserve. We can face every enemy attack with calm. If your position has been built as well as possible, and is defended according to orders, and you do not allow yourself to be intimidated above all by the enemy's numbers, but keep your nerve, then every enemy attack will be bound to collapse before or at our positions.

This order is to be made known to all members of the battalion and above all to be discussed with the NCOs.

Signed: Hauptmann Graf von Nayhaus, Battalion Commander'

And this good man, who had won no laurels in the Carpathians with '1029 Grossdeutschland', shouted loudly at me – shortly before our own attack, when I went with my messenger to look for a site for a observation post – for not wearing a steel helmet. I find that I can hear better without it, for the wind often whistles in the chin strap. My steel helmet was on my belt and I was wearing a field cap

'Unteroffizier, come here! I have expressly ordered that the steel helmet must be worn in battle. You have disobeyed my order! You will report to me this evening.'

'Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann! But I always put my helmet on when fighting begins.'

'Silence. That is refusal to obey an order!'

'Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann.' Some of the younger officers near him grinned maliciously. I put on my steel helmet, saluted and went off, thinking, 'Stupid fool!'

Unfortunately his loud shouting must have been heard by Ivan, for only a few minutes later Ivan targeted a fierce bombardment on the edge of our wood. Ivan will have certainly recognized our position without the shouting of Herr Graf. My messenger and I threw ourselves flat in a depression and let the enemy's blessing pass overhead. When we got up my messenger said to me, 'Herr Unteroffizier, in this case the Graf was right!' When the racket died down and it grew quieter, we heard loud shouts and then, 'The Hauptmann is wounded! Sanitäter!' We ran there and discovered that the 'Herr Graf' was not wounded but had 'only' suffered a nervous breakdown. And he had been the author of that stupid battalion order to us veterans! The officers carried him away to the motorcycle and sidecar which would transport him to the dressing station. I asked the Oberleutnant slyly, 'Where should I report this evening to the Herr Hauptmann?'

'For heaven's sake, Unteroffizier, just get on with your job!'

31 May 1944

We have changed position again. We have been relieved by the SS-*Totenkopf* Division to our left and 24 Panzer Division to our right. The latter is newly formed, for the 24 Panzer Division which preceded us in 1942 to Voronezh went down at Stalingrad. We are assembled close behind the Front ‘in the green’ preparing to move out. It will be into some new ‘shit’ again so the infantry say. And they are probably right.

Note

1. In the Wehrmacht, a soldier was required to salute any person of higher rank than himself, not just officers. Therefore, as in this case, the man of lance corporal rank saluted the corporal. (TN)

Chapter 10

Through the Minefield of Orsoaia!

1 June 1944

We are preparing to straighten the Front near the village of Orsoaia. Also to gain higher ground so as to have a better view over the territory held by the Russians. These are the heights just south of the Pruth lowlands. Tomorrow it begins.

2 June 1944

The attack began! In scorching heat, preceded by good artillery and panzer support. Ivan was not slow to react and soon the air was filled with deafening growling, thunder and cracks. Orders were shouted: ‘Advance! Forward men, at Ivan!’ We mortar groups hastened ahead as best we could with our burdensome equipment. Initially we received only token defensive fire and took a couple of small villages. Just leaving the last houses I happened to look down and saw neat squares cut into the ground, baked hard by the sun. Mines! We had stumbled into a minefield: luckily Ivan’s fire had not yet developed to a crazy level, the mines had not been carefully buried and so we plodded forward, eyes always looking down, until after 50m we were clear. ‘Shit minefield,’ one of my men said. He had gone quite pale and was not the only one. Now the question was: why was there no Russian infantry ahead of us?

Ahead to our left was a railway embankment with a tunnel through it. From here Ivan opened up with sub-machine gun, rifle fire and hand grenades on our advancing infantry. If he had waited a bit it would have caused us a nasty surprise. Now flight after flight of Il-2 ground-attack aircraft arrived announcing their presence by firing from all barrels,

launching rockets and dropping fragmentation bombs. These latter all fell well short.

We had all immediately sought the best available cover. Confronted by Il-2s above, mines underfoot behind and probable Russian positions ahead, the initial high tempo of our advance faltered. To my right was a vineyard on a low slope. Some Ivans were running about in it quite openly and I mowed them down with my sub-machine gun. Meanwhile to the left it had grown quieter on the railway embankment and our infantry advanced there. The crews carrying the heavy mortar parts were strung out far apart. I was still cautious about no defensive Russian line and so quickly spotted the first piles of earth which betrayed the Russian field position. I deliberated with my men, weighed down by the heavy mortar equipment, how best to break into the Russian positions. Only the ammunition runners carried a rifle, the mortar operators each had a pistol, my troop leader and I each had a sub-machine gun. This could get interesting! Suddenly my thinking was interrupted by the howling discharges of our Do-rockets. I went forward cautiously and looked up as a batch came hurtling down. I made a quick estimate of thirty-six, therefore a battery with 6 x 6 tubes. The rockets were falling short and would probably arrive amongst us. I shouted at the top of my voice, 'Mortar men! Full cover! They're coming down on top of us!' I threw myself into a furrow made by our panzers, only 30 to 40cm deep but the best cover I could find in the time available. A peculiar feeling came over me as I waited for the salvos to impact which, when they did, was not far short of our noses in the ground. After the hammering explosions it fell quiet. There were no cries of pain, no calls for '*Sanitäter!*' Fumes and smoke drifted through the air; I could smell and taste the powder gases. I jumped up and looked around to see my men getting to their feet, cursing loudly, but nobody injured. I shouted, 'Let's go! Forwards and into the Russian trenches with a Hurrah!' At once I heard the chatter of a sub-machine gun and the crack of hand grenades. One of my men lay on the ground. I turned him over and looked into the distorted features of Grenadier R's face, the man who had warned me: 'In the first attack you will get a bullet!' I remembered the threat, but this man here was in no position to carry it out. He was uninjured and trembling.

‘R, have you fired your first round?’ I shouted to him, and then, ‘Come on, up you get and follow the others!’ He pushed himself to his feet angrily, held his rifle ready to fire in his hands and stumbled with me ‘bravely’ towards the Russian lines. Just at that moment as we jumped into an abandoned trench, I heard the howl of our Do-rockets firing again. I wondered what they were firing at this time. In the trench I crouched low behind my colleague Unteroffizier Bruno Sprengala. The thought occurred to me suddenly, ‘His rear gives me a good anti-shrapnel protection.’ The salvo of rockets fell clear of the trench. Bruno turned to me and confessed, ‘When you were so close behind me, I thought to myself, if a shell falls to my rear, at least I have good anti-shrapnel protection.’ I told him I had been thinking much the same, and we both laughed.

The Russian trenches were being ‘cleared’. Each bunker-like hole received a hand grenade or burst from a flamethrower, the latter often through the sack hung over the entrance, and then a burst of fire. We saw many fallen Ivans and came under very little defensive fire ourselves. If a Russian defended himself he was shot down. It was barely 100m to the village of Orsoaia. Many of its houses were on fire and we could hear fire from sub-machine guns or individual rifles. Our panzers had wiped out most of the defences: we threw hand grenades and fired into houses from which resistance was still being offered. Nobody likes house-to-house fighting! Deadly fire can come from any window or hole in a basement. For some time instead of the egg-shaped hand grenades I have used rifle grenades converted into hand grenades. They have a better fragmentation effect but are supposed to be fired from the ‘cup’ clamped above the rifle muzzle.

We were bathed in sweat from the heat and running about, my heart was in my throat and my temples were throbbing! Searching for cover in the entrance of a house I stretched myself out exhausted on the floor. As I took off my steel helmet for a moment, salty sweat ran over my forehead, into my eyes and down my cheeks. After a few minutes I carried on. Our infantry had also arrived and the first Russians appeared from houses and holes in the ground with their hands up. They had had enough of it, just as we had. Take away the weapon, search each man, interrogate if possible.

Ahead, panzers were securing the area. Our attack over two low heights to capture Orsoaia had been successful. Now the fleeing Ivans were pursued using all weapons until the last of them disappeared. Our panzers, Pak and artillery took out some enemy anti-tank gun emplacements and also destroyed a number of T-34s on the slope. These tanks burned with the black smoke of crude oil. ‘We are back!’ Despite many painful losses amongst the infantry, this feeling gave rise to a certain proud joy within us.

3 June 1944

We used the night to dig trenches and set up our defences. When Ivan attacked next morning with tanks and infantry, he was beaten off with heavy losses, though we also sustained casualties.

I was given a mission to go with a motorcycle combination into the town of Jassy to search for ammunition. At dusk I set off. The sidecar is a fairly shaky affair. When we had to make a stop just before getting to Jassy, I heard the sound of a fairly large formation of aircraft overhead. ‘From where did we get so many aircraft?’ I asked. Then I saw ‘Christmas trees’ brightly illuminating the whole area. These were not Luftwaffe aircraft! Then, almost without any opposition from Flak, they began bombing. Thunder, lightning and explosions rent the night! We watched from a trench by the side of the road. Jassy was in flames in many places. The pressure from the blasts shook us. Our Flak was weak. A few days previously a Front newspaper had written: ‘In the Romanian town of Jassy, not far from the Front, life goes on as normal. The trams are running, the population feels secure under the protection of the Wehrmacht and goes to work.’ The Americans had probably read this, for now their bombers operated from Italian airfields on these bombing raids. They would probably be bombing the Ploesti oilfields too. In the town were many Wehrmacht installations and hospitals. We were very impressed. Panic broke out in the town. When the bombers left, we crept up to the outskirts of town very cautiously. People were running around in shock, trying to save whatever they could. We had to return empty-handed. In the night, however, ammunition was brought up in the provisions lorry. Tomorrow we are to make the last push and drive the Russians out of the Pruth lowlands. I have been transferred to

the Leaders' Reserve and so will not be taking part. I am remaining with the Tross where the ammunition and provisions are being brought.

2 to 3 June 1944

Attack on the village of Orsoaia (Romania). Also elements of III Battalion are going back. Russian tanks came up and fired furiously! Suddenly the first one blew up. Black smoke billowed from its hatches – and not long after the second was hit and burned too. The others began to zig-zag amongst themselves nervously. Four of the attacking T-34s were given short shrift in the same manner from the dug-in panzer firing from our flank on the far left. The four smoking tank wrecks were the symbol of the failed Russian counter-attack. ‘And the rest beat it,’ was a grenadier’s laconic comment. Romanians who had retired from the field were sent forward again and shown their positions. It is necessary to be very forceful with these ‘comrades in arms’ because they tend not to like being too far forward. I went back with my commander, Oberleutnant Schmelter, to the trenches we had left much earlier this morning. They were all full of infantry whose faces betrayed their joy at their success in seeing off the attack. The company command post was set up in the trench and deep niches cut into the sides as protection against splinters. Today Ivan was very active with his Stalin organs and he spattered the trenches with his mortars. First of all we had to retrieve the bodies of two of our fallen, buried here provisionally yesterday. I went to the shallow depression with my two messengers. The men had been crushed to death by one of our own panzers. We soon had the first body free, but then one of the messengers reported that there were three bodies and not two. They had died with their hands in front of their faces as if trying to push away the earth, but had suffocated. The three bodies will be taken back this evening by the vehicle which brings up the provisions. More and more Romanian soldiers are coming up from the village. I am told that we are being relieved this evening; this was actually scheduled for yesterday but the Romanian battalion did not arrive. The Romanian lieutenant who came yesterday said, ‘You see, I have come alone, the battalion is not there. The commander and his officers are still sitting in the village. They know what it’s going to be like here. I have no

more ammunition, nor any more rations for my men.' This expression, 'You know what it's like with us', is almost typical of the Romanian Army! The soldier himself is not poor – but the leadership considers itself too good to have to demean itself in the filth of a trench or foxhole. Russian groundattack aircraft are constantly above us and bomb all possible targets. After that they strafe the trenches and vehicles with their MGs. Also they are commonly equipped with under-wing rockets.

I had sent my messengers back to their platoons to fetch the daily bulletins and, while I was attempting to prepare these reports on a report pad under constant fire, Oberleutnant Schmelter was crouching in the trench no more than a couple of metres away studying the map. Suddenly I heard the weird sound made by Stalin organs and I pressed hard against the cool damp earth trying to make myself as small as possible. I heard them coming. They sounded like really fat ones! Then came the terrible 'drumming' of the many rockets intended to destroy soldiers' morale. There is always the fear that out of the huge batch, one is going to find you! The ground trembled, and from the howling and crashing and many impacts I noticed that the salvo straddled our trench. Then the earth flew up in clods, dirt and smoke made breathing difficult. Just when I took a deep breath and sighed, 'Thank God that's over!' there came another deafening explosion. The pressure from it hurt the ears and chest, earth fell on top of me, and I felt how the pressure of the masses of earth compressed my body. I tried to get my hands free but failed. I closed my eyes and let it pass. The sand in my eyes hurt, I blinked at the sun which appeared dull through the dust and smoke. I tried to get free but could not. My first thought was, 'Where is the Oberleutnant?'

I called out and from nearby he replied, 'Rehfeldt? Dig me out, I am partially buried.' A *Sanitäter* came running past to help the wounded. He ran past without stopping! I shouted, 'Hey, can you get us free?' A grenadier heard and with a fairly distracted expression began work with an entrenching tool which struck my wristwatch, then he began digging with his fingers to get my hands free. Finally I got my arms loose and with some effort the rest of me. I had pain in the arms, leg and back, stretched, then set to work to free Schmelter. The two of us achieved this fairly quickly. The

lieutenant said that he had lost his glasses and map. While we searched through the earth for the items, we heard another salvo on its way, threw ourselves to the ground and waited. The rockets hissed towards us, we curled ourselves up – and the entire salvo passed overhead. We sighed in relief. ‘Damned shit!’ the grenadier swore and took off as fast as he could. The enemy mortar fire was very accurate. Because our infantry had straightened the Front and many of them were in our sector, our company command post was now too far ahead of our heavy weapons. For this reason the commander ordered me to find a more suitable spot for it further back. The trench system was filled with infantry, I left all my things except my submachine gun lying at the edge of the trench and, thus unburdened, attempted to squeeze myself into the trench at its rear. These Romanian communication trenches are very narrow! I had to make my way over men lying and sleeping and slip past men on lookout duty. I had enough of this and, having seen Romanians packed together in the main trench, decided on the spur of the moment to get out, and run back across the field towards it. Just ahead of the village I saw an old abandoned Russian MG nest. This could be the ideal spot for the command post. Now I dashed further back across the open fields and came under fire from left and right. ‘A typical *Grossdeutschland-Front*,’ I thought to myself, ‘Ivan everywhere!’ Nevertheless it seemed fairly safe until a little later an accursed Ivan got me in his MG sights and his weapon chattered behind me. Then with a jump I landed in the main trench on top of one of the Romanians lying there.

Having recovered my wits, I returned to Oberleutnant Schmelter to report on my reconnaissance. The lieutenant had taken care of my things left at the edge of the trench (haversack with field flask, groundsheet and map case) and now the two of us had to make our way through the first narrow trench. The Romanians there recognized me and made way for us as much as possible. From the end of the trench we had to run for it. Ivan had noticed the coming and going and our sprint was now followed by 5cm mortar fire. We had gone hardly 25m when the first of them exploded. Now it was a race between us and the next explosion. One round went into the trench, we heard the wounded cry out. *Sanitäters* came running with stretchers. Putting distance between us we ran for the vacated MG nest I had spotted, split up

in the holes for protection then set to work enlarging it. I crouched down, continuing to write up my daily report. Meanwhile messengers came bringing the missing data on ammunition, casualties and requirements. Apparently I had been lucky in my choice of this former MG nest for the company command post, since we seemed to be in an area which did not attract enemy fire. When their anti-tank guns fired, the shells landed ahead of us or in the earth behind, whizzing and hissing. Even the Stalin organs fired too short, or too wide. The village to our rear was blazing in many places. A radioman came towards us over the rise panting heavily. Just in front of our command post he collapsed with a soft cry, but then stood up and disappeared into one of the foxholes. He reported himself to Oberleutnant Schmelter: 'Gefreiter X assigned to 8 Company as radio operator. Herr Oberleutnant, I am wounded.' He could still run though, and was sent back immediately. The poor telephone men always had to go out when a line was shot up or cut. By now I had finished making up the daily report and headed back to the battalion command post. Hastening forward I overtook a squad of soldiers carrying back a wounded man. An Oberfeldwebel was laid out on the stretcher, deathly pale. A German was at the front, two Romanians behind. They were clearly exhausted. I took hold of one handle of the stretcher in front and with the united effort better progress was made. The area ahead of the village was under heavy fire and Ivan, who could see us, opened up with rifles and MGs. The earth sprayed up around us, a sign of his accuracy. We stumbled on, clenched our teeth and kept going. There was a wall, a heap of smoking rubble, the only remnant of what had been a house, and taking cover behind it gave us temporary relief. The wounded man was groaning, lying motionless with his eyes closed. 'Pick him up! Let's go!' We lifted the stretcher and set off cautiously. Panzers were rolling between the houses and throwing up an incredible amount of dust. Mortar bombs fell into the village with a short hiss. We ignored them, for our priority was to save a life. The two Romanians indicated that they wanted to set the stretcher down, but I refused and urged them onwards until we reached the battalion command post. Our German surgeon had departed with a severely wounded man, there was a Romanian doctor on call, but where was he? Romanian soldiers

directed me to a trench and pointed inside without speaking. The hole was deep and round, the doctor was cowering inside it. I requested him to come out but he would not budge. I shouted and raged at him, but nothing had any effect. He looked at me with frightened eyes and his look told me everything. I could expect no help from that quarter! Seconds later when Russian ground-attack aircraft dived towards us with bombs, rockets and cannon, I deliberately jumped down into the foxhole on top of the coward. He tried as hard as he could to force me out but my weight was too much for him, particularly my boots on his steel helmet. Once it was clear to climb out I gave orders that the wounded man be taken by VW amphibious vehicle to the main dressing station. A few weeks later I discovered that the Oberfeldwebel had lost too much blood and died on the way there.

There was very lively traffic at the battalion command post. Messengers coming and going, stragglers reporting and some artillery officers wanting instructions. With the 1 General Staff Officer's writer I sat behind a wall – to some extent protected against direct fire – and gave him the daily report. I heard two days' casualties: seventy-eight men! Of these twenty-two dead! This made clear our difficult situation here. He and I often had to take cover because Ivan's Il-2s frequently flew over. Expenditure of ammunition, ammunition requirements, report of casualties and serviceable weapons, everything was done. Now we waited for the provisions. Would they be brought? The infantry complained and cursed. Nothing to drink. In addition, ravenous hunger.

Yesterday we had begun the operation here. We had run around all day in the tremendous heat with nothing to drink, hardly anything to eat. I saw a crewman of a Panzer IV dressed in a black, oily driver's uniform near the battalion command post and asked if he could spare me a slice of bread. 'Of course, man, I invite you to a feudal feast. First course, a slice of Army bread. Second course, dripping fat to spread on it and third course, tinned fish in Dutch sauce. What do you think?' At first I thought he was joking. But a panzer man like him must have it good! I had to help him bring down the provisions box from where it was fixed behind the turret, then we both sat and ate. He was a Feldwebel (sergeant) and though we had never met before we got on like brothers! He even had still-hot coffee in his field

flask. But the peacefulness here couldn't last. Ivan had probably tumbled to the fact that something was up. Suddenly 12cm mortar bombs began dropping all around the command post. Everybody now moved off slowly to their foxholes, even the Romanians who had been talking loudly quietened down. I took leave of my panzer comrade and retired into an undamaged house for better protection against shrapnel. I had a close look at the ceiling and walls. They seemed fairly stable. Ivan has fired his Stalin organs into the village very often so that many of its houses are burning. In the gully before the village everything lay under a blue-grey layer of smoke. Farther to the right the fusiliers must be the point of concentration: our panzers were ascending in a long line towards a commanding height. The first few had reached the summit, but the others were still creeping upwards. There were large numbers of Tigers, Panthers and Panzer IVs. Suddenly we heard the familiar sound of approaching Il-2 aircraft and everybody in the open disappeared in a flash! I counted thirty of them flying stolidly overhead. Not without reason did we call them stolid. They headed directly for our panzers, grouped too closely together. The Il-2s lifted their tails and the first bombs fell. Our panzers became lost to sight behind the dirt and dust. One wave after another unloaded their bombs, then banked away for another approach. In between the attacks air-launched rockets were fired: first came the ugly noise of their discharge, and then the explosions. Scarcely had the smoke and dust cleared than the panzers came under more pressure. Apparently the bombs and rockets had had no effect, for none of the panzers was burning. On their last approach the Il-2s used their cannon and MGs. Our Flak and 8.8s fired like crazy. The noise was fearsome! The many little black explosive clouds from the Flak covered almost the whole sky. There! An Il-2 caught fire and fell steeply to ground and disintegrated. Neither of the crew got out. Scarcely had we cleared the skies of these vultures than we became the target of Stalin organs. Nobody had heard them fired, the noise of the aircraft engines and the Flak had drowned out everything else. After a short hiss they rained down! With a single bound I got into a corner inside a house. Standing there, my steel helmet and face took the brunt of everything flying about the room, I was seized by the heat of the blast and shaken, a peculiar humming sound in my

ears. It was very difficult to draw a breath. I closed my eyes and pressed my handkerchief to mouth and nose, leaned against a wall and waited. It was some while before the smoke and dust cleared. We all stood around, coughing and spitting, looking at each other with a dumb expression. ‘Maaaaaan!’ a comrade said, pointing to the rear wall of the house. A rocket had struck the corner of the shed and wall and collapsed them inwards. It was not safe here and I moved into an adjoining room.

Ivan was fairly busy here today with his ‘organs’. The Romanians protecting our left flank received a few and abandoned their positions. They arrived individually and in groups. This was completely incomprehensible. One of our officers sent them back. Our comrades are not so keen and willing. Their officers remained with us and sent only the NCOs and soldiers forward again. The long ridge behind us with the Russian anti-tank gun which destroyed a Tiger is still in their hands. We are now receiving mortar fire from there – big mortars, 12cm calibre! I took out my small leather tobacco pouch from my haversack, rolled a cigarette with trembling, dirt-encrusted fingers and inhaled deeply. I went to the window, its frames hanging loose, the panes shattered on the floor. Suddenly I was aware of an approaching mortar bomb by its fearsome short, sharp hiss: it exploded, a 12cm bomb barely 2m in front of me. I saw its lightning flash at impact, then I bounced back, ducking involuntarily. Earth, wood and metal splinters flew past me and clattered against the wall. ‘Man, you had more than just good luck then!’ I received some tiny splinters of wood in the face which looked like stubble. I wiped my eyes and looked at the wall behind me. Some big splinters had stuck in the plaster! The crossbar of the window just above my head had split: it could easily have gone into my eyes. Outside I could hear some wounded men calling for help. It seemed a good time to abandon this inhospitable spot. With my sub-machine gun on my back, I followed the gutter, always ready to throw myself into cover. In one house I waited out a mortar attack, then crossed the street into a farmhouse full of Romanians due to relieve us that evening. Every third man of them carried a Panzerfaust! We were at the edge of the village. From here I had to cross about 500m of meadow covered on two sides by Ivan, the same open plain which we had had to cross carrying the wounded sergeant. Now the

Romanians went first, with intervals between them and ducking low – but Ivan soon saw them and gave them a shower of mortars. Our command post lay directly ahead. I halted first in the rubble of a new construction in order to ‘get my bearings’. I noticed that at precise intervals of time the Russians fired five mortar bombs, all of which came down at the same place, about 50m ahead of me and the same distance behind our company command post. It was to a certain extent a curtain of fire which the Romanians had to go through. I set off between two of their squads looking towards my goal, the command post.

Ivan kept firing! I heard the next salvo whistling overhead. One leap and then – as I had learned as a recruit – threw myself flat, nose to the ground! I heard the impacts and jumped up, the wind driving yellow-brownish loamy dust and the smell of powder into my face. I ran on blindly, tears streaming from my eyes, then I saw the pile of earth of our command post and steel helmets in the foxholes. ‘Make way! I’m coming in!’ I shouted and jumped into the first hole. Gasping I knelt, took off my steel helmet, wiped the sweat from my eyes and forehead. The pulse hammered in my temples. Accursed heat! Sweat continued to run into my eyes, tasted bitter-salty on my lips. Then I reported my presence to the commander. The best surprise was when one of my messengers said, ‘Unteroffizier, here are your rations and also cigarettes.’ But first I sucked a sour acid drop. Now and again an anti-tank round would whizz above our foxholes and then fall as a dud into the ploughed land far to our rear. These rounds were therefore not HE but armour-piercing. They came over so low, I think that a man standing could have touched them. (Better not!) I found out that our old company troop leader, Unteroffizier Daun, is back with us having been discharged from military hospital in Roman. He had resumed his old post at the direction of the commander. After I brought him up to date on the existing situation here, I reported to my company commander that I was ready to take over my mortars again.

‘Unteroffizier, take over your group again, here you have done things well. When you leave, take care that nothing happens to you on the way. I thank you!’ I saluted and then chose a favourable opportunity to run to my mortars. More and more Romanian troops were coming forward: Ivan was

shooting with MGs and rifles, including the use of much explosive ammunition. These burst in bushes and clumps of grass and caused very grave injuries. I ran, slightly bent forward, sub-machine gun in my hand, entrenching tool in my belt and never stopped. The Romanians threw themselves down every 5m but I kept going like a hare towards an orchard. I had a lot of luck, for Ivan's fire was accurate. Finally out of sight, I dropped to a walking pace and looked around me. Suddenly a voice called, 'Hey, Hans, where are you going? We are here!' I stood still and saw behind a house at the village edge the 'Command Staff' of the 'Boomsers' (i.e. mortars).

'Excellent, I was just looking for you!' I informed the troop leader that I was taking over the group again, and then we sat behind the wall smoking and talking. The formalities of the transfer having been accomplished, we had to take full cover against Ivan's ground-attack aircraft roaring overhead. From the firing position, with binoculars we could make out the long ridge almost directly behind us. The Romanians were attacking there. One of our panzers was firing from close by a *pietz*, an ancient tumulus. We could see Ivans running this way and that behind the *pietz*. We could make them out quite clearly against the bright horizon. Ivan was attempting to destroy the panzer with his 15.2cm artillery. We could see it all, just as though watching a film, as one of my colleagues said. We made our critical observations. But then the 'film' became reality. We heard Stalin organs being fired, and it was always wise to be in full cover whenever that happened. Il-2 aircraft also reappeared, firing rockets from under their wings. One of them exploded directly in front of the house behind which we had our firing positions. The shrapnel slapped into the weatherboarding and trees. A messenger arrived from Battalion with the glad news that ammunition could be collected from the battalion command post.

'Ammunition runners! Get ready!' the platoon commander, Fahnenjunker-Feldwebel Gerber, shouted. 'Rehfeldt, you go with them and ask if we are going to be relieved.'

'Jawohl!'

We set off and it was not long before the ammunition boxes were at our firing position. The messengers at the battalion command post heard our

mortar fire and gave warning mistakenly of Stalin organ fire which had them all running for cover. ‘Rubbish,’ I told them. ‘That is our own mortars.’ And as if in confirmation they began rapid fire far into the Russian positions, but at only well-identified targets. Now we had sufficient ammunition for ‘effective fire’. The ammunition runners came running up with full cases. ‘My dear Otto, I would not like to be where they come down.’ I learned that we were to be relieved by a Romanian battalion that evening: the precise hour would be relayed by messenger. I took my sub-machine gun and went to the firing position, where I found Pan Gerber with the group leaders seated around him. I told him what I had discovered at Battalion and then we received the order to prepare to dismantle the mortars at nightfall. ‘Who knows what shit we’re being sent into this time.’ That was how it always was, from one shit into the next one. It was nothing new for us. *Grossdeutschland* – the Fire Brigade!

The sounds of battle ebbed with the sinking day. Dusk gave way to nightfall and our heavy MG people returned from the front line. We set up a ‘hedgehog’ around our position, stretched out on straw and waited for the messengers. I was lying in the house on a wooden bench and through the window frame could watch the starshell flare up on the main battle line. How good it was to rest! Now and again there would be a round fired and an MG rattled somewhere. Night fell over the battlefield and I fell asleep. ‘Bubi’, the platoon messenger, the eternally smiling, fresh and friendly young Austrian, woke me. He joined us in January 1943. We had become good friends. ‘It’s good, Felbermeyer, make ready – and quietly please!’ The head count was correct and we moved out with large gaps between us to assemble at the old battalion command post. The companies were advised of the situation. We made camp and waited. Towing tractors arrived, field guns rattled, Pak and Flak guns, infantry guns rolled by. Finally we moved out. Ivan appeared to have noticed nothing for he remained quiet. After a while the convoy stopped. ‘Turn back – wrong way! Damn, who is the oaf leading this column?’ Therefore we turned about, went by another route past dreadful stinking corpses, wrecked and crushed Russian anti-tank guns, abandoned positions – to somewhere. We trudged without asking to where and how far, feet burning, steel helmets pushed

back to the neck. A fine rain sprayed us. As we went forward, one after another without a word, the men removed their steel helmets. It was all quiet here! Twelve hours later we made a fresh attack. Attack is the best form of defence.

4–5 June 1944

Now I am the officer reserve. Another NCO, previously with the forward *Tross*, came up to relieve me. At the *Tross* the first thing is to wash, shave and change one's underwear. After that one feels new-born. At night one mostly gets more rest than at the position. Of course one has to make oneself useful. There is much to do. One of the saddest jobs is when the fallen are brought back, men whom a few days earlier one was with at the Front. All pockets are gone through and the private belongings put into an underwear bag. Medals and decorations are packed separately. The *Spiess* then checks it over and writes the report of 'Death for *Führer, Volk und Vaterland*' and finds some suitable words for the parents or wife. Then the ID tag is broken off, the body wrapped in a woollen blanket or groundsheet and roughly sown up and buried at a known feature together with others and a sketch of the location prepared. Depending on the scale of the battle and the number of fallen, the cemeteries may be large or small, but very rarely will a body be buried alone. It is always one of the most difficult and saddest jobs for me. Our aim and intention is to encircle Ivan near the Pruth Marshes and wipe him out. But this requires the courage born of despair.

6–7 June 1944

Despite the sun and heat, we often have a very stormy south-westerly wind here. The whole landscape, trees, bushes, orchards and shacks, are brown with dust. Even in Russia I never knew dust like this. If a salvo of Stalin organs impacts, the sky is soon overcast for half an hour and the sun almost eclipsed.

In the midst of the whipped-up dust, our panzers and assault guns went on the attack almost blind. Ivan attempted, to some extent successfully, to launch a powerful counter-attack north of Zahorna with strong aerial support and forced his way into the locality, but then our brigade of assault

guns reconquered the town although not spot height 181. Unfortunately, in the heavy panzer battle, assault gun commander Oberleutnant Diddo Diddens was seriously wounded, as was another battlegroup commander.

Chapter 11

Out from the Front

8–9 June 1944

We have found out that we are being withdrawn from here again although we do not know to where. Attacks have stopped. From our divisional newspaper *Die Feuerwehr* we learn that in the period from 2 to 7 June 1944 *Grossdeutschland* destroyed seventy enemy tanks and shot down nineteen aircraft. Furthermore forty-five heavy guns and thirty-six anti-tank guns were also destroyed. Our pioneers cleared 10,300 mines. With its seventeenth aircraft shot down, Army Flak *Grossdeutschland* reached 100 such victories in twelve months. Our assault guns destroyed fifteen tanks and took ninety prisoners. Proud successes! Meanwhile Romanian units are arriving to relieve us.

13 June 1944

Our whole division is camped south of the Jassy–Targui Frumosoa Rollbahn in scrub and woodland, but we are not going to stay here. We are going to have a proper period of rest. From the radio we heard of the heavy fighting on the Invasion Front in Normandy. We very much hope that the Front there will hold.

15 June 1944

We have driven about 100km to the south, destination unknown, but it will be a quiet place of rest. Our division received special mention in the Wehrmacht communiqué:

. . . in the fighting in the Jassy area, German and Romanian troops commanded by Romanian Cavalry General Racovit and General of Panzer Troops von Knobelsdorff, with the outstanding participation of Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland*, well supported by German and Romanian bomber and groundattack aircraft, have ejected the Bolsheviks from deeply layered, bitterly defended positions and thereby significantly improved our own positions.

16 June 1944

We are lying here well-hidden in the woods. After all the strain of the last weeks we are to rest and recuperate here. On the first evening we had a company evening ‘with all the Pi-Pa-Po’ as our Berliner comrades say. Naturally we also have personal care, weapons cleaning and a proper roster of watches. Today is a regimental celebration. Our former company commander has been made battalion commander. He invited us for a small drinking session. The evening passed very quietly and harmoniously. We remembered our fallen comrades, also the many in various military hospitals. Then: ‘Things must continue until *Endsieg!*’ As I lay awake in my tent later, wondering about the future, I thought of German troops in the Caucasus in 1942, and the bitter end of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The fronts receded everywhere. A lot is spoken and written about the ‘vengeance weapons’. From the Invasion we know about the V-1 and V-2. We are hoping for other new weapons which will make it possible for us to spike the guns of the superior numbers of our enemies. What else can we soldiers do? The Allies have stated clearly: ‘The only terms are unconditional surrender!’ After the many hard years of war and the dreadful losses, we are now supposed to hand ourselves over to the Allies and submit to whatever it pleases them to hand out? That cannot be. The new weapons will come, therefore we must hold out until these are available and decisive for the outcome of the war. Don’t we owe that to the fallen? These are the thoughts which run through my head. The night passed with no alarm or shooting.

Next morning was beautifully sunny and during the course of the day we were told of the big regimental festivities planned for the evening. We all

helped industriously and enthusiastically with the preparations! We actually swept the forest floor! A stage was erected and deep holes dug along each of its four sides. The places for the individual companies were marked out and bushes cut down and arranged for decoration.

The festivities began! We had no idea of the artists to be found in our regiment: opera singers, artistes and acrobats, amateur actors – all soldiers of the regiment. Thus a colourful programme was on offer to which we responded with fervent applause. Our General Hasso von Manteuffel, regimental commander Oberst Lorenz and the rest of the ‘Admiralty’ were present. Our regimental band played wonderfully with a mixture of light music, popular hits and military marches. Naturally there was plenty to drink. Our canteen suppliers did us proud. The mood improved hour by hour.

At midnight there arose a spontaneous call for our general to be seen amongst us. The ‘noble gentlemen’ had a private box in a kind of tabernacle made up of leaves (Feast of Tabernacles). He came at once and spoke to us in a friendly manner, thanking us for our brave commitment and remembering our fallen and our comrades lying wounded in the military hospitals. ‘But Grenadiers, now we must eat and drink heartily and look to the future with optimism. I hope you all greatly enjoy this evening and wish you all *Soldatenglück*.’ This inspired us and we responded with a vociferous ‘Hurrah!’ Then the band played a flourish and the bandleader presented his baton to our general for him to conduct our *Grossdeutschland Präsentiermarsch!* At its conclusion he was seized by several hefty grenadiers, seated upon their shoulders and then carried back to his ‘leafy tabernacle’. Our regimental commander Oberst Lorenz had to go through the same procedure but was not found to have the same ability with the conductor’s baton. It was the most unique occasion of its size with the divisional and regimental commanders in all my war service, first rate and magnificent, and good for ears accustomed to the noises of the Front. Unfortunately it remained unique, for in the months which followed with all their desperate losing battles the thing lost its point.

At the end, flares of all colours rose up into the night sky in a grand pyrotechnic display followed by balled charges, dug into the four deep

holes during the morning by our pioneers, being set off in a big explosion. As the infantry say, it was an ‘elephantine’ conclusion to the event.

Report on this event from our Front newspaper *Die Feuerwehr*, 24–25 July 1944

Romania, Vaslui/Bacau. We are resting in woodland after the heavy defensive fighting in the Carpathian foothills near Jassy and Roman. Either side of the Pruth fronts, the units of the division are celebrating joyful ‘hours of festivity’. We had also prepared everything. Our ‘new general’ Hasso von Manteuffel had arrived. What had we not had to achieve in recent weeks and days in heavy fighting! Overnight we made the big leap across that ‘Fire Brigade Road’ of Jassy – Targul – Frumos. Overnight we left the land of the Russian ‘Black Pig’ heavy gun, the pitted Pruth-Pietz [small tumuli in the plains we called ‘Pieze’], the kilometres of countless counter-attacks. Also overnight ‘the beards fell from Tautesti and Moimesti, soaked the lice of Zahorna and Hortesti.’ Spirited away from the plains the bombers and ‘Rotzer’ [Il-2 ground-attack aircraft], hidden in the fresh green of a Moldau wood in which special detachments and holiday surprises shot up like mushrooms from the ground. The commanders closed their maps, the adjutants struck out from their notebooks the names of artillery barrages, aiming points and stocks of ammunition, luxuriated in the blue fug of good cigars and stared deeply into a bottle of schnapps. First we had a rainy prelude. A downpour washed away the last reminders of battle from us grenadiers. When the announced guests arrived they were not met by Panzerfaust and hand grenade, nor had they to dig a trench or throw themselves down in the mud. They experienced another side to their grenadiers. The merriest and by no means the worst. The colourful troupe proved at the thickly populated edges of the woods that they could also be comedians, multi-talented actors who knew how to improvise, who rejoiced and bustled doing the rounds with their home-made lanterns. The ‘Grenadiers’ had their own parade of soloists to accompany the tempo and rhythms of

divisional music. The man, who goes through fire for his grenadiers, stands alongside them by word and deed, joins them in their trenches in grave hours and crosses their foremost paths in anti-tank hunts, was also present this time when gaiety and merriment were to be sought. Our general! He sat in the midst of the youngest men, sang and enjoyed their company. And when the general and his grenadiers exchanged old and new experiences of the Front in the moonlight of the Moldau night and under the multicoloured incandescent lamps of this atmospheric festival, and when finally ‘Masuhr’s Fanfare’ – the general swung the baton – trumpeted the song of the truest Hussar for the cavalryman von Manteuffel, that was the highpoint! Many hundred voices shouted ‘Hurrah!’ and then five stalwart grenadiers seized the general and carried him away shoulder-high across the field of festivities to the strains of the old cavalry march. An old friendship was closer and a Front comradeship sealed more firmly.

20–23 June 1944

Nothing was celebrated in our woodland bivouac. We set up a ‘close combat road’ and when it was ready, we practised attacking, breaking through, rolling up enemy trenches and finally making ready to defend. It was all very lifelike and occasionally live rounds were fired. We of the heavy MG Company with mortars, the light infantry guns (7.5cm), MGs and anti-tank guns especially are grouped as centres of concentrated effort. Here we have an enormous amount of firepower. We also repeatedly practised attacks against bunkers, received instruction in firing the Panzerfaust, now easier to handle and less dangerous for the ‘tank destroyer’ than the hollow-charge limpet mine, which requires the soldier to go directly to the tank and attach it magnetically to the hull. I have only tried it once personally. I was crawling up to a stationary T-34 through tall grass when it was hit by an anti-tank round with a deafening explosion. The shell had passed close overhead and I could easily have been wounded by the shrapnel. After that I never tried it again.

In the evenings I sat by the telegraph receiver, which also functions as a radio, hearing reports about the fighting on the Invasion Front and the

attacks by Anglo-American bombers on Reich territory. The situation does not look rosy. Where are the new weapons we have been promised? Here with us not much has been improved. The light infantry guns have been given a longer barrel and are now called infantry anti-tank guns. The ammunition is better and can destroy a tank. Our armoured vehicles, assault guns, panzers and other armoured tracked vehicles have been improved. Besides the well-known but often unreliable in action German sub-machine gun (the magazine could buckle when throwing oneself down) there is now a much better *Sturmgewehr* (assault rifle) with a curved magazine. Of miracle weapons there is still no sign! But in our situation, one does not give up hope so easily.

Constant artillery and shooting practice has been instituted for us. We cannot do the former often enough! One day some high-ranking Romanian officers appeared and we were told that we were to demonstrate an attack on our practice trenches and positions following all the rules of the art of war. It had to be realistic and live rounds were to be used. We set up our mortar firing positions in clearings in the woods, the observation post high in a tree with a telephone line to the mortars. The exact plan of attack was explained to us prior to the commencement. The heavy weapons to be used were the new 7.5cm infantry anti-tank gun, 2cm Flak and normal anti-tank guns, besides these our heavy 15cm infantry guns. There was also the introduction of the new 'Goliath', a remote-controlled, tracked explosives carrier (about 1.5m long, 80cm high and 75cm wide) driven through the trench system to one of the bunkers where the explosion would occur. That would be the high point and conclusion of the display. After the initial barrage the infantry would advance. We were given the official plan. Preparatory firing of the previously-mentioned weapons, immediate infantry attack. Our orders read: 'All heavy weapons to be fired simultaneously.' Because our mortar bombs took twenty seconds to impact we needed to fire twenty-five seconds before the other heavy weapons so that all projectiles would impact at the same time on the 'enemy'. However, the order was repeated, watches to be synchronized to fire simultaneously. This was madness. Our advancing infantry could be hit by our falling mortar bombs, which had a certain degree of scatter. All argument proved

useless, everybody had to fire at the same time. Orders are orders. The spectators, Romanian and German officers, had gathered at the edge of the woods close by our observation post in a tall tree and through binoculars were watching the ‘enemy trenches’ to be conquered. The command came, ‘Fire at will!’ We fired as quickly as we possibly could. Then what we had feared would happen, happened! The fire of the other weapons at the forward trenches was accurate and the infantry attacked. Sub-machine guns and MGs chattered. As they were on the point of breaking into the leading trenches with a loud ‘Hurrah!’, our mortar bombs, fired indirectly with a twenty-second flight time, arrived. The shocked infantry took full cover, the cries of ‘Hurrah!’ sounded fairly miserable. They allowed the first salvo to ‘unfold’ over the trenches. The men lay a bare 15cm before the first trench and the shrapnel flew their way! As per combat routine the men had gone into cover and, with a sigh of relief, we saw all of the infantry jump up as soon as the dust and smoke had cleared and conquer the trenches with a loud ‘Hurrah!’ Two or three of them were more or less seriously wounded. This was unnecessary. When excited adjutants put us on the spot with a threatening demeanour, we were able to refute all accusations and point to the real ‘culprits’. At that the gentlemen turned away. To conclude the demonstration the ‘Goliath’ exploded very convincingly alongside a bunker. All’s well that ends well. The embarrassing incident was not investigated. We had the impression that after this presentation, the Romanians believed in *Endsieg* again!

3 July 1944

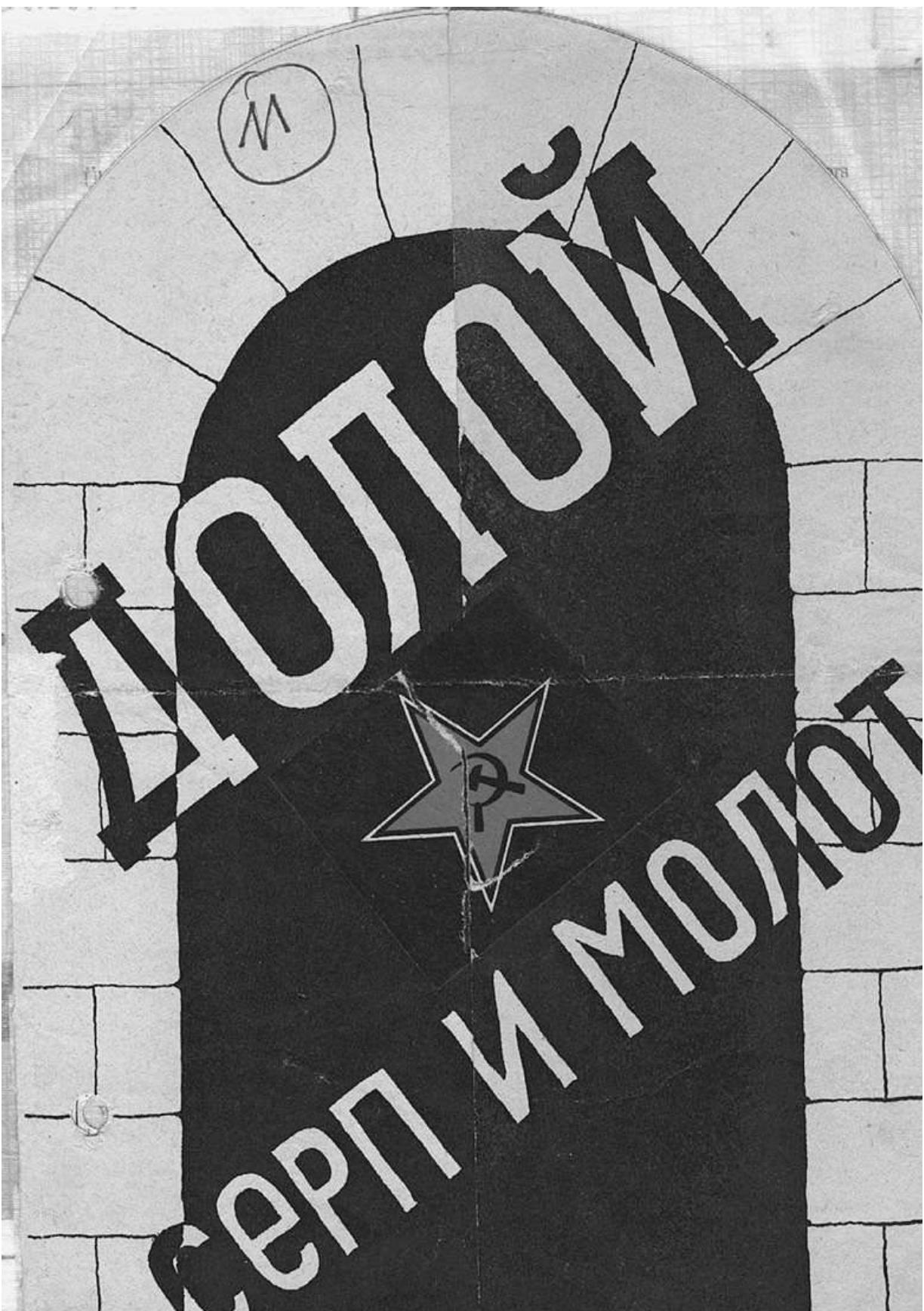
The weather is glorious, the Carpathian mountain scenery to the west only a few kilometres away wonderful to be seen. The region is free of the enemy. Yesterday a so-called Front Theatre/Troop Welfare group visited us and we were entertained with two hours of gaiety, music and pretty girls! We laughed a lot, which did us good! I received a letter from comrade Jupp Dörfler from a military hospital in the ‘G.G.’ [General Government: Poland]. He wrote that he is recovering well from his wound. Here we had a heavy storm and much rain today. Our division’s woodland camp lies in the triangle east of Bacau/ Vaslui, 100km south of Jassy.

25 July 1944

We are preparing to move out. The vehicles are being loaded with fighting equipment, our morale is good! We know neither where we will be bound nor what the situation is at the Front. Where next will we have to play fire brigade? Unfortunately the grapes do not ripen here until later in the year. As I look at this wonderful scenery, I am thinking I might come back here after the war. But first we have to win it. Meanwhile we have received extensive information regarding the criminal attempt to kill our Führer. It is totally incomprehensible that German officers would do such a thing. It reminds me of the 'stab in the back' legend after the First World War. For us soldiers, especially the officers, it gives us no pleasure to be forced to use the 'Hitler salute' with outstretched right arm. (I believe that Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring the ordered it.) In the first week it led to a lot of confusion!

25–26 July 1944

We have had the benefit of a very pleasant and peaceful time without coming into contact with the enemy. But now it is at an end. We have had a very hard period of retraining which cost nobody his life! Soon we heard the order: 'Make ready! Load vehicles for combat, leave nothing behind. Report when ready to move!'





German propaganda leaflet, costly and colourful.

Пропуск действителен для неограниченного количества переходящих на сторону германских войск командиров и бойцов РККА.

ПРОПУСК

Пред'явитель сего, не желая бессмысленного кровопролития за интересы жидов и комиссаров, оставляет побежденную Красную Армию и переходит на сторону Германских Вооруженных Сил. Немецкие офицеры и солдаты окажут перешедшему хороший прием, накормят его и устроят на работу.

(Перевод на немецкий язык смотри рядом)

Passierschein

Vorzeiger dieses wünscht kein sinnloses Blutbad im Interesse der Juden und Kommissare. Er verläßt die geschlagene Rote Armee und geht auf die Seite der deutschen Wehrmacht über. Die deutschen Offiziere und Soldaten werden den Überläufer gut behandeln, ihn verpflegen und für Beschäftigung sorgen

Der Passierschein gilt für eine unbeschränkte Anzahl von Offizieren und Soldaten der Roten Armee, die zur deutschen Wehrmacht übergehen





The leaflet contains a 'safe conduct' for defectors to pass to the German side.



The defector is promised a 'Safe World' with good food and peace. For most defectors this did not correspond to the reality.

Der deutsche Soldat hat es gut... ①



Hitler denkt für ihn



Göring isst für ihn



Ley trinkt für ihn



Goebbels spricht für ihn



Himmler sorgt dafür,
daß seine Frau nicht



Ihm selbst bleibt nichts
übrig als an der Front



'The German soldier has it good. Hitler thinks for him. Göring eats for him. Ley drinks for him. Goebbels speaks for him. Himmler ensures that his wife does not remain childless. Nothing more remains for himself than to go under at the Front.' A Russian leaflet.

Bis zu den Kompanien verteilen!

(10)

Merkblatt für die Truppe

Wie behandeln wir Überläufer?

„Die ansteigende Zahl der Überläufer zeigt, daß der einsichtige russische Soldat nicht mehr gewillt ist, sich sinnlos für das sowjetische Regime zu opfern.“ Mit dieser Feststellung beginnt ein Befehl des OKH, der vom Chef des Generalstabes des Heeres im Auftrage des Führers erlassen und unterzeichnet worden ist. Er trägt die Bezeichnung „Grundlegender Befehl Nr. 13 (Behandlung von Überläufern)“ und das Datum des 20. April 1943. Durch diesen Befehl wird von höchster Stelle einem jeden deutschen Soldaten ein einheitlich geregeltes Verhalten gegenüber den russischen Überläufern vorgeschrieben. Der Befehl wird ebenfalls in russischer Übersetzung als Flugblatt in vielen Millionen Exemplaren über den feindlichen Stellungen abgeworfen, so daß nun auch der russische Soldat, der zu uns übertragen will, genau weiß, in welcher Weise er bei uns aufgenommen werden wird. Dies verpflichtet uns doppelt zu einer genauen Befolgung der in dem Befehl erlassenen Weisungen. Wie lauten diese Weisungen?

Überläufer ist danach „**jeder Angehörige der Roten Armee (Offizier, Polit-Kommissar, Jfz. oder Mann), der sich nach Lösung aus dem eigenen Truppenverband einzeln oder in Gruppen freiwillig in Gefangenschaft begibt**“. Für den Fall, daß sich ein Zweifel erhebt, ob diese Definition auf den in unsere Hand gekommenen russischen Soldaten zutrifft, ist dem Betreffenden dennoch die Überläufereigenschaft anzuerkennen. Dieser Punkt ist wichtig, er muß stets beachtet und weitherzig ausgelegt werden.

Wichtig ist nun, daß dem Überläufer sofort ein Ausweis auszustellen ist. Der Befehl schreibt ein Muster hierfür vor, so daß nach diesem Muster Ausweise von der Truppe hergestellt werden können. Er bemerkt jedoch ausdrücklich, daß dort, wo solche vorgeschriebenen Ausweise nicht oder noch nicht vorhanden sind, auch eine „einfachste Zettelnotiz“ oder der Sichtvermerk eines deutschen Soldaten mit dessen Dienstgrad, Name und Feldpostnummer auf dem vom Überläufer mitgebrachten „Passierschein“ genügt. Der Frontsoldat wird sich also den „Passierschein“ des russischen Überläufers zeigen lassen und auf ihm dann seinen eigenen Namen, Dienstgrad und seine Feldpostnummer aufschreiben. Mit diesem Ausweis wird der Überläufer nach rückwärts geschickt.

Der Befehl schreibt dann genau die Behandlung vor, die dem Überläufer zu teil werden muß. Er sagt in dieser Beziehung wörtlich:

„Überläufer sind von anderen Kriegsgefangenen sofort abzusondern und besser unterzubringen. Die Belassung von Geldmitteln, Wertsachen, Bekleidung, Dienstgradabzeichen, Ehrenzeichen ist selbstverständlich. Überläufer sind sofort aus Truppenbeständen reichlich zu versorgen. Sie sind ferner sofort aus der Zone der Feindeinwirkung zu entfernen und — soweit möglich, mit Fahrtgelegenheit (Leerkolonnen), nicht im Fußmarsch — schnellstens nach rückwärts, unmittelbar in die

An instructional pamphlet for the German forces on 'How we treat defectors'. After the OKH order of 20 April 1943, Russians are no longer referred to as 'sub-humans' but as partners in the struggle against Bolshevism.

Überläuferauffanglager der AOK abzutransportieren. Transportführer sind besonders auszuwählen, Kranken und Verwundeten ist bevorzugt ärztliche Hilfe zu gewähren.

Anschließend regelt der Befehl die Unterbringung und Behandlung der Überläufer in den für sie besonders eingerichteten Auffanglagern. Spätestens hier ist der behelfsmäßige Ausweis, den der Überläufer durch eine Zettelnotiz oder einen Sichtvermerk auf dem „Passierschein“ in der HKL erhalten hat, gegen einen ordnungsmäßigen Ausweis einzutauschen. Gleichzeitig hat eine entsprechende Eintragung in sein Soldbuch unter Beifügung des Dienststempels zu erfolgen. Im Auffanglager werden die Überläufer in geeigneten Räumen (Heizung, Stroh, Decken usw.) bevorzugt untergebracht. Es muß eine Entlausungs- und Waschgelegenheit vorhanden sein, die Verpflegung hat nach Sätzen der Schwerarbeiter zu erfolgen, wobei auch, je nach den örtlichen Verhältnissen, zusätzliche Vergünstigungen (z. B. Rauchwaren) gewährt werden können, schadhafte Bekleidung ist bevorzugt zu ersetzen. Sehr bedeutsam ist dann folgende Vorschrift:

„Eine Beschäftigung der Überläufer außerhalb des üblichen Lagerdienstes findet in den ersten Tagen nach ihrem Eintreffen nicht statt. Innerhalb dieser Zeit hat der Überläufer die Möglichkeit, sich entweder für einen Eintritt in einen auf unserer Seite kämpfenden russischen, ukrainischen, tatarischen usw. Verband oder auch für den freiwilligen Arbeitseinsatz im Raum der befreiten Ostgebiete zu entscheiden.“

Weitere Ziffern des Befehls regeln die Unterbringung und Behandlung der Überläufer im Offiziersrang sowie ihre geistige Betreuung. Beachtenswert ist dann noch der Schlussatz, wonach „den Überläufern nach Kriegsschluß sichere Rückkehr in die Heimat garantiert wird“. Hierauf kann der deutsche Soldat, der den Überläufer in der HKL in Empfang nimmt, falls er gefragt wird, sofort hinweisen.

Es ist nun die Pflicht eines jeden Ostkämpfers, sich diese Anweisungen nicht nur genau einzuprägen, sondern auch nach ihnen zu handeln. Denn abgesehen davon, daß jeder deutsche Soldat einen ihm erteilten Befehl selbstverständlich straff und genau ausführt, wäre in diesem Falle jeder Verstoß gegen die Weisungen des OKH besonders kurzsichtig und schädlich. Überläufer geben uns nämlich in zahllosen Fällen die Möglichkeit, eigenes Blut zu sparen. Ihre freiwilligen Aussagen unterrichten uns über die Feindlage, über die wir uns sonst durch gewaltsame Erkundung Klarheit verschaffen müßten. Ferner ist ihre Bereitwilligkeit zu begrüßen und zu fördern, mit der sie entweder nützliche Arbeit beim Wiederaufbau ihrer, gegenwärtig von uns besetzten Heimat leisten, oder aber in den Reihen der ständig wachsenden landeseigenen Verbände mit uns gegen den Bolszewismus kämpfen wollen. Der Befehl des OKH stellt daher auch einleitend fest, daß „alle russischen Soldaten, die mit der ehrlichen Absicht, den Kampf einzustellen, überlaufen, als Gegner des sowjetischen Regimes anzusehen sind“.

Jenseits der HKL seufzen und leiden noch viele Millionen Russen, unter der bolschewistischen Knute. Jeder, der von ihnen zu uns kommt, will dieser Terrorherrschaft entrinnen, er hofft auf ein besseres Leben, ist ein Gegner des Bolszewismus, und aus diesem Grunde unser natürlicher Bundesgenosse. Handeln wir danach! Wir erblicken in jedem Überläufer einen Mitstreiter in unserem Kampf gegen den östlichen Todfeind! Der Befehl des OKH vom 20. April zeigt uns, wie wir uns dabei zu verhalten haben.

Eh.

Erich Weinert

NACH NEUN JAHREN

Zum 30. Januar

Das war ein Getrommel und ein Geschrei
Vom „tausendjährigen Reiche“.
Und noch ist das erste Jahrzehnt nicht vorbei,
Da krachts in der hohlen Eichel

Was hat er aus euch und Deutschland gemacht,
Den ihr als Führer bewundert?
Nur Schande hat er uns eingebracht
Und Deutschlands Ansehn verplundert.

Er machte Europa zum Trümmerfeld,
Hat ganze Völker geschlachtet.
Und nie war Deutschland in aller Welt
So tief verhaßt und verachtet.

Es wurde das deutsche Volk wie nie
Getreten, geschröpf, geplündert
Durch seine Banditengalerie.
Und niemand hat es verhindert.

Das Blut von Millionen Deutschen dampft!
Schon naht die Vergeltungsstunde.
Doch wenn ihr nicht diese Halunken zerstampft,
Geht Deutschland ehrlos zugrunde!

Hitler heißt Krieg und Verwesungsgestank!—
Hitler heißt Deutschlands Untergang
Und Schande und neue Ketten!
Die einzige Rettung, die es gibt,
Für jeden, der seine Heimat liebt:
Deutschland vor Hitler zu retten!

Deutsche Soldaten! Allen, die sich
der Roten Armee überlassen,
wird garantiert: das Leben, gute
Behandlung und die Heimkehr nach
Kriegsende.

Немецкие солдаты! Вам, кто
сдастся в плен Красной Армии,
обеспечена жизнь, хорошее обра-
щение и возвращение на родину
после войны.



'After Nine Years. On 30 January.' This leaflet was taken from Germans who had defected to the Russians, or German Communists in exile.

(2)

ДОВОЛЬНО УБИВАТЬ ДРУГИХ!

К НАМ, ТОВАРИЩИ!

**ПЕРЕХОДИТЕ
С ЭТИМ ПРОПУСКОМ
ЧЕРЕЗ ФРОНТ**

Немецкие солдаты! Всем, кто перейдет на сторону Красной Армии, обеспечена жизнь, хорошее обращение и возвращение на родину после войны.

ПЕРЕХОДИТЕ К НАМ!

СПЛАСАЙТЕ СВОЮ ЖИЗНЬ!

HÖRT AUF MIT DEM MORDEN!

KAMERADEN, ZU UNSI

**GEHT MIT DIESEM
PASSIERSCHEIN
DURCH DIE FRONT**

Deutsche Soldaten! Allen, die auf die Seite der Roten Armee übergehen, wird garantiert: das Leben, gute Behandlung und die Heimkehr nach Kriegsende.

RETTET EUER LEBEN!

KOMMT ZU UNSI



A simple leaflet inviting Germans to defect to the Russian side. Around the borders: 'Stop the murders! Comrades to us! Save your life! Come to us!' Message: 'Use this safe conduct to come through the front. German soldiers! Everybody who comes over to the side of the Red Army is guaranteed: life, good treatment and a return home after the war.'

Lesen und weitergeben!

Als wir zum Kampfe zogen ...

Als wir zum Kampfe zogen,
Wir waren unser drei:
Ein Schütze und ein Jäger
Und ich, der Fahnenträger
Von der Standarte 3.

Und als wir weiterzogen,
Wir waren nur noch zwei:
Der Überländer Jäger –
Und ich, der Fahnenträger
Von der Standarte 3.

Und als wir weiterzogen,
War ich nur noch dabei,
Kein Schütze und kein Jäger,
Nur ich, der Fahnenträger
Von der Standarte 3.

Das Lied ist schon zu Ende:
Von der Standarte 3
Stand nur noch eine lange
Verkohlte Fahnenstange,
Doch keiner sang dabei.

KRIEG GEGEN SOWJETRUSSLAND:

1. Woche:
300 000 Mann Verluste

2. Woche:
700 000 Mann Verluste

3. Woche:
1 000 000 Mann Verluste

4. Woche:
1 500 000 Mann Verluste

Even if the German losses in the Russian campaign were very high, the figures here are hugely exaggerated.



An impressive sketch to show German soldiers 'the real culprit'. It is obvious, however, that both dictators sacrificed their men ruthlessly.

LESEN UND WEITERGEBEN!

DEUTSCHE SOLDATEN!

Der Menschenfresser Hitler hat euch an die Ostfront in den Krieg gegen Sowjetrussland geschickt. Was habt ihr in dieser kurzen Zeit des Krieges gesehen?

BERGE VON LEICHEN DEUTSCHER SOLDATEN BEDECKEN DEN WEG, DEN IHR GEGANGEN SEID. ÜBER ANDERTHALB MILLIONEN DEUTSCHER HABEN UNTER DEN SCHLÄGEN DER ROTEN ARMEE IHREN TOD GEFUNDEN.

Wofür haben sie ihr Leben gelassen? Warum fährt ihr fort, euch der Gefahr auszusetzen, euer Leben durch russische Kugeln, Bomben und Geschosse zu verlieren?

Braucht *ihr* denn diesen Krieg? Verspricht er *euch* irgendwelchen Gewinn?

Nein. Euch persönlich bringt dieser Krieg nur Tod und Verderben. **NUR DIE DEUTSCHEN KAPITALISTEN UND GUTSHERREN ZIEHEN GEWINSTE AUS DIESEM KRIEG. AN EUREM BLUT VERDIENEN SIE MILLIONEN REICHSMARK.**

An eurem Blut und dem Blut eurer Angehörigen hat Hitler viele Millionen verdient. Die Tatsache, dass Göring, Goebbels und die ganze Bande internationaler Verbrecher, die Hitler umgeben, zu Millionären geworden sind, beruht auf den Knochen der deutschen Soldaten. Das Blut deutscher Soldaten sickert durch die Wände des prächtigen Schlosses, das sich Ley im vorigen Jahre für hunderttausend Mark bauen liess.

SIE PROFITIEREN ALSO DURCH DIESEN KRIEG, ER BRINGT IHNEN NEUE MILLIONEN MARK. EUCH KANN ER NUR EIN HÖLZERNES KREUZ AM STRASSENGRABEN BRINGEN.

Was für einen Ausweg gibt es denn hier? Nur einen Ausweg:

Geht entschiedener auf die Seite der Roten Armee über!

Ihr werdet in Sowjetrussland anständig empfangen. Euer Leben wird durch nichts mehr gefährdet sein. Der Krieg wird schneller ein Ende nehmen und ihr könnt dann gesund nach Hause zurückkehren.

Lüge!

The Russian promises regarding the treatment of defectors were often lies. Beside the word 'Lüge' in the margin, the promise reads: 'You will be given a decent reception in Soviet Russia. Your life will no longer be endangered by anything. The war will end sooner and you will then be able to return home safely.'

ER VERSUCHTE DEN DNJEPR
ZU UEBERSCHREITEN!



'He tried to cross the Dnieper!' A gruesome picture with text of a dead German soldier 'killed by the Red Air Force while attempting to cross . . . he drifted to the reed banks where the fish found him good eating.' Russian leaflet.

LESEN UND WEITERGEBEN!

Deutsche Soldaten!

Dies ist alles, was von dem deutschen Soldaten übrig geblieben ist, der es wagte, den Dnjepr zu überschreiten.

Tausende und aber tausende seiner Kameraden sind in den schnellen Fluten des Dnjeprs umgekommen.

Er wurde von der Roten Luftwaffe während des Flussüberschreitens vernichtet. Zusammen mit den verbrannten Stücken der Pontonbrücke wurde er von den Wellen ans stille, mit Rohr bewachsene Ufer getrieben.

Die Fische fanden an ihm eine reiche Speise.

Verkohlt, halb von den Fischen aufgefressen, stellt er ein Bild des Schreckens dar. Mit Grauen blickt man auf diesen Menschenkörper, der noch vor kurzem lebte.

DEUTSCHE SOLDATEN!

Wollt ihr das Schicksal eures Landsmanns teilen?

Jeder, der es wagen sollte, den Dnjepr zu überschreiten, wird vernichtet werden!

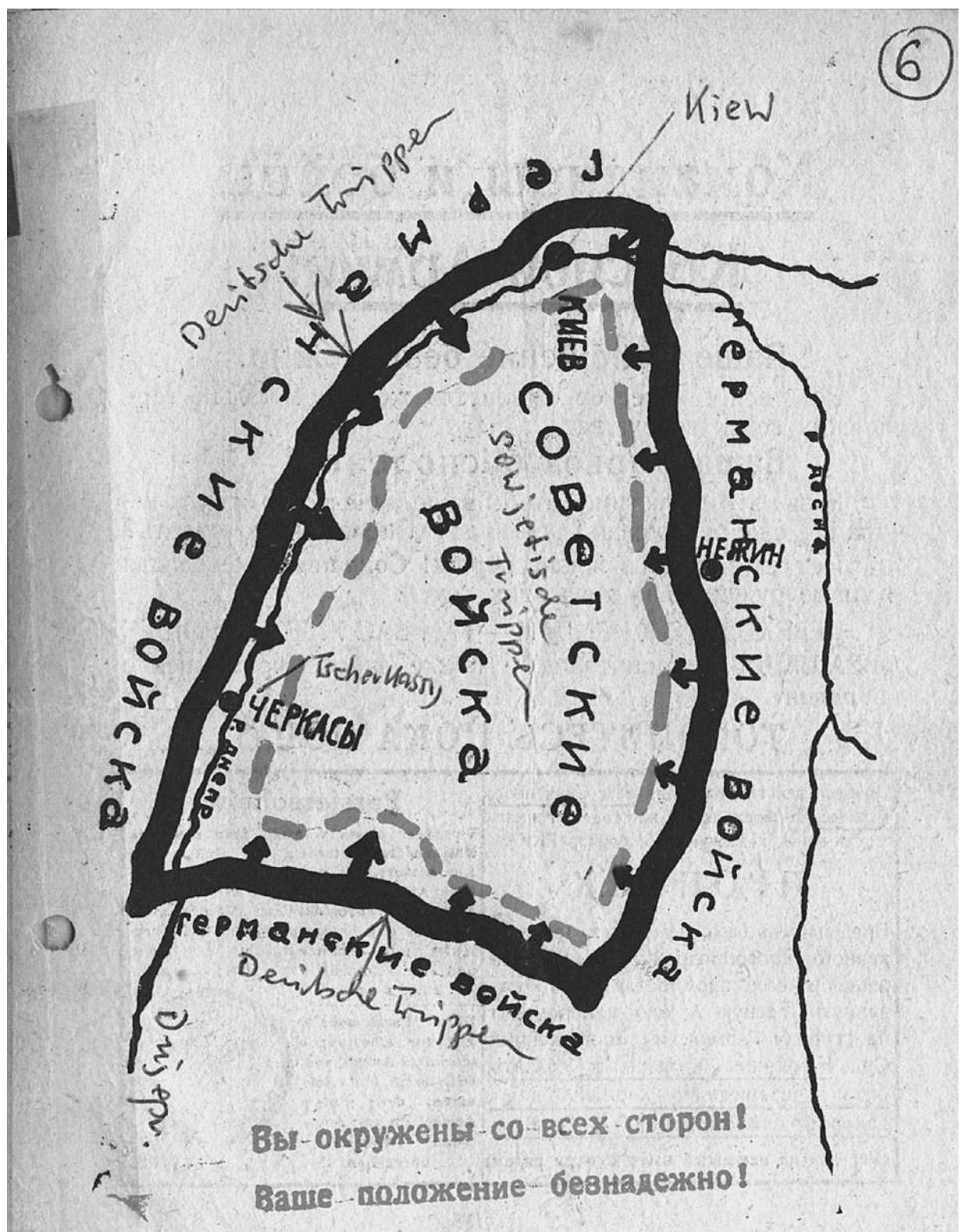
Folgt nicht dem Beispiel eurer toten Kameraden!

**ERHALTET EUER LEBEN FUER EURE FRAUEN,
FUER EURE KINDER!**

**GEHT AUF DIE SEITE DER ROTEN ARMEE UEBER!
NACH DEM KRIEGE KOENNT IHR HEIL UND GESUND
NACH HAUSE ZURUECKKEHREN.**

DIESES FLUGBLATT DIENT ALS PASSIERSCHEIN
ZUM UEBERGANG AUF DIE SEITE DER ROTEN ARMEE.
ЭТА ЛИСТОВКА СЛУЖИТ ПРОПУСКОМ
ДЛЯ ПЕРЕХОДА НА СТОРОНУ
КРАСНОЙ АРМИИ.

(6)



Командиры и бойцы

Красной Армии!

Ваше положение безнадежно.

Все теснее и теснее сжимается железное кольцо германских войск вокруг вас.

Ваша борьба бесполезна!

Разве это допустимо, чтобы ваше начальство из упрямства все еще беспощадно гнало вас на неизбежную смерть?

Нет — вам ваша жизнь дорога! Сохраните же ее для лучшего будущего и для ваших семей.

ПЕРЕХОДИТЕ К НЕМЦАМ — ТАМ ВАС ЖДЕТ ХОРОШЕЕ ОБРАЩЕНИЕ и пропитание, а также скорое возвращение на родину.

ТОРОПИТЕСЬ ПОКА ПОРА!

Пропуск действителен для неограниченного количества переходящих на сторону германских войск командиров и бойцов РККА.

ПРОПУСК

Предъявитель сего, не желая бессмысленного кровопролития за интересы жидов и комиссаров, оставляет побежденную Красную Армию и переходит на сторону Германских Вооруженных Сил. Немецкие офицеры и солдаты окажут перешедшему хороший прием, накормят его и устроят на работу.

(Перевод на немецкий язык смотри рядом)

Passierschein

Verzeiger dieses wünscht kein sinnloses Blutbad im Interesse der Juden und Kommissare. Er verläßt die geschlagene Rote Armee und geht auf die Seite der deutschen Wehrmacht über. Die deutschen Offiziere und Soldaten werden den Überläufer gut behandeln, ihn verpflegen und für Beschäftigung sorgen

Der Passierschein gilt für eine unbeschränkte Anzahl von Offizieren und Soldaten der Roten Armee, die zur deutschen Wehrmacht übergehen



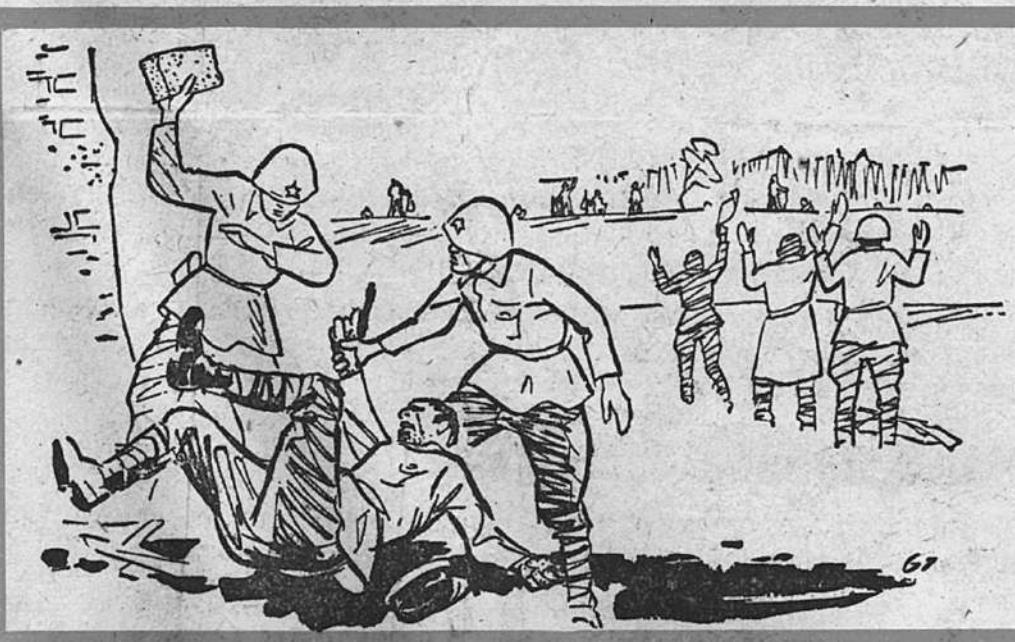
151 RA

Over 600,000 Russians were taken prisoner there. A German pamphlet with safe conduct section for 'an unlimited number of officers and men of the Red Army to cross over to the Wehrmacht'.

Бей жида - политрука, рожа просит кирпича!



Комисары и политруки принуждают вас
к бессмысленному сопротивлению.



Гоните комисаров и переходите к немцам.

Переходите к немцам пользуясь либо лозунгом:



This German leaflet urges Russian soldiers to kill their commissars and defect.

Пропуск действителен для неограниченного количества переходящих на сторону германских войск командиров и бойцов РККА.

ПРОПУСК

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Командиры и бойцы Красной Армии!

Ваше положение безнадежно.

Все теснее и теснее сжимается железное кольцо германских войск вокруг вас.

Вам не хватает боеприпасов, снабжения и продовольствия, ваши правители и вожди ни к чему не способны, бегут и оставляют вас на произвол судьбы.

Многих из вас комвласть до сих пор угнетала и лишала всех прав, теперь же она пользуется вами для защиты своего режима.

Ваша борьба бесполезна!

Разве это допустимо, чтобы ваше начальство из упрямства все еще беспощадно гнало вас на неизбежную смерть?

Нет – вам ваша жизнь дорога! Сохраните же ее для лучшего будущего и для ваших семей.

ПЕРЕХОДИТЕ К НЕМЦАМ – ТАМ ВАС ЖДЕТ ХОРОШЕЕ ОБРАЩЕНИЕ и пропитание, а также скорое возвращение на **полину**.

Родину.

Торопитесь!

Немцы в занятых ими областях уже приступают к разрешению земельного вопроса.

Красноармейцы, не опоздайте,
иначе вы останетесь без земли!

The commissars were much feared and hated by Russian troops for ruthlessly forcing their countrymen into German fire.



A Russian propaganda postcard depicting a train derailed by partisans.



A Russian tank rolls victoriously over German panzers towards victory.

Chapter 12

On the Way to East Prussia

26 July 1944

Today a last roll-call, then we mounted up and drove off. Whenever we are transferred, the wildest rumours circulate. Are we going to Italy? Or to France and the Invasion Front? We have long been accustomed to be ‘the Fire Brigade of the Eastern Front’. That prompts many to give free rein to fantasies. Various loading stations have been mentioned. We drove through the wildly beautiful Bistrita Valley via Gura Humorului – Dorna – Vatra to Jakobeni. There we were loaded aboard a transporter train. It had no passenger coaches and so we set up tents between the lorries. Many slept in the cabs or in the backs of the lorries. We had MGs on Flak mounts, 2cm Flak and personal weapons and so were to some extent capable of fending off attacks. I settled on the canvas rolled back behind the driver’s cab, which served me as a hammock and from where I could watch the countryside flash past. I felt uncomfortable when the train passed through tunnels because the tunnel roof passed very close overhead. The train headed via Budapest–Lavic–Sillaus over the Jublunka Pass–Oppeln–Breslau/ Silesia–Lissa–Posen–Gnesen–Thorn–Allenstein–Insterburg to Gumbinnen. ‘Man, if the Wehrmacht had to pay the railways for the length of all these journeys we’ve made it would set them back a pretty packet,’ one of my people said. On the journey through Germany, people stood along the railway and waved to us cheerfully. When the train proceeded at a slower rate, we threw our address (name and field-post number) in a matchbox to the prettiest girl we could see in the hope of receiving a reply from her.

3 August 1944

Finally we reached Ebenrode in West Prussia, a small town near the Lithuanian border. Here we were unloaded and the vehicles parked far apart. A few days previously the Russians had occupied Vilkaviskis/Wolfsburg, in Lithuania but behind the so-called East Prussian Protective Position, only a few kilometres from the German border. We were also told that Russian troops had already crossed the border once to Goldap where they committed cruel atrocities against the civilian population. Later they had been driven back.

Unloading proceeded apace! We had no defensive position of any kind ahead of us. We dug our firing position and foxholes only a few hundred metres behind our panzers, well camouflaged between the stacks of corn from where they protected our unloading and ‘position building’.

4 August 1944

We have erected a provisional main battle line here to await the arrival and unloading of all of our division’s transport trains. We also discovered that Ivan has been occupying the Lithuanian border town of Vilkaviskis/Wolfsburg for two days. This also lies only a few kilometres from the German border and an ‘Enhanced Alert’ is in force. Resting in my foxhole I was plagued by toothache, which had started on the railway journey. An old Obergefreiter helped me very much. With pure Hahnewacker chewing tobacco the pain went after half an hour! At first the plug tasted vile but in time I even detected a certain cognac flavour to it. I even spat like an old man.

I am lying now in my foxhole listening towards the east, but at the moment it is quiet. Nearby our panzers roar up now and again when shifting position. I hear shouts of command. Tonight there is no activity in the skies.

6 August 1944

This morning came the order: ‘Report readiness to move!’ Then we went via Pillkallen (Schlossberg) along the Wistytiter Lake south of Wirballen. An advance to the north-east began at 0825hrs. Finally we saw and heard our own fighter-bombers again heading towards the Russian positions. They

neither dropped bombs nor fired their cannon. It seemed to be a feint attack. We wondered about this! After initially token resistance we came under heavy artillery fire. This caused us some casualties and the advance did not go as we had planned. Then came the order, 'Stop the attack, set up to defend!' The attack order read: 'II Battalion, Oberleutnant Schmelter, advance left of the road Wirballen–Skiaudinirkiat–Skardupial, close to the east of Obsruteliai. Attack direction: north-east.'

7 August 1944

Today after a renewed attack we finally reached the dominating height 51. During the advance there was a big tank battle. We saw the new 'Josef Stalin Casemate Tank' (calibre 12.2cm!) It even destroyed some Tigers. Ivan is stronger here than expected. We achieved our objective despite serious losses. The night remained quiet. We learned that we are to be relieved. Next day we reconnoitred the attack strip. The next objective is the enemy-occupied town of Vilkaviskis/Wolfsburg. We are to proceed south-west to north-east on the eastern side of the town to the East Prussian Protective Position and cut off the line of retreat for the Russians in the town. We have received warnings about the many mines lying around. During the night we heard much bustle and activity behind us: the I Battalion armoured personnel carriers and panzers occupying their departure position.

8 August 1944

In front of the town the ground is flat with a tank ditch on the north-south axis, as is the East Prussian Protective Position to the east. Farther east is a wood, and we do not know what is hiding in it. We want to beat Ivan here. It will be no light undertaking!

9 August 1944

At dawn there was a ground mist. All the motorized vehicles, panzers, armoured personnel carriers, Flak guns, anti-tank guns and ourselves! This was to be a surprise attack, no artillery preparation. We made good progress forward, came up in the morning mist from the south and after a fierce

encounter broke into the trenches at the East Prussian Protective Position east of Vilkaviskis and rolled them up northwards. III Battalion Fusiliers were with us. Because he received no artillery softening-up, Ivan was not warned and surprise was complete. Our first attack occurred successfully east of the Vilkaviskis outwork, but then Ivan awoke and we received 15.2cm artillery fire. We call this calibre ‘Black Pig’ because thick black smoke and fumes are released on impact. Our panzers also received anti-tank fire. The accursed mines caused casualties. As we began rolling up the trenches with a loud ‘Hurrah!’, tossing hand grenades, our assault rifles chattering and everything going well, we were attacked by a large number of Il-2 ground-attack aircraft which dropped bombs, strafed us with their MGs and cannon and made things difficult with their rockets. Now it was our turn to experience how it had been for the Russians to be on the receiving end of what the Luftwaffe had to offer in the opening years of the Eastern campaign. Ivan now outnumbered us! Scarcely had the first formations roared off overhead than we heard the next flights arriving and the ‘racket’ began anew. Ivan had not been so strong as he was here since our failed Operation *Zitadelle*. Some men of III Battalion found themselves in a minefield: a motorcyclist was killed and there were also other losses. It was developing into a fine ‘Rabatz’ – raising hell – as our infantry say. Finally the East Prussian Protective Position was in our hands from the south. Ivan had fought bitterly. Some of our own panzers stood burning or wrecked on the battlefield. Making its debut here was the new Russian Casemate Tank – similar to our SP assault guns but colossal, with a 12cm piece capable of destroying a Tiger tank. While we cleared the trenches of enemy troops, house-to-house and street fighting was being played out to the west on our left in the town.

Our light infantry gun has been converted into an infantry anti-tank gun with a longer barrel and with the corresponding ammunition can destroy a tank.¹ I halted with my mortars between them. We here in the East Prussian Protective Position have the enemy on both flanks. The maze of houses to the left and the woods to the right are both good for surprises. A close watch has to be kept. As it grew quieter towards evening a messenger arrived: I had to go into town and look for our provisions lorry, which was

also bringing up ammunition. The town was said to be in our hands. I pirouetted through the trench heading for the town. The infantry were already hard at work digging deeper since a Russian counter-attack was thought likely. I heard shooting, hand grenades exploding and bursts of sub-machine gun fire. Was Ivan still holding out in places? I was just running for the first house, which was linked into the trench system, when a single Il-2 came towards me at low level. I had the sensation that it was attacking me personally. It strafed the trench with its cannon, banked tightly and then came round a second time. Looking up I saw a single bomb falling roughly in my direction. I took a flying dive into the ruins of the house. The bomb exploded in the trench a few metres from the house. Dripping with sweat and breathing heavily I thought to myself, ‘How much are they prepared to invest to kill one soldier?’ But then when our 3.7cm Flak opened up, the lone Ivan flew away and did not return. Our own Luftwaffe was in a sorry state at this time.

I went on to reach the first houses of the town and finally discovered our quartermaster. We drove into the centre of town where some panzers were restocking their ammunition. It did not seem any too safe since we were fired upon from a number of gardens and houses on the way. Therefore there were Russians in the maze of houses and we fired back. Soon the vehicle was surrounded by rations-carriers. The quartermaster distributed the hot food with his ladle into the mess tins, the rations-carriers receiving a larger portion as compensation for the danger they endured running through the district. They also had a swig of coffee or tea. In winter, when the quartermaster often added a tot of rum to the tea, I would volunteer to be a rations carrier.

Back in the trenches of the East Prussian Protective Position, sentries were posted and we prepared a camp for sleeping. All one could find by way of grass, straw and so on was laid out on top a woollen blanket in winter, a groundsheet in summer. Mostly one would sleep wearing the steel helmet; the leather lining inside the rim made a comfortable rest for the head. During the night heavy firing occurred several times about 100m north of us. Once the shooting came from the woods to the right, then individual rounds from the edge of town accompanied by the loud shout,

‘There they go! There they go!’ The first flares went up, lit the ground in front of us and more shooting followed. Ivan was also interested in seeing what was going on and sent up some of his rather weak greenish flares. This was not a reason to waking sleeping grenadiers. Only when something definite happened would the alarm be raised. At night we NCOs supervised the sentries. Seldom were men reported. Shooting again! Some Ivans were attempting to break out and, as we heard next morning, achieved it almost without losses.

10–11 August 1944

In the early hours so-called East Prussian units came to us as reinforcements: they are basically ‘Home Guard’ men, native to the region. The town had been combed through meanwhile and declared free of the enemy. During the day there were a few skirmishes while improving the front line. More and more of these East Prussian units are arriving in the East Prussian Protective Position to relieve us. We have now moved to a resting position to the south and southwest of the town and been advised of the division’s immediate intentions. The major objective is to reach the Kurland Army in the north and consolidate the overland connection to it. On 19 July 1944 the Russians occupied the town of Schaulen (Siauliai): their aim is a drive westwards to the Baltic, cutting off the Kurland Army. There has been heavy fighting in the town of Kursenai. Our ranks have also thinned out.

12–13 August 1944

Today we set out. The journey to the north will take us through the cities of Schlossberg (Pillkallen), Haselberg, Trappen. From there across the Memel.

14–15 August 1944

The journey continued via the towns of Willkisch, Ken, Tauroggen, then further along the Tilsit–Schaulen road to Pankrazentis, there northwards – so far without contact with the enemy – to Krazia–Kolainia–Looke, from there on the Telsche–Schaulen road and to the Schaulen–Libau railway line, where we had our first encounter with the Russians. We were passing

through a wood and could just make out where we would arrive at open country when Ivan, who had seen the first vehicles, opened fire with Stalin organs! As soon as we heard this only too familiar noise, this repeated howling, I called out, ‘Get out of the vehicles at once and find cover!’ The men obeyed like greased lightning and took cover in a ditch or some other depression. As the company troop leader (which our little-loved new company commander had made me), I was seated in the car behind Oberleutnant H. When the driver stopped abruptly, I shouted, ‘Get out! Under! Full cover!’ and then jumped into the ditch and curled up. The rockets exploded left, right and in the centre of the path, twenty-four rockets in all, hitting in a fairly rapid sequence. We veterans had our noses in the dirt waiting for it to pass. It seemed to have finished without adverse effect when suddenly we heard a loud, wailing voice, somebody crying out in distress.

Let me set the scene. This Oberleutnant H. became our company commander after his predecessor, Oberleutnant Schmelter, had had to leave us in Romania with a serious injury suffered in the woods at Karachev when the turret of the panzer on which he was sitting moved and crushed his leg. This replacement officer had already made himself disliked by us platoon and group leaders. Even the infantry thought the worst of him. To start off, he had tried out all the corporals one after another in the role of company troop leader. When he appointed me to the job I dared to say, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, I do not really want it, I would rather remain with my mortar platoon.’ At that he threatened to court-martial me for refusing to obey an order. Nobody could do anything right in his eyes, and none of us had forgotten a remark he made to us: ‘If one of you is wounded, I don’t want to hear any wailing or crying. Clench your teeth and show that you are a man!’ We veterans thought: ‘You arsehole! We’ll see how you cry out when you get one.’

Now that day had come and I heard Gefreiter Ludolf Vinzelberg shout loudly, ‘Ha ha, Kameraden, hear how he squeals? He should clench his teeth.’ The Oberleutnant had a fairly severe injury to the upper arm. A splinter had torn out a piece of muscle the size of a fist. Naturally that was very painful, as one can imagine, but he should not have talked big. Later

the Company received post from him from a hospital at Königstein/Taunus. He actually requested that our *Spiess* (Osker Gellert) should send him cognac, cigars and cigarettes from our canteen stores. When the *Spiess* showed me the letter, I told him, ‘Let me handle it, Oskar, I’ll pack it for him.’ Then with delight I wrapped some Russian Machorka tobacco in a sweaty sock with a small bottle of vodka. ‘With best wishes for your recovery but if possible not your return.’ It does not sound very friendly, but he deserved nothing better. End!

16–17 August 1944

We no longer have a company commander but the war goes on. We prepared for an attack. The vehicles moved back under cover. Oberleutnant Schmelter, II Battalion leader, accompanied us forward to the Venta. The river runs some kilometres ahead of us below a gentle slope. We became bogged down and were simply unable to go further. We lay in flat open country where Ivan can immediately see everything. We came under defensive fire: he has a lot of artillery and these accursed Il-2 aircraft. To pick out targets to engage and also for a better view I crept into a water main under the road. I got through to the other end with some difficulty but as soon as I spied Ivan I realized that he had seen me creeping out. Observing through my binoculars I saw an anti-tank gun in the bushes. Attempting to return the way I had come I got caught up with my haversack and mess tin and had to back out. I was lucky and Ivan didn’t shoot, not even when I was sprinting across the road to reach the other side.

17–18 August 1944

Today our infantry captured Kurseniai. We hurried through the fields of wheat with our heavy equipment. Panzers from another unit and our assault guns accompanied us. Our Tigers are deployed elsewhere. Kurseniai was hard fought-for but we took it. We continued towards Purviniai, keeping on the enemy’s heels. We should be able to take it fairly easily. We are gradually becoming overconfident. If it carries on like this, and we always succeed as intended, our motto will be, ‘Drive, shoot, eyes closed and through!’ until we reach the Kurland Army.

19–20 August 1944

When we reported for the night-time conference to establish our objective for the morning, we were told, ‘Cease the advance, set up to defend. We have open flanks on both sides and that can be dangerous.’ We learned from an Order of the Day signed by Oberst Niemack: ‘I Armoured Personnel Carrier Battalion under Hauptmann von Basse [from Hagen!] may call itself “the Lion Battalion”. You have fought like lions!’ Later the men painted a lion on their vehicles next to the battalion tactical insignia. Meanwhile, Ivan has probably noticed that something is happening in front of him, but he does not know our intention to force our way northwards to meet up with the Kurland Army.

21 August 1944

We have pulled back behind a swampy area for a better defensive position. The Russians sent over a lot of artillery fire to where they assumed we are assembling. We notice that this fire is not aimed. All the same, his fighter-bombers dominate the skies and can shoot up and bomb our troop concentrations, panzers and vehicles. It is as though we have arrived in a wasp’s nest here. Officers of Panzer Reconnaissance Sub-battalion 14 arrived to relieve us: we slipped away quietly with all our vehicles and assembled in a resting area west of Kursenai before setting off to the north. As the relief proceeds, the battalions take to the road.

22–25 August 1944

We learned that a panzer group under Oberst Graf Strachwitz is already ahead of us past Doblen. We headed in the direction of Auc-Doblen. The aforementioned panzers left the Lemkini–Skola crossroads for the breakthrough at Tukkum and are driving through the Russians without any infantry support.

25 August 1944

We followed the panzers but only as far as the mentioned crossroads and then halted. There is no more talk of ‘Drive, shoot, eyes closed and through!’ We have dug in and must hold the position. Ivan is very active

here with his accursed Stalin organs and has any number of Il-2s. He has now recognized our intention to connect up with the Kurland Army. We dug industriously, for we have noticed that Ivan is stronger here than at first assumed. Firing positions, foxholes and interception points are being laid out. Our losses in our earlier thrust were very high, the front line can only be occupied on the strongpoint system. Our panzers, assault guns and artillery are well camouflaged to our rear. Now there is a real 'Kurland Pocket' which has received strong reinforcements in the shape of Panzergruppe *Strachwitz*, but can only be reached by sea. We are improving our positions with a will since we are expecting Russian counterattacks at any moment. We have no shortage of ammunition. From the fact that there are very few officers as company commanders, we notice how grave our losses have been. We corporals and sergeants run the companies. The Grenadier Company often has only forty to fifty men. Oberleutnants serve as battalion commanders. We now have a cohesive Front running from the area west of Schaulen passing Kursenai in a general northerly direction west of Doblen, which then bears to the north-west.

Note

1. The author is referring to the 7.5cm Infanteriegeschütz IG 37. The original Krupp design IG 42 did not proceed beyond the prototype stage. Early in 1944 it was decided to combine the 885mm barrel with four-chambered muzzle brake of the IG 42 on the old carriage of the 3.7cm Pak 36 and redesignate the result IG 37. The 7.5cm hollow-charge projectile could penetrate up to 85mm of armour at typical battle range: rate of fire was eight to twelve rounds/min. Alexander Lüdecke, *Deutsche Artillerie Geschütze 1933–1945*, Motorbuch, 2016, pp. 22–3.

Chapter 13

The Battle for the Memel Bridgehead

1 September 1944

The line I mentioned can be held. The Russians have not yet begun their counter-attacks. Today our former divisional commander Generalleutnant von Manteuffel left us, handing over to our regimental commander, Oberst Lorenz. (Lorenz commanded the division until the war's end: a few months later von Manteuffel led the Ardennes Offensive.)

28 September 1944

Today we celebrated the birthday of our *Spiess*, Oskar Gellert. His motto: 'But the wagon, it rolls' (chorus line from a German folk song). And it rolled! In the course of that alcoholic evening I was nominated 1 General Staff Officer of the company, but after everybody sobered up by next morning nothing had changed. I heard that our sector is to be taken over by SS-Division *Nordland*. Maybe I can find out something about my cousin Rolf Scholl.

2 October 1944

Nothing much has changed: I went to the dentist, all now well. An inflamed root canal is an evil thing. Apparently the teeth are too long and every bite hurts. I am to have a follow-up later on.

3 October 1944

Today we were withdrawn from the Front and transferred via Auce to Tryskiai. Finally post has come again. I received a letter from a girl from Arnswalde who got my address during the train journey through Germany

when I threw a note out in a matchbox. Amongst other things she wrote: ‘.. . I am here now in the occupied territory and have been conscripted for essential war work on something which I hope will never be used in this war!’

Naturally I immediately wondered if this would be a new V-weapon. In September when we were withdrawn from the Front, I was appointed National Socialist Leadership Officer (NSFO). This role has existed since the 20 July attempt to assassinate the Führer. It is similar to the Russian ‘Political Commissar’ (*Politruk*). I am not doing it on a full-time basis, only when we are resting. I am also the company chronicler, but in the main make notes about my mortar platoon. As NSFO I have a few advantages, but also a heap more work. When we are resting, I have the chance to attend conferences with the officers and talk with them about the general situation, both politically and especially about the Front. As I am now officer reserve, my job is to copy up the Wehrmacht bulletin on an ancient Lithuanian typewriter and where appropriate prepare sketches of the Front. I also act as spokesperson for men who wish to make a special application about anything. It is mostly I who have to write up the ‘war reports’ for the company – and for myself! Although we of *Grossdeutschland* are considered to be ‘political soldiers’ because initially all volunteers had been in the Hitler Youth, often more or less in its higher levels, the NSFO never had a special significance for us. The officers are happy to have nothing to do with it, they have far, far more important tasks on hand! Every unit must have its NSFO, however, therefore we have one, and I am it. Whether there are political fanatics amongst them I do not know. I cannot imagine that that would be the case amongst genuine Front soldiers.

3–4 October 1944

Today we received the following order: ‘Panzer Regiment *Grossdeutschland* with III Tiger Abteilung, subordinated 1 Abteilung Panzer Regiment 26 and Panzer Reconnaissance Abteilung *Grossdeutschland* are to move in southerly direction to deal with the critical situation on the East Prussian–Lithuanian border.’ A Russian offensive is expected from the Kaunas/Kovno region. Ivan has established some

bridgeheads over the river Venta. His objective is the Baltic and to cut us off.

5 October 1944

Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* is to hold positions west of Kursenai. But Ivan is already everywhere! We drove via Tuciai–Piveniai–Jonza–Paiciai. Ivan is attacking like crazy everywhere. This is the beginning of the feared major Russian offensive to throw us into the sea. In the early morning we heard an enormous artillery barrage falling on the neighbouring units. These are partly relatively weak *Volksgrenadier* divisions. Ivan's massed artillery destroyed the positions there, breached them and broke through. The Front there no longer exists, nor is there a unified command any longer.

6–7 October 1944

'Battlegroup *Fabich*' has been set up, consisting of ourselves, the II Battalion, Assault Gun Brigade 303 and III Panzer Artillery Regiment *Grossdeutschland*. We were sent to Luoke, an important crossroads. Scarcely had we arrived, sought and occupied positions than Ivan attacked with many tanks. I thought involuntarily, 'Where have all these damned tanks come from after the pasting we've given him?'

7 October 1944

Luoke had to be held at all costs! It was a very bloody battle. I am still officer reserve with the forward *Tross*. It is all fairly obscure. Nobody knew exactly where the panzers with infantry seated on the hulls were supposed to go once they had broken through. Around 1800hrs the order came for the division to fight its way back to the 'Windau Position' (Ventspils, Latvia). Meanwhile Luoke was three-quarters encircled! There was a great danger of total encirclement for II Battalion fighting there. Battlegroup *Fabich* put up a desperate defence, and succeeded in breaking out. I was told by wounded men that Feldwebel Plickat had distinguished himself with the infantry/anti-tank gun (IG 37). The battlegroup then broke through to the west. We received a new order: 'All *Grossdeutschland* units, depending on

the battle situation, are to pull back as soon as possible to the East Prussian Protective Position and hold it.' The former line: Pieliai–Bedaukiai–Badmakiai. We should go to the Viesviniai–Stulpiniai–Tavsola Lake line and hold it. If that were impossible, the next defensive line is Trelow–Plunge–Virksto Lake–Notena. II Battalion *Grossdeutschland* from Luoke to the west, west of Telsche, north of the Rollbahn to Plunge. There a (somewhat) cohesive Front can be set up.

8 October 1944

After bitter fighting, II Battalion grenadiers broke out from Luoke. The *Tross* were directed to the south-west. The East Prussian Protective Position (outer ring) could not be held because Ivan was almost there before the defenders. Two to three protective positions were planned in front of and around Memel. But it turned out differently to what one had imagined.

9–10 October 1944

Pull out! There now began a desperate race between the advancing Russian armour spearhead and our own troops to occupy the town and port of Memel first! We drove back to Karkelbeck for the coastal road so as to enter the outer protective line before Memel from the north via Polangen. As we rolled over the airfield at night there were explosions on the runway, enormous flashes and bangs. During a short rest during the hours of darkness at Nimmersatt on the old German border we found a gramophone in an abandoned house. The mechanism no longer worked and we had to turn the records with a finger. We found a record suitable to our situation. Comrade Ludolf Vinzelberg was the 'disc jockey' and he worked the turntable, though at uneven speeds. On one side was the very appropriate 'Caught in the Moorish Desert', the song of the poor Foreign Legionnaire. We were enchanted by it and wanted an encore. Suddenly a messenger arrived and shouted, 'Make ready at once! Load up, get in and then get a move on for Memel, otherwise Ivan will have your arses!' Well, that was clear enough! No sooner said than done. At a crossroads was a motorcyclist who shouted to our driver, 'Are you crazy? That way leads straight to Ivan! Memel is to the left!' A good job he had been there or Ivan would certainly

have wiped us all out. During the night Ivan bombed Polangen, but we had already passed through it.

10 October 1944

In order to make it difficult for the enemy's vanguard, we took up positions on the road from Krottingen to Memel. Between our own troops (not *Grossdeutschland*) striving to reach Memel were long sad columns of refugees. Wagons piled high with furniture and people, women, children and old grandparents led the horses. With them French prisoners of war, accompanying the German farmers and helping them! They too did not wish to fall into the hands of their allies, the Bolsheviks. While we secured the road, this convoy of refugees followed close behind for Memel where they hoped that ships would be available to take them to the Reich. We received reinforcements from our fusilier regiment. We could hear fighting not so far ahead. Ivan was pushing forward energetically. After a rather nervous night, because we did not know the strength of our defensive barrier and what Ivan intended, we left the road protective position and drove on to the outskirts of Memel. We were told that the city must be held at all costs as the bridgehead between the Reich and the Kurland Army. I Battalion had positions right on the coast, then III Battalion and further east than ourselves II Battalion, Grenadier Regiment. We were soon prepared to defend. The Front ran from the coast eastwards of us over a low range of hills to the Memel–Krottingen railway line. Directly behind this line we had our mortar firing positions near the farm estates Kunken Görge, Szodeiken-Jonell and Rund Görge. The observation post was located near the company command post of one of our infantry companies about 150 to 200m before us on the 'low range of hills'. Firing sites and infantry trenches were dug quickly, also a reserve position about 150m behind in case we were forced to fall back. When everything was complete, I put a crew on every mortar and had the others reconnoitre the 'hinterland'. Soldiers are always curious and they discovered some local passenger coaches with open windows standing on the rails. In they went to search – this part belonged to the command train of the C-in-C, Army Group North! The things we found there! Tinned bread, cigarettes, chocolate, Scho-Ka-Kola, any amount of

writing paper and what interested me especially, quantities of map material: land maps, ordnance survey maps and what pleased many infantrymen, batches of leave passes. They stuffed their pockets full. Personally I took possession of some good maps, cigarettes and leave passes but only because they are so useful for underhand purposes! While ransacking the train, some of our officers appeared, sealed it and later posted sentries to guard it. Our regimental command post was at Gut Purmallen. We did not have any more time for looking round. Scarcely were we ready to defend against Ivan than he 'raised hell'. We were enclosed here in a narrow area with only the city and port of Memel behind us and the Baltic at our backs. This gave us a fine 'shitty feeling'. At least we had enough ammunition on hand to defend ourselves, and we had two heavy cruisers, *Prinz Eugen* and *Lützow*, from the Baltic in support with their very substantial firepower. Our artillery had ammunition as never before. The Russians had pushed ahead deeply to the south-west and reached the Baltic at Heidekrug. Here our various *Tross* were in great danger! I had a sealed metal case aboard our lorry containing all my 'Front reports'. (Post-war note: I never saw them again.)

11 October 1944

The city of Memel was burning in many places as a result of bombing and artillery bombardment. During the night an attack by Ivan succeeded in breaking through at Podseit-Stankus, but it was very swiftly repulsed. That is some kilometres south-west of us. We listened on edge to the noises of battle. Because the Russians here are very strong and we always have to expect a major offensive at any time, our positions and bunkers are constantly improved, and we keep at it even in the short breaks between fighting. To make them rainproof, we removed the tin roof from a building, covered it with thick beams and then a half-metre of earth. The weather is wet, cold and unpleasant. In the opening days Ivan used much artillery and tanks in the effort to wear down our positions and then break through. He was given a warm reception, with several hours of deafening thunder and explosions from both sides. When he finally realized that he could not break through, our courage and confidence grew. It was also a joy to experience our own artillery, finally 'topped up with ammunition'. My mortars fired

without a break too. Even with their tanks, the Russians could not force their way through, some of them finishing up as burning wrecks on the main battle line. Some were destroyed from the air by the special Stukas of the famous airman Oberst Rudel equipped with two 3.7cm Flak guns each. The tanks are not so well armoured on top and so the 3.7cm cannon were relatively effective. Its advantage was that the enemy tank crews expected to find the enemy on the ground and not in the air. (Oberst Rudel flew 2,530 missions. He and his team destroyed around 500 enemy tanks on the Eastern Front. He was the only soldier of the Wehrmacht to be awarded the Gold Oak Leaves to add to the Swords and Diamonds of his Knight's Cross.)

12 October 1944

My people and I are lucky to have had no casualties to report during the heavy defensive fighting although it was occasionally a close thing. My mortar firing positions have so far not been spotted otherwise we would definitely have received accurate aimed fire more often.

One day an SS officer appeared with a messenger, both wearing rain capes so that their uniforms could not be immediately recognized. I called to them and asked where they had come from and what they were looking for. At first I was pleased, for as far as I knew SS units are not found in bridgeheads. When the officer (I was never good with SS ranks) asked where the weak points of our anti-tank defences in this sector were, I told him to enquire at the company command post ahead, which was authorized to provide such information. The officer returned my salute and the two of them made off for 6 Company command post. In the evening at the situation conference in the battalion command post I asked if, since when and how many SS units were in the bridgehead? At that, the 6 Company lieutenant stated that the two men had come to him and asked questions. This gave rise to excitement and astonishment. 'SS, here in the bridgehead? I've never heard of such a thing. Call the divisional command post at once.' After this call came the answer: 'They say there are no SS units here. Therefore highest alarm readiness – and look for them!'

Search parties were assembled swiftly and next day the pair of them were caught. They were from the 'National Committee Free Germany', the organization of former prisoners of war turned by the Russians to work against us as spies, or make loudspeaker appeals to us to defect. In our eyes therefore, traitors and deserters. They were spying out weak spots in our bridgehead and then reporting them by radio to Ivan. The transmitter was found in a hollow tree trunk. The next day we confirmed the effectiveness of their messages to the enemy. Previously our mortar position with the artillery had never received aimed fire. Suddenly Ivan now bombarded it with shells from his 15.2cm 'Black Pig' gun. Fortunately the salvos fell 50 to 100m too long and too far to the right. It was nevertheless a strange feeling to know that Ivan had pinpointed us personally. The bombardment did us no damage, but now we set to work to improve our firing position and bunkers substantially. Furthermore, every time we hear the battery fire, we look at once for the nearest cover.

13 October 1944

We were told that each company had to send two men to the battalion command post to witness the execution of the two traitors. The execution by firing squad was also meant as a warning to others. Old soldiers think that is 'too stupid' and none wants to go. Therefore they have to be detailed, which goes against the grain.

In the next couple of days the battalion commander and other officers came to inspect all positions. Well, of course, they will have to be improved. The holes and firing positions deeper, more tree trunks and earth on the roofs of the bunkers. The infantry grumbled but saw that it was in their best interests. Unteroffizier Ramm's half-platoon further to my right had very good, firm positions. Finally our company commander, Hauptmann Pfau, came by and confirmed that everything had been very well done. Furthermore, our officers were accompanied to our observation post by Kriegsmarine officers. From here they were to direct the fire of the two heavy cruisers *Prinz Eugen* and *Lützow*. Then we were ordered, 'Everybody who is forward here, nose to the ground!' Soon we heard the guns of the two cruisers thunder, and then the big shells came over (from

Lützow's main armament 6 x 28cm, from *Prinz Eugen* 8 x 20.3cm). Gasps of admiration, and then huge whirling fountains of earth arose from the Russian positions, smoke, a tremendous racket from the explosions, especially those that fell short, and then splinters flew around our ears. After the enemy forward trenches had been destroyed and the Ivans had learned how to run, the range was increased to include the airfield at Krottingen because the Il-2s took off from there by day and the 'sewing machines' by night. We were enthralled: 'They should have done that more often!' After this heavy bombardment it grew quieter. Apparently Ivan had been impressed! I used these quiet hours to visit the dentist in Memel about my violent toothache, which had troubled me since the railway journey from Romania. So I shuffled into town, always on the alert for artillery fire: now and again Ivan fired random rounds into the area. His fighter-bombers were also very active. They prefer the city and port. Then our heavy Flak fired incessantly, a deafening racket. On my way to the dentist I was forced to take cover several times. The city is pretty ruined. I had to ask my way to the surgery. He had his practice on Ufer Strasse, at the harbour. There was plenty of activity, ships being loaded with refugees and wounded, weapons, panzers and ammunition unloaded. Everything was hectic, for the fighterbombers were frequent visitors, and the Russians hammered the port with their heavy artillery. I had to shelter several times in the entrance to a house while the heavy Flak fired nearby. Finally I found the address: the dentist worked in a second-floor room with a bay window. This gave him good light. A soldier (his 'assistant') sat in a corner pedalling a wheelless bicycle to power the drill. First time I ever saw anything like it. When sitting at last in the chair, mouth and cheeks stuffed with cotton wool, the doctor began his work. Suddenly he seemed very worried and then I heard the accursed Il-2s with the deep droning sound of their engines, firing from all barrels and launching rockets. They came from the north, along the beach. While I sat there with my mouth jammed open, my doctor, his assistant and all the people in the waiting room disappeared. I stood up and went to the window to see what was going on. I drew back very quickly when I noticed the 'birds' arriving and heard their rockets being fired and the hammering of their cannon. The accursed aviators hit something which

then burned and billowed smoke from all ends and corners. When they flew off, the dentist and assistant returned, rather pale in the face and with trembling hands. I was very happy when he extracted the tooth. I think he was trembling more than I was ! I was given some pills and then got away from the port area as fast as I could. Then I saw the next wave arriving.

On the railway journey from Romania to Gumbinnen, like many of my colleagues I had thrown a matchbox containing my name and field-post number to a girl. She had written to me and invited me to call on her parents' house, a printing works in Memel, if it ever became possible. Her name is Ruth Preukschat. As I had the address I searched for the house, found the street quickly and saw that the house itself and printing works were boarded up. Only a few window panes were missing and so the building itself counted as 'still' undestroyed. The girl had gone with her parents to Pomerania after I had told her in a letter of the current situation. I feared that even that would not last for long! Memel was being bombarded almost without pause. Nothing better than getting away from here and back to my 'home' position. The 'Memel Pocket' was damned small. Coming up from the south, it is only 18km from the coast at the estuary of the 'Kaiser Wilhelm Canal' to the north, where our positions went down to the Baltic, and only about 6km from the city centre to ourselves near Kunken Görge. From the port a radius of about 5 to 8km is about right. 'Firing Fortress Memel' is what the Front reports call it. And all around us one hears it. The quieter rattle of MGs, then the hard, short crack of anti-tank guns or panzer main guns. More lasting is the firing of our own or Russian artillery and the explosions on impact. I marched along route 132 towards my position. I had to jump into a house on the city outskirts to seek cover against a fighterbomber. Once it had gone I had a look around the house. The occupant must have been an educated man. He had a large bookcase and valuable furniture. The window panes were shattered and the rain had got in. I wondered where the man would have gone and cursed the war. I helped myself to his copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and a volume of poems (Agnes Miegel, a well-known East Prussian poet: I have both books to this very day in my bookcase). Then I continued back to my unit. At Gut Hohenflur I detoured left at the inn, crossed the railway tracks at Kollaten

and passed Rund Görge to my firing position this side of Szodeiken-Jonell. On the low ridge of hills are my mortar observation post and also 6 Company's command post. Our alternative positions, in case Ivan should force us back, are about 1,200m behind at the Kollaten Lake. We have practised occupying them but never in earnest, only once nearly!

14 October 1944

Ivan made a heavy attack on Kunken Görge. We put up barrage fire, but then I saw some of our infantry running back in agitation. We were firing everything we could from three mortars. Our observation post was still intact. I ran forward and shouted to them: 'We are staying here! We are still shooting! Go back to your positions and shoot! No running away!' My mortars were firing almost along our own front line where the first Ivans were roaring their bloodcurdling 'Urrraah!' and firing their sub-machine guns. As our mortars exploded amongst them, and the ricochets released their vile shrapnel effect, they threw themselves to the ground, noses down. That was the favourable moment for the lieutenant to rise and urge his men forward on the counter-attack with a loud 'Hurrah!' When the Ivans heard it, they took to their heels. Then we pursued them back with accurate mortar fire. Our casualties were one dead and six wounded. Ivan had had to leave far more lying where they fell. Our heavy MGs had also reaped their harvest. The Russians tried it several more times, also in the coming days, but each time they were repelled energetically. Our 15cm heavy infantry gun was hard on Ivan (equivalent to his 'Black Pig').

The wet and cold autumnal weather is not pleasant. Only in the bunker with the stove lit can we get warm. We have plenty of firewood. We sit unshaven, filthy outside in the position and tremble ourselves warm. We have a radio in our bunker and heard the speech by Heinrich Himmler about the 'Volkssturm'. 'Now Volk arise, storm break loose!' No mention of new weapons. We hope very much that they are coming! We wouldn't like to have to hold this small bridgehead between the Reich and the encircled Kurland Army to the last. Fortunately the spit of land known as the Kurische Nehrung reaches almost to Memel. Ivan is attempting to attack the semi-circular defensive line at various points, but whenever he achieves a

breakthrough somewhere, he is immediately repelled by a powerful counter-thrust. We have become very strong! To our left on the coast is a naval coastal battery in concrete bunkers. Their heavy guns are very efficient every time the opportunity arises to use them on Ivan. Our Stukas appear especially when Ivan attacks with massed armour. In the evening we were told at the situation conference that the legendary Oberst Rudel aids us very much using his Kanonenvogel ('Cannon bird') Stuka for anti-tank work.

15 October 1944

Today the Russians broke into the position to the right of us across the Krottingen-Memel railway line, but they were immediately ejected by our 5 and 6 Companies. Naturally I was very concerned and had two mortars aligned right ready to fire, but then the observation post reported to platoon leader Feldwebel Legler that our assistance was not necessary to deal with Ivan. At the evening situation conference we learned that in the ten-day period from 5 to 15 October 1944 we have lost eight officers, 42 NCOs and 202 men dead. The Russians have quietened down: we always take advantage of these opportunities to improve our positions, trenches and bunkers. It is clear that Ivan is not going to let us get off lightly. As long as Feldwebel Legler is there (he is due to be sent on a course for prospective officers), I remain NCO i/c Position. The weather is turning more autumnal, more unpleasant, colder and wetter. We can withstand it well in our bunkers. When it rains it is like a stalactite cavern, but we have made it dry with metal sheets and roofing slates. The bunker stove does its job well and we have enough firewood, but we light it only at night, for during the day Ivan can see the smoke and pinpoint our bunker exactly. The firing by both sides has fallen off, but one must keep a listening watch and expect a sudden artillery bombardment at any time. Some days there is thunder from the sea, the guns of the heavy cruisers *Prinz Eugen* and *Lützow*, firing not far offshore from our position and to the right of us at Kunken Görge. That is where Ivan will try something. Some of the infantry trenches have flooded with all the rain lately and even the firing pits have had to be drained!

31 October 1944

Today was a day of joy. We had not received any post for more than four weeks, but now our *Spiess* Oskar Gellert came with a sackful. I had twenty-two letters, many parcels and postcards. The men are fully occupied exchanging cakes, biscuits and sweetmeats, admiring photos of each other's wives. But there is less good news from the homeland. After hard fighting the Western Allies have advanced to the borders of the Reich. Dammit, where are the promised new weapons which are decisive for the war? There is no 'V-3' operational. Yesterday we received our issue of proven winter clothing. Because it is to some extent quiet, I went down to a kilometre or so from the Baltic coast. I saw what troops are to our left and some heavy weapons. There are also *Grossdeutschland* men. I stood for some time at the coast staring out across the water. White-capped waves rushed to shore. No ship was in sight. In order to make things better for us, a cinema has been set up behind the Front. Our 'Gloria Palace' is in a barn. One can forget the war there for a few hours. When I got back to my bunker before midnight there was more post for me. I found out that my cousins Gerhard and Rolf are still alive and I learned about their experiences. How wonderful it would be if all three of us could meet up fit and well after the war.

Now follows a description of my 'command bunker'. Interior decoration: wall covering with colourful material. A table, two chairs with upholstered seats, a couch as a bed. On the wall two shelves, one for food and eating utensils, the other for books and newspapers. On a broad board all important military items. A clothing hook-board, on the walls pictures. A large portrait of the Führer and a large situation map. All enemy positions known and engaged are marked. Naturally I have a field telephone and a small radio set. But the most important thing we have besides our optimism is the bottle of 'Danzig Goldwater'.

20 November 1944

From the sea we heard a siren and Ivan began firing his anti-tank guns. A German freighter, the *Füsiler*, had ventured too close to the port of Memel in fog and too near to the coast. Ivan's 7.62cm guns damaged the ship

severely; it was abandoned, attacked by a Russian fighter-bomber, began to burn and sank. About 320 people were aboard the troopship, but the actual number of casualties is unknown. The wreck lies about 10km north of Klaipeda.

If we are to believe the rumours in circulation, *Grossdeutschland* is being withdrawn. The infantry began to fantasize about the Invasion Front: a few days later officers of a foreign unit arrived for instruction on the situation. We noticed that they were veterans: they came from the Kurland Pocket. Some units of our division have already been pulled from the Front and are to be shipped out by sea.

21–23 November 1944

And so that is it. We leave without a song and dance and the transfer of the positions goes ahead. We have even been praised!

End November 1944

Arriving at the port, we saw our ship, a 10,000-tonne freighter. At bow and stern several 3.7cm guns and also quadruple Flak were installed on tall, round, lightly-armoured firing platforms. Loading proceeded apace for the good reason that enemy aircraft could appear at any moment. However, our fighters showed their presence and no Ivan aviators came by. I was not happy to discover that our battalion was being shown to compartments well below the waterline. I thought at once, ‘How would you get out from here alive if the ship were bombed, or worse, torpedoed?’ It would not be the first ship that Ivan had sunk in the Baltic. In addition it was very narrow. Quickly we sought our sleeping places and cheered up when hearing the engines turning over and feeling the ship moving. It was not long before the engines were running full out. Finally, after many hours we were informed that our destination was Königsberg. There were ice floes in the water which made a dull thud in contact with the ship’s hull. ‘I hope we’re not torpedoed’ someone said. Then, ‘Boom’ came a thunderous sound against the hull. Somebody said quietly, ‘Another torpedo. I think the Russians only have duds.’

‘Man, shut your mouth!’ came from the other side. We were told there were few escort vessels available. We reached the Frisches Haff and sailed down the Königsberg Sea Canal into the port. Ashore, we were glad to have firm ground under our feet again. From Königsberg we went by train south for the unloading at Sensburg. We rested at Giesenau, divided up between large farms and estates.

December 1944

Then began again a ‘peacetime-like’ smart and snappy training period. First everything had to be put into proper order, including personal care, clothing inspection and the all-important cleaning of weapons and ammunition. Reinforcements had arrived and had to be fitted in, amongst them to our joy some known comrades returning from convalescence. A happy reunion! A few days later we had a clothing and weapons inspection. I received a new submachine gun, the magazine clip of mine having jammed. Next day was devoted to instruction and we were told what would happen to us while here ‘resting’. We were to be reformed into a Panzerkorps *Grossdeutschland*. The commanding general of the future Panzerkorps, whose appointment had been announced on 1 November 1944, was general of Panzer troops von Saucken.

We kept the new recruits hard at it with field exercises, cleaning and caring for weapons and ammunition. In short, we were ‘fully occupied’. We refused to brood on the grave situation and had platoon and company evenings and much alcohol. Such festivities bring ‘old’ and ‘new’ closer and help them to get to know each other. There is no hope of leave, and so therefore we write home industriously, and also to good friends and acquaintances. And what is just as important, we ourselves receive mail almost regularly. In December when the hours of daylight are less I often think, ‘You are resting here now, but what is yet to come?’ I have been in the east as a front-line soldier since November 1941, participated in the attack on Tula and experienced the grim retreat which followed it and – importantly – survived. I have often escaped from the jaws of death. Then came 1942. The 1941 winter war finally ended, leave! The great summer offensive, from Kursk to Voronezh, the successful offensive to the south,

Stalino (Donets), crossing the Don, advancing as far as the Maytsh-Liman. Then in September Rzhev! My first wound! Warsaw hospital, home leave, convalescent leave, Reserve Brigade Cottbus. 1943. Action on the front line again east of Kharkov, then in the city itself. Back to beyond Poltava. In March the successful counter-attack as far as Tomarovka. After that a period of training and preparation for Operation *Zitadelle*. Broke into and through powerful Russian field positions and fortifications. Then halted at Obayan, south of Kursk. Attack broken off. SS units pulled out on account of the Badoglio treachery in Italy. Our ‘fire brigade’ missions north-east of Smolensk and Bryansk in the so-called Karachev Woods. There together with my comrades Richard Ahlburg and Spiegel promotion from Gefreiter to ‘Bravery Unteroffizier’. The heavy defensive fighting around Achtyrka – Retreat ‘Scorched Earth’. Across the Dnieper at Kremenchug, fighting at Krivoi Rog. Then my transfer to the Army Veterinary Academy, Hannover. 1943/44. After one month (1 Trimester) back to Cottbus, Reserve Brigade *Grossdeutschland*. Short leave Hagen. With the ‘Reinforced Infantry Regiment 1029 *Grossdeutschland*’ – Zakopane – Hungary – Romania – Carpathian Front – Gura Humorului – Jassy – Roman. There very hard defensive fighting! By ‘Blitztransport’ train to East Prussia. Wirballen. Then Kurland – Memel. Now here, Königsberg. What more is intended for us? We hear about ‘miracle weapons’, we already have the V-1 and V-2 used on the Invasion Front and against southern England. Are we to expect more? V-5–V-8? V-9...?

Here on the Eastern Front we have a desperate need of such weapons. But the soldier should not think too much; for that reason there is strict military training and drunken evenings. In general, morale amongst the troops – at least with us, *Grossdeutschland* – is still really good. Optimism with much hopefulness and awareness of duty! That is best. One must never be thinking of a war as lost. What future had our enemies planned for us? Unconditional surrender. ‘Not with us!’ That was how we thought then. Was everything to have been in vain and for nothing? We simply will not believe in the possibility of defeat.

A major field exercise is being planned. The commanding general himself will attend. I am writing an exact memorandum on the role of my

mortars.

The structuring and integration of our divisions and the Brandenburg Division zbV ‘for special purposes’ is proceeding only very slowly. Large elements of the Brandenburgers are still on their way here and the force is not expected to be complete before mid-January 1945. At the Baranov bridgehead on the Vistula in Poland, a large enemy concentration has been confirmed. Since this means we have to expect a Russian offensive, we, that is to say the entire Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland*, has been ordered to move south. Prior to that, however, the big demonstration before the commanding general is to take place.



An expensively-prepared Russian propaganda postcard. The German translation of the Russian text says: ‘Fearsome and dangerous though he may appear, he is not.’ This card was found somewhere and was sent by the Russian field post.

Welch sinn- und zweckloser Tod!

Der russische Vormarsch geht über ihre Leichen
weiter nach Westen.



Die
Widerstand
geleistet
haben...

Heute -- sie, morgen -- Ihr,
wenn Ihr auch weiterhin die verhängnisvollen
Durchhaltebefehle Eurer Kommandeure befolgt.

Frozen German dead on a Russian pamphlet urging German soldiers to defect.

**Die den sinnlosen
Widerstand einstellten...**



Das Kriegsgefangenenlager ist die sicherste Zufluchtsstätte im Kriege.

Bald ist der Krieg aus, und sie werden wohl behalten zu ihren Lieben heimkehren.



After Stalingrad, German soldiers were captured in increasing numbers by the Red Army. Many of them were murdered after they were taken.

für missische Überlämfer!

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ственностью этих крестьян. Нарезка наделов и передача земли в частную собственность будет продолжаться в рамках проводимого в настоящее время землеустройства.

Правом на землю пользуются все, обрабатывающие землю своим трудом. Наравне с крестьянами, проживающими в настоящее время в местах землепользования, землей будут наделены в полной мере и все имеющие на нее право, но временно отсутствующие крестьяне, как например: находящиеся в настоящее время на работах в Германии, на военной службе, военнопленные, военнослужащие красной армии и эвакуированные или сосланные советской властью.

Введение частной собственности на землю для крестьян является признанием их заслуг в деле сельскохозяйственного производства. Приложение всех усилий к восстановлению сельского хозяйства освобожденных областей и в дальнейшем является священным долгом крестьянства, которое этим содействует окончательному низвержению большевизма.

От имени Германского Правительства
Имперский министр

3 июня 1943 года

РОЗЕНБЕРГ

PASSIERSCHEIN

ПРОПУСК — Passierschein



Пропуск действителен для неограниченного числа командиров, бойцов и политработников РККА, переходящих на сторону Германских Вооруженных Сил, их союзников, Русской Освободительной Армии и украинских, караказских, казачьих, туркестанских и татарских освободительных отрядов.



Dieser Passierschein gilt für
Offiziere, Politarbeiter und
Mannschaften der Sowjetarmee

Переходить можно и без пропуска: достаточно поднять обе руки и крикнуть
«Сталин напут» или

«Штыки в землю!»

746 / VI. 43

“Schitka w semlju!”
~~“Сталин напут”~~

Seitensicher in die Erde!

A simple German leaflet with a message for Russian defectors. At the foot, 'Stalin kaputt.
Sidearm into the earth.'

З Е М Л Я Ж Д Е Т В А С !

Бойцы и командиры!

Ваша братия, военнослужащие Красной Армии, добровольно перешедшие на сторону Германских Вооруженных Сил или Русской Освободительной Армии, рассказывают, что советская пропаганда продолжает твердить, что «немцы передают землю крестьянам только во временное пользование». Это **ЛОСЬ!**

В **ПОСТОЯННОЕ** пользование земля была передана уже 16 месяцев назад (постановлением от 15. 2. 42 г.), а сейчас, несмотря на все трудности военного времени, заканчивающееся землеустройство дало возможность признать полученные крестьянами земельные участки их **личной собственностью**. Прочтите сами текст «Декларации» и обратите внимание на то, что **права на землю бесспорно признаются и вами.**

ДЕКЛАРАЦИЯ

Германского правительства о частной собственности крестьян на землю в освобожденных областях.

Германское правительство поощряет и защищает крестьянскую земельную собственность. Поэтому во всех освобожденных от большевиков областях вводится частная собственность на землю для трудового крестьянства.

Основой передачи земли в частную собственность является плановое землеустройство, проводимое согласно постановления о новом порядке землепользования от 15 февраля 1942 года. Земля, которая при проведении этого землеустройства по поручению Германского Управления была отведена крестьянам для постоянного единоличного пользования, признается частной соб-

Whether the Russian 'safe conduct' would save one's life always depended on the current situation locally.

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Gebt Euch freiwillig gefangen!

Deutsche Soldaten!

In letzter Zeit geben sich immer mehr deutsche Soldaten freiwillig der Roten Armee gefangen.

Nach zwei Jahren Krieg im Osten habt Ihr Euch davon überzeugt, daß es eine russische Gefangenschaft gibt und daß alles, was die Hitlerpropaganda darüber erzählt, bewußte Lüge ist. Der beste Beweis sind die 91 000 deutschen Soldaten, 2500 Offiziere und 22 Generäle mit dem Feldmarschall Paulus an der Spitze, die sich bei Stalingrad gefangengenommen haben.

Jetzt möchten viele deutsche Soldaten gern Genauereres über das Leben in der russischen Gefangenschaft erfahren.

Wenden!

Для немецких солдат и офицеров, добровольно сдающихся в русский плен
КОМАНДОВАНИЕ КРАСНОЙ АРМИИ устанавливает следующее удостоверение:



Удостоверение

Дано военнослужащему немецкой армии

звание

фамилия

ГАЗЕЦ

в том, что он добровольно перешел в плен Красной Армии.
Тем самым на него распространяется постановление Командования Красной Армии о льготах и преимуществах, предоставляемых солдатам и офицерам немецкой армии, добровольно перешедшим в русский плен.

Дата

Подпись командира Красной Армии

КОМАНДОВАНИЕ КРАСНОЙ АРМИИ

The Russian offer was a lie. 'The best proof that Russian captivity exists are the 91,000 German soldiers, 2,500 officers and 22 generals led by Field Marshal Paulus who surrendered at Stalingrad.'

Deshalb gibt das **OBERKOMMANDO DER ROTEN ARMEE** bekannt:

Alle Kriegsgefangenen in Sowjetrußland leben, in genauer Übereinstimmung mit dem Völkerrecht, unter normalen Bedingungen, in günstigen klimatischen Verhältnissen, erhalten ausreichende Verpflegung und arbeiten in entsprechenden Berufen. Die Rückkehr in die Heimat nach Kriegsende ist ihnen garantiert.

Der Name des Kriegsgefangenen wird ohne sein Einverständnis nicht veröffentlicht.

Vorzugsbedingungen werden darüber hinaus jenen deutschen Soldaten und Offizieren eingeräumt,

DIE SICH FREIWILLIG GEFANGENGEBEN.

Laut entsprechenden Anweisungen des Oberkommandos der Roten Armee erhalten sie:

- 1. Zusätzliche Verpflegung,**
- 2. Unterbringung in gesonderen Lagern** unter **besonders günstigen klimatischen Bedingungen,**
- 3. Begünstigung bei der Wahl einer Berufsausbildung,**
- 4. Bevorzugung bei der Abfertigung der Briefe** an ihre Angehörigen in Deutschland,
- 5. beschleunigte Rücksendung nach Deutschland** oder auf Wunsch des Kriegsgefangenen in ein anderes Land **sofort** nach Kriegsende.

Auf Anordnung des **OBERKOMMANDOS DER ROTEN ARMEE** wird den Soldaten und Offizieren der deutschen Wehrmacht, die sich freiwillig gefangen geben, folgender Ausweis ausgestellt:



.....
(Datum)

.....
*(Unterschrift des zuständigen
Einheitsführers der Roten Armee)*

DAS OBERKOMMANDO DER ROTEN ARMEE

A safe conduct for Germans who wished to desert to the Russians.



Hitler stabbed to death by a Russian bayonet and those of other countries, the flags of which are difficult to identify.

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Lesen und weitergeben!

DEUTSCHE SOLDATEN!

Wüßt Ihr, was in Eurer Heimat vor sich geht?

Hitlers Feldpostzensur und Eure Offiziere verheimlichen Euch die Wahrheit.

Die englischen Bomber bombardieren täglich deutsche Städte.

Am 8. Juli wurden bombardiert: Köln a/Rh., Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Krefeld, Osnabrück, München-Gladbach, Frankfurt a/M., Münster i. W., Mannheim.

Am 9. Juli wurden bombardiert: die Leuna-Werke, Hamm, Münster i. W., Bielefeld, Osnabrück.

In der Zeit vom 10. bis zum 15. Juli bombardierte die englische Luftflotte ununterbrochen Bremen, Hamburg, Wilhelmshaven, Hannover.

In der Nacht zum 17. Juli unternahmen die englischen Bomber erneut einen starken Luftangriff auf die Industrieviertel von Hamburg.

Allein in den letzten 6 Tagen wurden abgeworfen auf:

Köln	1 000 Tonnen Bomben	
Bremen	500	" "
die Industriezentren		
des Ruhrgebiets über	2 000	" "

The purpose of this Russian leaflet was to worry and unsettle German soldiers by reporting the extent of the RAF raids on German cities. Because the German soldier in 1942-3 had constant concerns for his family at home on account of the Anglo-American bombing, the safe conduct at the foot invited him to defect to the Russians.

Durch die Bombardierungen werden Eure Eltern, Eure Frauen und Eure Kinder getötet. **Die Menschenopfer sind unzählbar.**

Wer ist zur Verantwortung zu ziehen für den Tod Eurer Familien im Hinterland, für das vergossene Blut an der Front?

Verantwortlich dafür ist einzig und allein der Henker Hitler. Er war es, der dieses blutige Abenteuer angezettelt hat, er hat Eure Familien dem Tode geweiht, er jagt Euch in das sichere Verderben.

DEUTSCHE SOLDATEN!

Macht Schluss mit dem Krieg!

Rettet Euer Leben!

Rettet Eure Familien!

GEHT AUF DIE SEITE DER ROTEN ARMEE ÜBER!

ПРОПУСК ЧЕРЕЗ ФРОНТ

**GEHT MIT DIESEM PASSIERSCHEIN
DURCH DIE FRONT**

Deutsche Soldaten! Allen, die auf die Seite der Roten Armee übergehen, wird garantiert: das Leben, gute Behandlung und die Heimkehr nach Kriegsende.

GEHT AUF DIE SEITE DER ROTEN ARMEE ÜBER!

RETTET EUER LEBEN!

H

L

KOMMT ZU UNS!

E

Lesen und weitergeben!

GENERAL YORCKS BEISPIEL

Deutscher Soldat!

Der Krieg ist für Hitler verloren.
Du bist im Herzen bereit, die Fahnen der Schinder und Mörder zu verlassen, aber Du fühlst Dich



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durch Deinen Soldateneld an Hitler gebunden.

Du irrst Dich, wenn Du glaubst, daß die Ehre verlangt, dem hundertmal meineidigen Hitler treu zu bleiben! Sieh auf das Beispiel, das Dir der berühmte

**Held der deutschen Befreiungskriege 1813 – 1815,
Feldmarschall Hans Yorck von Wartenburg,**

Leben hat!

Er hatte seinem König den Treueid des Soldaten geschworen.
Aber er hat seinen Eid gebrochen, er mußte ihn brechen, als er sah,

dß sein Vaterland in Gefahr war.

Auch damals sollte das deutsche Volk gegen seinen natürlichen Verbündeten und Freund, das russische Volk, kämpfen. Dieses

In this leaflet, Russian propaganda fell back on the historical example of General Hans Yorck von Wartenburg who in the German Wars of Liberation of 1813–15 renounced his oath of loyalty to his king when he 'saw that his Fatherland was in peril' and on 30 December 1812 at Tauroggen signed the famous alliance with Russia. Therefore, for the same reasons, German soldiers should 'be a man like Yorck, recognize the hour of peril for Volk und Vaterland' and 'go over to the side of the Red Army'.

Unglück wollte General Yorck verhindern. Er lehnte es ab, das Leben Zehntausender von Deutschen den Weltherrschaftsgelüsten eines Napoleons zum Opfer zu bringen.

Er brach seinen Soldateneid

und unterzeichnete gegen den Willen seines Königs am 30. Dezember 1812 in Tauroggen den berühmten Bündnisvertrag mit Russland.

Mit dieser Tat Yorcks begannen die deutschen Freiheitskriege!

Das deutsche Volk hat dem mutigen General Denkmäler gesetzt,
weil er seinem Volk die Treue gehalten hat!

Deutscher Soldat! Sei ein Mann wie Yorck! Erkenne die Stunde der Gefahr für Volk und Vaterland!

Hilfster muß vernichtet werden, wie einst Napoleon vernichtet wurde,

damit Deutschland wieder frei wird!

Verlaß die Blutfahnen Hitlers!

Geh über auf die Seite der Roten Armee!

Passierschein — Пропуск

Ich, deutscher Soldat, weigere mich, gegen die russischen Arbeiter und Bauern zu kämpfen. Ich gehe freiwillig auf die Seite der Roten Armee über.

Я, немецкий солдат, отказываюсь воевать против русских рабочих и крестьян. Перехожу добровольно на сторону Красной Армии.

Achtung!

Wichtig für jeden Soldaten an der Ostfront!

Deutsche Offiziere und Soldaten!

Euch zu beweisen, daß

Ihr diesen Krieg schon verloren habt,

hieße offene Türen einrennen. Nach Stalingrad und Tunis, nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sommer-Generaloffensive Hitlers auf Kursk, nach der Aufrollung der deutschen Front am Abschnitt Orel und nach der Landung englischer und amerikanischer Truppen auf Sizilien

ist das ja jedem klar.

Ihr wißt auch sehr gut, daß

**die Russen deutsche Offiziere und Soldaten
gefangennehmen und sie am Leben lassen.**

Glaubt doch schon lange niemand mehr dem Propagandaschwindel, daß die Russen Gefangene umbringen.

Ihr Soldaten müßt aber auch von den

Vergünstigungen und Vorrechten

wissen, die die Rote Armee denjenigen gewährt, die sich
freiwillig gefangengegeben.

Diese Vergünstigungen und Vorrechte sind in einem Befehl des Oberkommandos der Roten Armees aufgezählt und bestehen in:

Despite all the appeals, from his own experiences at the Front it was obvious to the German soldier that if he defected to the Russians there was no way in which he could expect fair treatment.

1. zusätzlicher Verpflegung,
2. Unterbringung in gesonderen Lagern unter besonders günstigen klimatischen Bedingungen,
3. Begünstigung bei der Wahl einer Berufsausbildung,
4. Bevorzugung bei der Abferligung der Briefe an ihre Angehörigen in Deutschland,
5. beschleunigter Rücksendung nach Deutschland oder auf Wunsch des Kriegsgefangenen in ein anderes Land sofort nach Kriegsende.

Den Offizieren und Soldaten, die sich freiwillig gefangen geben, wird von dem zuständigen Einheitsführer der Roten Armee ein Ausweis ausgestellt, auf dessen Vorweisung den Kriegsgefangenen die angeführten Vergünstigungen gewährt werden.

DEUTSCHE OFFIZIERE UND SOLDATEN

In der letzten Zeit ist die Zahl der deutschen Offiziere und Soldaten, die sich freiwillig gefangen geben, stark angewachsen. Sie überschreiten die Frontlinie in Gruppen und einzeln, mit Waffen und ohne Waffen, mit Flugblättern und Passierscheinen und ohne sie.

Das Oberkommando der Roten Armee hat in Berücksichtigung dessen, daß die Überschreitung der Frontlinie mit gewissen Gefahren verbunden ist (Minen, Beschließung deutscherseits usw.), angeordnet:

1. die Gefangengabe deutscher Offiziere und Soldaten in jeder Weise zu erleichtern, nötigenfalls ihnen Pioniere entgegenzuschicken, um ihnen die Durchgänge durch Minenfelder und andere Sperren zu zeigen;
2. jeden Versuch von deutscher Seite, den deutschen Offizieren und Soldaten, die sich freiwillig gefangen geben, in den Rücken zu schießen, unverzüglich mit Feuermittel zu unterdrücken.

Dieses Flugblatt gilt als Passierschein für deutsche Soldaten und Offiziere, die sich der Roten Armee gefangen geben

Эта листовка служит пропуском для немецких солдат и офицеров при сдаче в плен Красной Армии

During his time on the Eastern Front, the author made a collection of leaflets printed by both sides and sent them home. They are very interesting historical documents.

Lesen und weitergeben!

DEUTSCHE SOLDATEN!

Hitler betrügt euch, wenn er euch vom schnellen Sieg vorschwäzt. Um seine wahnsinnigen Pläne zu verwirklichen, schont er euer Blut und euer Leben nicht.

Hitler wird den Sieg über Sowjetrussland nie erleben.

DAS MÄCHTIGE ENGLAND HAT MIT DER MÄCHTIGEN SOWJETUNION EIN ABKOMMEN ABGESCHLOSSEN, MIT DEM EINZIGEN ZIEL DEN FASCHISMUS ZU VERNICHTEN.

Jetzt sind diesem Bunde eine Reihe Länder beigetreten: **POLEN UND DIE TSCHECHOSLOWAKEI HABEN MIT DER SOWJETUNION EIN ABKOMMEN ÜBER GEMEINSAMES VORGEHEN GEGEN DEN HITLERISMUS ABGESCHLOSSEN. DiesER KOALITION HAT SICH AUCH JUGOSLAWIEN ANGESCHLOSSEN.**

Hunderte Millionen ehrlicher Leute der ganzen Welt schliessen sich zusammen und beginnen den Feldzug zur Vernichtung der Hitlerbande und des blutigen Hitlerismus.

Diesen fortgeschrittenen Leuten hilft so ein mächtiges Land wie die **VEREINIGTEN STAATEN VON NORDAMERIKA** und sympathisiert mit ihnen.

Zweifelt jemand von euch am Untergang Hitlers und des Hitlerismus?

Opfert nicht umsonst euer junges Leben auf, setzt euch nicht den russischen Kugeln aus. Zu Hause erwarten euch eure Frauen, Kinder und liebe Mädchen.

GEHT ZU UNS ÜBER! HIER WERDET IHR BRÜDERLICH UND FREUNDSCHAFTLICH EMPFANGEN.

AUF DIESEM WEG RETTET IHR EUER LEBEN UND FINDET FRIEDEN.

It had to be made clear to the German soldier that the whole world was against him, which largely corresponded to the facts.





A soldier decorated with the Iron Cross Second Class seated on an armoured personnel carrier.





Generalleutnant Walter Hörnlein was much liked and admired in his *Grossdeutschland* Division, and for his leadership accomplishments received the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross on 15 March 1943. His final rank was General der Infanterie.



A German Panther tank rolls towards a burning Russian T-34.

1945

Chapter 14

From Memel to Königsberg: The Journey Continues

1–10 January 1945

We had left the Memel bridgehead by sea and from 26 November 1944 were brought in various troop transports over the Baltic and through the Pillau Canal to Königsberg. There we were loaded on railway wagons and brought to the planned waiting area. Our 8 Company/II Battalion/Panzer Grenadier Battalion is in and around Wiesenau in quarters with East Prussian farmers. Our new regimental commander, Oberst Heesemann, has his command post at Laxdoyen/Rastenburg. We spent some weeks resting interspersed with field exercises in order that the young replacements become accustomed to the raw reality. We celebrated Christmas and New Year in style. The big question is ‘What next?’ The overall situation is not encouraging! We have been assembled here to merge with other battle-experienced units, including the famous Brandenburg Rifle Division, into a new Panzerkorps *Grossdeutschland*. There is talk of a planned attack from East Prussia against the Russian Narev Front with the objective of wiping out the enemy’s attack spearheads. German troops attacking from the south-west will then build a great pocket to encircle the survivors and annihilate them.

11 January 1945

Our orders arrived today! We drove towards Praschnitz, and set up in a village, exercising. There is snow on the ground and it is very cold. On the night of 31 December 1944 we fired a salute to the New Year with our 8.14cm mortars. We worked out the aiming point on the map – a swamp –

but next morning some irate Polish farmers complained that partisans had fired on them during the night! We were speechless until discovering that this swamp had been recently drained and settled! We promised to drive out the partisans. One day a great exercise was arranged, to be held on a frozen area of moorland. Much live ammunition was to be fired. The Commanding General, Panzerkorps, and of the future *Grossdeutschland* Panzerkorps, von Saucken, came to observe in person. The infantry assault went off with much chattering of sub-machine guns and cries of ‘Hurrah!’, light and heavy MGs fired, our mortars made their characteristic sound. A great deal of live ammunition was used. Because under actual battle conditions we mortars are often short of ammunition we decided to keep back a lot of this ammunition for a later, better purpose as ‘black’ ammunition, i.e. not on the books. At the end of the exercise when the quantities of ammunition fired were reported, the high visitor said, ‘That is not possible. I only heard half this amount. I want an accurate report!'

‘*Jawohl, Herr General!*’. Now I considered how the shortfall could be explained. The whole platoon searched the frozen moor next morning for duds but could not find any! This crooked business of the saved ammunition was very useful later. I was threatened with an investigation but fortunately nothing came of it after we moved on again. We were billeted in a former Polish barracks, perhaps in Praschnitz itself. Then came 12 January 1945!

12 January 1945

We drove to a readiness position near a convent. We spent a night at the institution where some staff or other is located. Sleep was almost out of the question we were so tense, anticipating what we are about to face. On a clear, frosty night we moved up to our jumping-off point. The advance began but somehow the feeling of security which I always sensed when *Grossdeutschland* made an attack was absent.

13 January 1945

We knew from the enemy that the Russian General Rokossovski had advanced from the Pultusk-Rozan bridgehead north-west towards the port

of Elbing, his right flank heading for Praschnitz-Ortelsburg for access to the Baltic. This would cut off Army Group Centre. Our objective is to prevent the enemy crossing the river Orzyc.

14 January 1945

We reached Ploniavy just short of the Orzyc. We are to advance to the eastnorth-east towards the panzer fusiliers. There seems to be firing everywhere, Ivan is ‘raising hell’.

15 January 1945

Our II Battalion, led by Hauptmann Sommer, had as its first objective the villages of Golonivy and Gasevo. Although the support from our heavy weapons was not as good as it has been in the past, we took Golonivy fairly quickly. Ivan seems to be here in large numbers! One of our young officers, not long with us, fell here leading a heavy MG platoon. We attacked Borowe at midday. Our old war horse Oberfeldwebel Ernst Baerwald stopped a Russian attack with a determined counter-attack. He led a hand grenade attack on the Ivans until shot through the cheek. He was shouting ‘Hurrah!’ at the time and considered it lessened the effect of the wound. Our attack went ahead well! The *Tross* followed close behind. The houses lay in a gully. Ivan fired his Stalin organs and we hastened forwards through a gorge into the Russian positions. When they fired again, without thinking I threw myself into a Russian earth bunker, a fairly deeply dug one, my platoon messenger Obergefreiter Günter Lorenz (fell March 1945) so close behind me that we both almost flew inside. Inside almost total darkness, outside the rockets of the Stalin organ detonating. A vile drumming! Finally it came to an end, then for endless long minutes deathly quiet. I struggled up and stumbled across somebody lying on the ground, moving and groaning. I readied my sub-machine gun to fire!

‘Günter, there’s one lying there!’

He replied, ‘Yeah, and there’s more of them.’

I instinctively backed up against the wall. At that moment, Günter’s torch flickered on. Six to eight Russians lay on wooden plank beds against the wall: in front of me on the ground was another, his uniform greatcoat torn:

he was heavily bandaged, red with blood, groaning. We recognized a Commissar. I called out: '*Ruki wwerch! Poloshi orugie!*' ('Hands up, weapons down!') These Russians could have finished us off easily, nobody outside would have noticed. Boldly we began to put it over the Russians and disarm them. They had large quantities of ammunition in their pockets and haversacks. We tore down the bunker door (actually sackcloth) in order to have more light. Then I saw the Commissar lying on the ground: a young man, about our age, who spoke to me but I could not understand him. I looked at the other Ivans for help. One made a gesture of shooting. I asked again: yes, the Commissar wanted to be shot. He had a dreadful wound in his back from which the blood was flowing freely. Günter and I exchanged enquiring glances. Then something rolled into the bunker from outside – a hand grenade! A deafening blast ensued. We were both unharmed! 'Out of here, as fast as possible!' Inside the bunker somebody fired a shot. 'The swine are shooting!' Günter called out – and then we opened fire with our sub-machine guns until it fell quiet in the bunker – really quiet this time.

Outside the attack rolled on. We paused by a dug-in Stalin tank in the captured Russian trenches. It had grown dark and we sought positions for passing the night. Many Russian earth bunkers were available. I occupied one as forward spotter for my mortars. The firing pits were naturally further back in a wood. I allotted the positions, here too there were many Russian earth bunkers. Then a telephone wire was laid to the observation post. The night was cloudless, starry and cold. Russian bombers wandered the skies. To my left and right were occupied earth bunkers. Half right of us was the village of Borowe, where the mortar platoon went with the heavy MGs led by Feldwebel Walter Pfeil (from Hagen). He had previously been a motorcycle rider and finally head of the 8 Company forward *Tross*. There was heavy firing all night in Borowe. We were told that our company commander, Hauptmann Sommer, was wounded today, His successor is Oberleutnant Mackert. We tried to sleep. Now and again I tested the telephone line. When morning came I was shivering with cold and had hardly slept. Once again I examined the line to the firing position and this time when turning the crank I noticed that the line was severed. The connection was 'dead'. I sent a messenger to patch it up but no sooner had

he left than Ivan began a furious artillery bombardment. His aim was very good: it was almost impossible to see through the smoke and fumes of the explosions. It went on for about fifteen minutes. I had the line tested again, still dead. I sent out a second messenger to make the repair, after which he was to proceed to the mortar position and inform the NCO in charge that he should lay down independent curtain fire if unable to establish contact with me. Scarcely had he set out than Ivan's artillery resumed, his shells falling not only close to my observation post, but also farther back near the mortar pit. Ivan was firing 15.2cm 'Black Pig' rounds. We cowered down, pressed against the forward bunker wall and listened to the shells whizzing past overhead and exploding further to the rear. I wondered about my mortars. The bombardment was turning into a barrage. After a while there was a pause. This was dangerous, for it could be followed by an infantry attack. Therefore I left the bunker to assess the situation.

Outside the snow was harsh white. To my left and ahead of me our own infantry was firing 'lustily'. But weren't they Russian sub-machine guns? I saw Ivans trudging through the knee-deep snow, through our own lines. Where were our infantry? Therefore they had made an incursion in the line to our left; in front of us there was no activity. I wondered if my two messengers had got through. Did the NCO in command of the mortars know his orders? Ivan fired his artillery again: this time the salvo was meant for us. We sprinted back to the bunker and got down seconds before the shells arrived. The wooden bunker trembled and shook under the impacts. They were damn' close. We curled up small and insignificant against the bunker wall, then with an ugly short hissing noise one shell hit the rear corner of the bunker. Beams flew, the bunker door fell outwards, earth sprayed up. Deathly quiet. We had survived it unscathed, but scarcely had we stumbled to our feet than we heard the cries of 'Urraaah!', and not far off. As soon as the firing ceased we exited, looked ahead: they were coming. Ivans everywhere, some without the white winter camouflage uniform. Crying 'Urraaah!', their rifles fixed with the long three-edged bayonet which went through marrow and bone! Everywhere Ivan, ahead of us and to our flanks. To the right of us the MG men sat firing as fast as they could reload the belts! But the Ivans kept advancing, and there were so

many of them! My mortars were not shooting. Why? In desperation I sent up a red flare. No response. A few shells from our light infantry gun (7.5cm) exploded between the attackers but did not stop them. We sprayed them with sub-machine gun fire from cover. Occasionally the Ivans would throw themselves flat into the snow and then resume the advance. Suddenly some Il-2 fighter-bombers came up with the loud engine noise so well known to us, diving on our positions and strafing with their cannon, MGs and then the whistling rockets. The Russians had got very close to the three of us at the observation post: we had only a handful of infantry nearby. I looked back and saw our infantry in the snow at many places and in groups. Their tactic was to lie in the snow and fire at the attackers, alternately moving back frequently through the high snow in a bid to reach a wood of fir trees. We had two Panzerfaust which made a good noise when fired and impressed the Ivans enough to force them to seek cover. Now we also tried to make a run for it, but ‘running’ in the knee-deep snow was not so easy. Halfway there we three were engaged by a fighter-bomber. Its bullets whipped into the snow around us but our luck held and we kept heading for the wood. Its engine groaning loudly, the fighter-bomber lost interest and climbed away. The Russians had long had air supremacy here.

On the way to the pine wood I struggled towards the mortar pit but it was no longer there. Heart hammering up to my throat, sweat clinging to my whole body, difficulty in breathing. I threw myself down in the snow and lay there for a moment totally exhausted. Thoughts raced through my head: what a hopeless situation. Have we lost the war? We need a miracle. Where are the promised ‘miracle weapons’? Back, back! I staggered and reeled more than I ‘ran’. My legs, heavy as lead, did not want to go on any more. The sun shone so brightly on the snow that one could see clearly every German or Russian running. Meanwhile the shells of both sides continued to rain down. I reached my mortar position. It looked bad, everywhere black holes in the snow from the shelling. Here a mortar destroyed, there a case of ammunition torn open, but thank God, no dead! No blood! Tracks in the snow led from the abandoned position towards the wood. My platoon had gone, I could not find it and night was falling. We three set up a provisional hole-in-the-snow position at the edge of the wood with the men of the MG

platoon. My own platoon remained elusive. I joined forces with Feldwebel Walter Pfeil (from Hagen), leading the MG group. Gradually things calmed and people began to find each other. Defensive measures were set up. Messengers arrived with information as to where rations could be collected. They also knew where my mortars crews were. I took my leave of Walter Pfeil to find my platoon. A Russian tank or anti-tank gun was firing nearby. I had not got far, shells exploding against trees made the area unhealthy. Minutes later Feldwebel Pfeil was hit and fell. He was in the same hole where we had smoked our farewell cigarettes. (After my release from American internment in the summer of 1945 I broke the news of his death personally to his parents in Hagen.) Finally I found the village with the rations and also my platoon. Despite heavy losses we had been lucky. I was able to put together three mortar troops, but we had to retreat further, breaking off contact with the enemy!

17 January 1945

We passed the cloisters from where we had begun the attack and overnight fell back on the Ploniavy area. Here we found more or less prepared positions. My mortars were set up in the village itself, the light infantry gun behind the village. Limbers and some lorries stood ready. My observation post was in a small earth bunker in a little wood of beech trees. Before we could identify and zero-in on aiming points and curtain-fire areas, Ivan attacked half right of us. A crazy exchange of fire began. I saw at least 150 to 200 Russians break through about 300 to 400m away with a fearful ‘Urraaah!’ and head for the village. I still had no telephone line to my mortars but the NCO in charge fired on his own initiative. I emptied two sub-machine gun magazines into the advancing Russians – so close had they got – and the mortars and light infantry gun also engaged the attackers. Those of us forward gave vent to our feelings as we retired. It was arranged that two infantry guns would fire while the others and my mortars pulled out and set up in new positions to the rear. From there the two infantry guns would have covering fire as they retired in turn. We tried to hold the position but it wouldn’t work, the pressure from the Russian hordes was too great and we had to change position to the rear again.

In a village we saw a large earth bunker roofed over with thick tree trunks. As we were about to get in, we saw that the bunker was packed with civilians. Many had sought protection here. Ivan was firing on the village with his 15.2cm 'Black Pig' which made an awful sound. The bunker and earth shook at each explosion. There being no room for us, we had to look elsewhere for shelter. We found an old vaulted cellar. In we went, it was full of anxious villagers. We had a short rest there, posted sentries and considered our situation. It was very shitty. The Russians seemed to be approaching in a semi-circle stretching north-east to south-west. I asked myself where the front line would hold them. The company commanders discussed it with the battalion commander. We were in danger of encirclement. Break out? Break through? But to where? The villagers cowered in fear in the cellar. How could we answer their questions? We were in it up to our necks ourselves. Women and children crying, we would like to help, but how? The tears of women and children soften the heart. For us it was an awful situation. Meanwhile night had fallen, and the Russians had not yet made it to this village. We received fresh orders.

18 January 1945

We broke contact with the enemy at 0200hrs, general direction north, towards Willenberg. We went on foot through woods, often along the roads on which Russian troops and tanks were heading in the same direction. Being in command of the mortars I was at the head of the column with the company commanders. Snow crunched under our boots: we proceeded as quietly as we could through the woods northwards. Suddenly we saw a red light shining through the trees. We approached cautiously and then recognized it as a railway signal at 'Halt'. This was the line Neidenburg–Willenberg–Ortelsburg. The signal might show 'Halt' but it wouldn't stop the Russians! We went on northwards towards Ortelsburg. No contact with Ivan. We moved almost only by night and through woodland. From Ortelsburg to the north-west, towards Passenheim-Purdensee. The situation remained uncertain. We came to places where there *were* Russians, who had got there before us. Like the fable of the tortoise and the hare. It happened several times and seemed weird. Next we built a defensive line. I had a

good observation post and telephone connection to my mortars. I tested the line: it was dead. A linesman sortied but returned soon with the news that our line had been stolen, 400m of it was missing! Telephone wire was in short supply because in our many relocations we had left it lying where it was. Later we found out that our own 15cm heavy infantry gun people had appropriated it as being ‘ownerless’.

21–22 January 1945

As happens almost every day, Ivan advanced with tanks, infantry seated on the hulls. If he can't go through us he goes around and is soon ahead of us or nearby. We have been ordered to pull back again. The companies are often only twenty to thirty strong. II Battalion is only half its authorized fighting strength. Where have the missing men gone? Wounded, straggling, missing, dead?

We had a good position in a farmstead on the Wartenburg road north-west of Gillau. My observation post was in the roof of a tall barn which gave me a good overview of the surrounding countryside. It is advisable here to keep a watch to all sides. We had been lucky so far: no contact with the enemy. In the evening as we went back the Russians fired phosphorus shells into a village. The glaring white fireballs erupted and soon many houses were on fire. Again and again the same bright flaring up. We reached our combat vehicles stationed in a farmstead. ‘Get in!’ A journey by night into the unknown! It has been the same routine for days. We hold a position, Ivan goes around us, we have to dismantle the mortars and move out in order to avoid encirclement, set up another position and so the game goes on!

23 January 1945

We are to keep going northwards so as to keep Ivan behind and near us, and we head always into the attack spearheads coming up from the east. Is Ivan everywhere? After a long night drive in which we hoped to unhitch from Ivan sufficiently to get some peace and quiet for a few hours, we set up positions on an estate. I believe we are all that remains of II Battalion. Even here the Russians are about. My mortars are under cover behind the buildings, six 8cm mortars ready to fire and with an adequate supply of

ammunition. My lorry stands well protected behind a small building fully loaded with ammunition. In the roof of the house I have an outstanding observation post with a wide view to the nearby woods. This wood is unsafe, being full of Russians. The remnants of the infantry companies have secured the estate within an outer circle. The battalion wants to clear the wood of Russians but the attempts so far have been unsuccessful. The companies have only fifteen to twenty men (authorized strength 150). There is always crazy firing from within the wood upon our approach.

(Later). They remembered the ‘gypsy artillery’, as they call us (so-called for our practice of dismantling the individual mortars into ground plate, bipod and barrel and carrying it on our backs, the barrel on the shoulder). The new idea was that either I or one of my NCOs should accompany the infantry into the wood. I declined. Reason: as advanced spotter to direct mortar fire I cannot function without radio or telephone line. How could I pass back my instructions? I made an alternative suggestion. I could fire a barrage of 8cm mortar bombs ahead of our attacking infantry to keep Ivan’s nose in the snow and also, from those bombs which exploded against trees, unleash a rain of splinters to wipe out Ivans in cover. I had plenty of ammunition in reserve plus the ‘black’ bombs from the field exercise. I convinced the battalion commander. There were no more attacks into the wood. I observed that the Russians were now attempting to move a strong force out of this wood to the road leading north which ran through heavily-forested country. This would enable them to block our own path northwards. Because I could not see far enough in that direction from my high perch, I went with Oberfeldwebel Grosse (commanding the light infantry guns) through roadside ditches, under cover of bushes, along the northbound road in order to see where the Russians were settling. We established that they had set up anti-tanks guns either side of the road to receive us should we attempt to break through. Grosse and I made a plan for the coming evening. We are the remnants of II Battalion/Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*. Our division intervened far and wide wherever it flared up: it had happened often enough in the past, that was why the name *Grossdeutschland* was synonymous with ‘fire brigade’. We put our plan to the battalion commander and he accepted it. I

would fire one mortar at the anti-tank guns on the road to get the range, and then the other mortars would follow. The ammunition runners laid out the cleaned mortar bombs near the mortars and under cover to protect them against dirt. Because mortars are ‘muzzle loaders’, and the bombs with the propellant charge are dropped fins-first into the barrel, it is important that on loading no foreign substances such as grass or earth enter the barrel. I laid our weapons so that our fire would impact in the centre of the highway, where the Russian gun was placed, and to both sides of it. Oberfeldwebel Grosse had also zeroed-in his infantry guns but he was very short of ammunition. It had grown dark and Russian riflemen were firing explosive rounds from the woods which burst around our ears. The white-blue explosive bursts could be seen everywhere against branches of trees and house walls. If a soldier was hit, they tore open a great wound. The German infantry had nothing like it. We were now prepared. The artillery tractors and lorries were ready to move, the infantry ready to advance, my mortars and the light infantry guns ready to fire. All six mortars fired simultaneously with an incessant ‘flupp’ sound. The infantry guns fired: my mortar bombs were still in the air when the first infantry shells hit. Range 250m.

We made it hot for Ivan who did not reply and put his nose into the dirt. None dared raise his head initially. Now our infantry ran towards them, the vehicles close behind. We fired as fast as possible. On the road my mortar bombs detonated incessantly around the anti-tank guns. Ammunition exploded! Before reaching the barricade I spread my fire into the wood and dense undergrowth to force out the Russians sheltering there. None of the enemy anti-tank guns fired, and my mortar bombs came down in a hail – thirty of them close together on and around the guns within a few seconds. Their gunners had neither fired a round nor noticed the approach of our column. I redirected the aim of my mortars along the edges of the wood, three to the left and three to the right. I had such a surfeit of ammunition I could keep firing salvos from six mortars! My men were so worked up with eagerness in loading that I feared a possible accident in which a barrel might be reloaded before the previous bomb had left. I have to say that I too was overcome by a devilish joy. After the plan had succeeded and the small

convoy had rolled past the wrecked anti-tank guns, only a little infantry fire having been necessary, all I could shout was ‘Fire! Fire! Fire!’ Now all that mattered was to shift position ahead (or to the rear) of the enemy. Our infantry guns had also been firing. I gave the order to dismantle four mortars, load them on the infantry gun lorries, which were also planning to change position and so would follow our column which had broken through. I had a problem with one of the last two mortars while loading up. In the general excitement we had not noticed that one of them had ceased firing. The reason was that the fixed firing pin in the base had broken. Taking the weapon apart was not so simple as we thought. The barrels were almost ‘glowing’ hot. If the other four mortars were to be set up in a good firing position, they could give us covering fire for our own breakthrough. I remained behind with the fifth and sixth, awaited the first ‘protective’ bombs coming our way with an edgy feeling (the first ones can often be a bit close to our side), but we could rely on each other now. The minutes turned to eternities in case Ivan was going to do something from inside the woods, but then I heard the mortars fire and watched the first accurate salvos arrive.

‘Dismantle equipment! Load up! Stow remaining ammunition! Get in and report readiness!’ Everything was done swiftly and we set off in my captured lorry (a Russian Chevrolet) with our ammunition. Passing the wrecked anti-tank guns we saw what our efforts had achieved. No Ivan moved at or behind the guns. I also noticed the ammunition for these guns destroyed in an explosion caused by a direct hit. The Russians had four of these guns in position: all looked irreparable. Only a small amount of infantry fire came our way from within the wood either side of the road. As previously reported, we had a problem dismantling the mortar with the broken firing bolt. The bomb had not set off the propulsive charge and had remained in the ‘glowing hot’ barrel. This had to be removed first by carefully tipping it out. In the course of almost four war years I had only experienced two of these feared ‘barrel bursters’ and each time there had been deaths. Here we were more fortunate. I had fired about 125 mortar rounds against the Russian anti-tank gun barrier and to each side of it. The

battalion commander was very impressed by my fireworks and the remainder of II Battalion got out scot-free.

25 January 1945

We have escaped Ivan's encirclement and continued north-west and occupied a new position in a village. We didn't have the chance to sleep a wink before the accursed Ivan shelled us. Otherwise the night remained quiet.

26 January 1945

Recommendation for the Award of the Iron Cross, First Class

In the heavy defensive fighting in East Prussia on 23 January 1945, by his own decisiveness and efficient deployment of his mortar platoon, Unteroffizier Rehfeldt, mortar platoon leader, 8. Company mortar platoon II Battalion/Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*, made possible the break-out without casualties of the encircled remnants of II Battalion Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* from a farmstead and through a crossroads blocked by six enemy anti-tank guns northwest of Gillau on the road to Wartenburg. The enemy anti-tank gun crews were overwhelmed and failed to fire. The covering force for this gun barrier was also overwhelmed. This saved for the regiment a strong unit of infantry, four light infantry guns, six mortars and the allotted vehicles. The battalion commander has recommended to the Herr Regimental Commander the award of the Iron Cross First Class to Unteroffizier Rehfeldt for this successful and highly individual decision.

Unteroffizier Rehfeldt has proved himself repeatedly since the heavy defensive battle in the Karachev Wood, from Achtyrka to the Dnieper Crossing at Kremenchug, in Romania and finally in the breakthrough attempt from East Prussia to Kurland as leader of the mortar platoon, and that always as sparingly as possible of the men assigned to him.

In the Field, 26 January 1945

Hinnerk, Oberleutnant.'

(The decoration was awarded later in the field.)

In the morning Ivan's fighter-bombers came and attacked us with bombs, cannon, MGs and rockets. After that we received the order to pull out and drove in a north-westerly direction until reaching another village for a few hours' rest. We did not get any, however, new defensive positions were indicated for development. On the way there we passed refugees with fully packed horsedrawn wagons leaving the village. They do not know how close the Russians are. The local Party leader (NSDAP Ortsgruppenleiter) had until then refused them permission to leave, and so they stayed until the last moment. Later on we saw many of these refugee columns lying by the roadside crushed by Russian tanks. A hideous sight. The populace was poorly informed, either not warned at all or much too late. It was also our experience that French and British prisoners of war accompanied their German farmers and landowners (mostly women) and helped them where they could. They had decided to themselves flee before their Russian ally! Many of them on these treks died with the German families. That is evidence that the prisoners were not badly treated. The villages through which we passed gave the impression that the occupants had fled only a few hours before. Everything looked like it had been fled in great haste.

We were near Passenheim and tramped through thick snow in a wood along the Allenstein–Ortelsburg railway line. Towards evening I led the mortars to a position at the side of the railway embankment. The enemy was expected to the north-east. About 250m ahead was a road running almost parallel to the railway line. The embankment fell quite steeply down to this road. Behind us was a thick forest of firs. After the individual mortars had found a good spot they zeroed-in. We were without infantry protection and had to handle the security aspect ourselves. Whoever was not working outside went into a bunker to keep warm. Our infantry was farther left up on the railway embankment and in a farmstead to our right. In the night we felt rather alone and abandoned. The enemy was neither to be heard nor seen. The silence was deceptive. Suddenly there was movement on the road: a challenge rang out and received fire in reply. Ivan again. Wild shooting broke out. Ivan hit back smartly. My people stood at their mortars, ready to fire. Some flares went up! Flickering bright white, they lit up the surrounding area, and we came under fire from the right. It

appeared that Ivan had come along the railway tracks where we supposed our infantry to be last evening. Soon Ivan opened up with his own mortars. Our people were totally without cover. In a second bombardment, one of my men, Gefreiter Bader, received a leg wound. Because the situation here was confused and we did not appear to have infantry cover on the right flank, I ordered a change of position. In the heavy firing on the flanks, with MGs firing along the railway track, I succeeded in bring out all my men, mortars and ammunition without further loss. Our infantry meanwhile seemed to have got a grip on the situation and the sector gradually fell quieter. I led my platoon about 800m back through the wood to a farmstead where I found the artillery spotter for the 15cm heavy infantry guns. Here we dug in. Whoever could got some sleep. We were so exhausted we could have slept standing up. The night remained quiet: I reflected on what we would do tomorrow morning.

27 January 1945

We made our way cautiously through the wood back to the railway line. Here we found that Ivan was present in large numbers. We would have to place our firing positions much deeper in the wood. After 200m I came to a small clearing just big enough for five mortars. Being a pure high-trajectory weapon, it needs only a relatively small gap between the treetops. My observation post was right on the edge of the wood. There I met Oberfeldwebel Grosse, now leading the company. Unfortunately as I had neither radio nor telephone connection, a human chain had to be set up for passing messages to the mortars. One of my group leaders, Unteroffizier Wieser, was zeroing-in his mortars. Each one of his commands echoed loudly through the woods and was then repeated down the line. Ivan could hear this. Then Wieser was wounded by a mortar bomb! When Ivan fired with an MG into the wood, the ricochets twittered around our ears. We had to be very careful. Because the railway embankment runs close to the edge of the wood and then falls steeply down to the road, it created a ‘dead zone’ out of our sight which could be dangerous for us. Thus I ordered ‘barrier fire’ on the embankment slope and as far as the road so that the splinters often flew about our ears. We might have been able to close the road down

with barrier fire, but what was Ivan doing knowing we were well prepared and had the range? He did not attack, but passed by our sides. He took the route of least resistance. So here we have no 'front line'.

28 January 1945

We changed position again and finished up at Graskau. I set up my platoon command post in a house. The off-duty men are at work on the stove so that we can get thoroughly warmed. We had luck when a chicken crossed our path, so we can eat well. My 2 Group can set up its position in the village but 1 Group has to make do near a frozen lake. The ice is thick so we have to be careful that Ivan does not cross it and attack us from the rear. 1 Group (Unteroffizier Sprengala) set off while 2 Group (Unteroffizier Ramm) was happy to remain, performed ablutions, attended to their weapons, cooked, baked and roasted. Our sentries outside reported the sound of firing coming from the Sprengala group. Soon I heard the typical sound of my mortars firing. The firing and impact are strangely muffled by the deep snow of the wood. In case they ran short of ammunition, I loaded a sled with bombs and went to their position. We drove through the snow hearing only the panting and puffing of the horses and the rushing of the skids. We kept a lynx-like watch! Scarcely had we got back to the village than the Russians mounted a violent attack. Where could they have come from? I had had luck on my sleigh ride and just missed driving straight into Ivan's arms! We had held the position so far but Ivan had got to the first houses quickly. Fire was coming from all directions, but so far not from my mortars. Finally I heard the first being fired, almost vertically, range 30 to 50m. The Russians took cover, then the mortar fire stopped. Next the artillery tractor with the infantry gun came through the snow with its engine racing loudly and with some of our infantry running behind it. I decided not to go to the firing position but stand my ground here with my sub-machine gun. Then the first of my mortar crews arrived following the infantry, one holding the bipod under his arm, the gunner with the barrel on his shoulder followed by the mortar captain with the base plate and sight. The other mortar had also been dismantled and had disappeared into slight depression. All were present, even the ammunition runners with their cases. I stood with a few other men

pouring fire from my sub-machine gun into the mass of arriving Ivans crying ‘Urраah!’ The situation became critical and we also retired into the depression out of sight of the attackers. We must always stay together. I saw an infantryman wearing a driver’s green overcoat over his winter uniform running between the houses as if lost. I did not recognize him until finally joined us in the depression. When I asked who he was and where he was trying to get to, he revealed himself as Oberleutnant Hinnerk from Danzig, who would be taking over 8 Company. It was his bad luck to arrive at our village just at that moment when Ivan decided to make a surprise attack on it. The infantry guns and my mortars were quickly in position and we agreed to open fire jointly and then counter-attack. It was a glorious concentration of fire on the village and then a competent counter-attack followed with mortar fire, the infantry guns barking and we soldiers on foot throwing hand grenades at the corners of the houses. And we were successful. The attack was made by our few ammunition runners and the two drivers. The Russians were shocked and ran for it in dispersed groups into the nearby woods where they received a rain of splinters and ricochets from mortar bombs exploding against trees. It was enough and it fell quiet. We posted more sentries and enough men at the mortars for immediate fire if necessary. The new company commander was very impressed with our mortar operation, from which he could obtain his initial experience on the battlefield! Once back in my command post I was delighted to find my chicken still sizzling on the stove! The Ivans had not had time to eat it themselves. For the time being they left us in peace, and during the night we set off northwards again.

29 January 1945

Some elements of the company moved out on horse-drawn sleds, the rest on foot, to the vehicles which were to bring us north. We went via Wartenburg-Bischofsburg to Lautern, where we held Ivan once more and enabled many columns of refugees to make it through to Königsberg. We were fully motorized again and made good speed to reach Fortress Königsberg, because the enemy was attempting to cut us off at Friedland and Uderwungen. We passed Bischofstein and the eastern side of Heilsberg,

where we saw some concrete bunkers not yet ready for occupation which probably formed part of the ‘Heilsberg Triangle’, the area where after the First World War fortifications had had to be built in East Prussia. Our route continued to Bartenstein where we obtained telephone cable and other useful items from a large warehouse. In the towns and villages the mood was often one of panic. It was a sad sight. A great throng on the road to Königsberg. Everybody trying to get to Königsberg. Many refugees, held back in their towns and villages by the Party, became involved in the fighting. We witnessed dreadful scenes. Fully loaded horse-drawn carts, shot up and crushed by Russian tanks, many dead civilians in the gutter and dead, squashed horses alongside overturned wagons. Trunks, cases, household goods, bedding and other belongings lay strewn near the carts. Here the Russians, incited to revenge and murder by Ilya Ehrenburg, unleashed their lust in the most inhuman and vile manner on the defenceless population, on women and children, on old men and even on French prisoners of war.

The Bolshevik author Ilya Ehrenburg made this call to Russian soldiers: ‘Soldiers of the Red Army! Kill! Kill! No German is not guilty – neither the living, nor the babe in the womb. Follow the instructions of Comrade Stalin and destroy for ever the Fascist beast in his lair. Forcibly break the racial pride of German women, take them in justified vengeance!’ Although this instruction was withdrawn in 1945 for political reasons, it remained the basic attitude of Russian soldiers towards the German population.¹

30 January 1945

Our will to fight on could only be strengthened by such experiences. Soon we reached Preussisch-Eylau, then on to Kreuzberg, crossing the Elbing–Königsberg autobahn west of Kobbelbude. In order to reach Königsberg we had first to break through an encircling ring lightly occupied by Russian troops. The town of Jäskeim was ahead of us, but we had no information as to whether or not it was in Russian hands and their strength there. We drove all night in a tight convoy and stopped at Kobbelbude. We had hoped for a brief rest here and some sleep, but the order came, ‘Make ready, we are advancing!'

Note

1. And not only towards the German population, as is evidenced by reports of many similar foul atrocities against the civilian populations in Hungary, Romania, Austria etc. See, for example, Albrecht Wacker, *Sniper on the Eastern Front: The Memoirs of Sepp Allerberger, Knight's Cross*, Pen & Sword, 2005, pp. 113–16, at Nyiregyhaza, Hungary, pp. 44–5, 55–7 and elsewhere. (TN)

Chapter 15

Attack and Defence Around Jäskeim

30 January 1945

Very quickly I reported ready with my mortar platoon. The motors roared and we set off. Deep snow lay over the East Prussian countryside making everything appear greyish-white. I sat in the cab of my lorry with the driver and strained my eyes searching into the dawn of the January morning. The terrain was a broad plain: in the distance one could see villages afire and from this side and that tracer rounds from MG bursts. It flared up suddenly, another house went up in flames, sparks flew up and I heard the short, sharp knock of a tank gun. It was difficult to hear anything else for our engine was flat out as we drove into the unknown. The red brake lights of the vehicle ahead of us lit up. We stopped and I jumped out with Oberleutnant Hinnerk. Soon the shout was relayed down the columns, ‘Platoon leader to commander!’ I went forward with the platoon leader of the infantry guns, Oberfeldwebel Grosse. ‘Shit,’ he said, ‘Just look at that. We’re sitting right in the middle of it again.’ We went along the waiting lorries in which our men crouched, wrapped in a blanket, weapons at the ready. It was bitter cold and the clouds hung above us leaden grey. It would certainly snow again today. The commander was seated in his Kübelwagen, bent over a mapboard. We reported: ‘Platoon leaders present as ordered.’

‘OK, Rehfeldt, Grosse. Come here please.’ We were told the following: We were on the Kobbeldude–Seepothen road heading for Königsberg. The spearhead already had contact with the enemy. All we knew of the Russians was that they were everywhere in the villages. Nothing was known of a main battle line, weapons etc. They had a ring encircling Königsberg that was so far still loose. If we were to proceed, it might be that we would run

into an anti-tank gun barrier and be wiped out. It might also be that we would be lucky and somehow manage to trick our way through. ‘Tell that to your men, and the greatest watchfulness to all sides. Firing positions must be suitable for all-round defence to avoid any dirty business.’ He gave us a stern look. ‘Now dismount and make ready. I thank you. *Auf Wiedersehen* until Königsberg!’ I requested a map of the area since I had no idea where we were. He gave me a good artillery map and I returned to my lorry. There I told my messenger, ‘Günter (Lorenz), get everything ready, dismount with equipment, ammunition runners two cases each – then follow!’ The men came alive. Groups and platoons formed up: in a line, with large intervals between each. Our first goal was a farmstead. As we approached this at daybreak we came under fire from a few Russians occupying it. We searched the individual buildings and cellars with caution. Russian who had secreted themselves in the cellars surrendered without any resistance. My platoon came up, I indicated where they should position themselves and waited for the first order to attack. The infantry went ahead slowly. The air was full of snowflakes inhibiting visibility and a strong wind increased steadily. A snowstorm was developing, large, wet snowflakes whipped into our faces. The wind came from ahead and drove the snow into our eyes. We could see barely 30m. Our 15cm infantry gun came rumbling up; the light infantry guns and my mortars were already in position. But we could not launch the attack in these conditions.

Our infantry lay 300m ahead of us in a farm, on a height and in a sandy depression. I called my radio operator and asked if the apparatus was working. After a short test one of my mortar leaders went ahead with him, but after a few hundred metres the connection was lost. We could see no Russians and they could not see us. The ammunition laid out around the mortars was soon totally covered by snow. I had a few nuisance rounds fired to let Ivan know we were there. The bombs detonated unseen somewhere in the snow. In order to get a better view I went forward a few metres to the heavy MG sentry. It was difficult to keep one’s eyes open. The binoculars were no longer of much use being wet, the lenses blocked with snowflakes. Staring into the flurries we saw figures coming towards us. Russians? I could not make them out. I readied my sub-machine gun with

the safety catch off and waited for them to come slowly nearer. Ten metres away I recognized women and children. I jumped up and called, ‘Come this way!’ Then they came. Crying girls with pale, anxious faces fell around my neck. ‘Help us! Help us!’ Children wailing for their mothers, old men and women standing dumb before me, faces frozen white with cold, clothing wet with snow. I stood there shaken, supporting a young girl in a state of collapse. In their expressions I saw fear, anxiety, desperation, strain and the suffering resulting from being driven from house and home to be left with nothing in East Prussia. Slowly I went up to them. There were about thirty people, most of them without a coat, menfolk or shoes. The Russians had confiscated their boots. How happy they were now to have found German soldiers again. Our battalion surgeon accepted them, and led them all to a house while I returned to my task. I cannot easily forget this incident.

A messenger came from Battalion: ‘Unteroffizier, dismantle at once. You should advance with 7 Company, it is going to attack!’ Change of position, dismantle mortars, lift components and set off in file. The group leaders reported their numbers correct and we marched. Meanwhile the blizzard had abated somewhat. Along a path across a field about 800m to our right was a farmstead. Our infantry was already there, waiting for me to have my mortars ready. I set up four behind the barn and looked around. There was as yet no sign of Ivan. Ahead of us behind a flat area of upland lay the village of Jäskeim of which only the roofs were visible. We needed to know if the Russians were present there. Two light infantry guns were brought up to an open position for direct fire. A three-man scouting party came back to report that the village was weakly occupied by Russians. Our infantry advanced spaced well apart, almost invisible in their white camouflage suits. It remained quiet. Through binoculars I observed the elevation and the village. I could make out nothing. The infantry disappeared like dark dots behind the height. Near it now came five mortar explosions where our infantry had been. I looked to my right: it was railway sidings at Kobbelbude with many goods wagons, locomotives and railway installations. I saw lively horse-and-cart traffic and Ivan running around. I felt uneasy and asked the adjutant: ‘Who is that to our right?’

‘Nobody, we are the right flank, the entire side over there is open.’

'Wonderful,' I said, 'if the Russians counter-attack they will wipe us out.'

'Yes, therefore particular watchfulness also to the right!'

I set up two mortars aiming right and observed. Meanwhile my radio operator had repaired the problem with the equipment and so I sent a mortar leader with a radio forward with him as spotter with the infantry. From the village I heard the rattle of our MGs – therefore they had contact with Ivan. I discussed our whole situation here with the battalion adjutant. I found out: We have now stumbled into the still loose encircling ring around Königsberg from the rear, and want to enter the city. Up until this point we have made our way here from Praschnitz northwards as a 'wandering pocket', always threatened by Russian troops advancing from an easterly direction, and in hard fighting to break through have more or less nipped off their attack spearheads. Here our right flank is open, we are the most easterly Germans. Today troops will advance from Königsberg towards us to tie down the Russians. This evening we should be able to break through into the city.

My two radio operators were trudging towards Jäskeim. Ivan fired another couple of mortar bombs. The two men lay flat, then got up and continued. Soon they too disappeared behind the low elevation. We tried contacting them: 'Here Ilona 1, here Ilona 1: Ilona 2 please report if understood. Over!' And they replied. Our radio conversation was perfect. Soon came the request: mortars change position, follow into the village. We dismantled a group (two mortars) which advanced in the overtaking mode: one group standing ready to fire, the other advancing, then change about. I went ahead with my messenger. It was very difficult in the deep snow and we made poor progress. Looking around me I saw that the two light infantry guns were limbered up and were following with two lorries. At the first houses we found our forward spotter. The artillery tractor with the two infantry guns arrived, motors howling. We two platoon leaders wanted to see the commander but first I got my crews under cover and gave orders for the two remaining mortars to be dismantled and follow us. Our radio was functioning well. The two infantry guns were unlimbered and went immediately to an open position for direct fire. The village of Jäskeim was simply two rows of houses, one each side of the street, with no side-roads.

With sub-machine guns slung across the chest we two platoon leaders went looking for a spotter position. One house in particular seemed very favourable. While we looked for suitable windows, the owner came out from a cowshed. This was the mother of two daughters, 28 and 18 years old. We asked her in astonishment if she had seen any Russians. She replied, Yes, they were here in the house looking for German soldiers but then rushed off. The Ivans had not touched the women. We set up our observation post, set the first observers, and then came the shout, ‘Cossacks are coming on horseback!’ We all looked in the direction of the outstretched arm. It was snowing slightly. I stepped out in front of the house and saw about twenty mounted Ivans coming for us at a crazy gallop through the snow, rifle in hand. They arrived very swiftly and we had to react lightning-fast! Our battalion of armoured personnel carriers to our left had also seen the horsemen and were firing their MGs. Their aim was too high and clattered into the village exactly where our light infantry guns and my mortars were. Having dismounted from their vehicles, they ran immediately to cover and from there fired with carbines and pistols at the riders as they swept past towards us. The horsemen replied from the saddle with rifles and sub-machine guns. ‘A glorious scene!’ A round hit a window near me: I reacted by jumping back, raising my sub-machine gun and with careful aim fired at the leading rider who had just raised his rifle butt to his cheek. At 30m! I let him have the whole magazine of thirty rounds. The barrel grew hot, casings sprayed out, I breathed in powder smoke. Over my sights I watched this foremost man let drop his rifle and sink from his horse which reared up and fell. The following horses stumbled into the fallen animal and a crazy melee ensued. I threw aside my empty magazine, pushed home a fresh one and was about to resume shooting when our 7.5cm light infantry gun fired at a range of 70 to 80m into the tumult of human and horse bodies, pieces of both whirling together. My messenger was firing his automatic rifle calmly at individual Russians fleeing to cover. A Russian using his fallen horse as cover fired a pistol at us. Quickly I raised my submachine gun and fired from the hip. He collapsed. Done for. The cavalry had not a single horse left standing, and only a couple of wounded Russians were calling out in surrender: ‘Pan! Pan!’ My messenger emerged

cautiously from the cover of a porch and went first to the fallen enemy. It had often been our experience that Ivan feigned ‘dead’ and then shot our soldiers from behind.

As quickly as the attack had begun we put an end to it. I stepped back and relaxed. The villagers, crowded into the corner of a room looked at me anxiously. ‘They won’t do you any more harm!’ I laughed. Wide-eyed, an 18-year-old girl said to me, ‘I was so frightened, for you too.’

‘Yes, child, but it’s always the same. Whoever shoots first and better, wins.’ Some distance from the farmstead by where we first came there was shooting. Through binoculars I saw ten to fifteen Russian mounted cavalrymen disappear behind a depression. I was seized by abrupt fright! If they ran into my following group things could turn nasty. I waited anxiously for my messenger and meanwhile prepared the village for defence. Jäskeim lay fairly unfavourably in a flat depression. One could not approach it unseen. The villagers were in the kitchen facing away from the enemy direction watching our activities. They were content to have us there and asked with fearful concern if the Russians would come back. As long as we are here, no Russians will come!

‘Is this the observation post of Unteroffizier Rehfeldt?’ I heard somebody ask from outside.

‘Yes, I am here. What’s up?’ A messenger from 2 Group (Unteroffizier Sprengala) tramped in and reported that the group had changed position and was awaiting instructions from me as to the next position. I went with the messenger to the front of the house to show him where and how I was thinking of establishing the firing position. Suddenly we heard the sound of mortar fire, ducked and jumped back into the porch of the house. The messenger swore, then Ivan fired another at which the messenger ran across the street and disappeared behind the rear of the houses on the other side. The company commander called me up: ‘Rehfeldt, have yourself relieved! You’re almost asleep on your feet. You’ve got three more NCOs!’

‘*Jawohl*, three more,’ I smiled, tired out.

“‘*Jawohl*, three more”, what do you mean by that? Are you going to let yourself be relieved or not? What else have you got to do there?”

‘I should like to do it here myself, Herr Oberleutnant.’

I went back to the door as Unteroffizier Sprengala, leader of 2 Group, came up. ‘Hans, 2 Group brought up as ordered, mortars in position, I request data as to targets.’

‘Fine, Bruno, take a seat.’

I offered him a cigarette and heard him draw the smoke deeply into his lungs. ‘Man, man, we almost had it back then. A couple of crazy Russians came up at the gallop. If the Flak hadn’t fired they would have got us.’ Then lightning-fast we left the stools on which we had been sitting and dropped to our knees. A couple of mortar bombs came over and detonated with a loud bang behind our house. The windows shook and the glass panes shattered. We laughed and sat rather ducked down on the sofa below the window ledge as protection against splinters. Ivan was scattering light and heavy mortar fire over the village.

‘We’ve got no telephone cable, we have to form a human chain and make sure the men take good cover.’ I gave him some more instructions and then sent him to his mortar position. Günter Lorenz had meanwhile refilled my magazine and was flirting with the 18-year-old girl: his broad East Prussian way of speaking appeared to cause her great amusement. He was playing the role of her knight in shining armour, who wanted to protect her against all dangers. I told her, ‘Don’t believe everything Günter tells you. He’s a real Casanova!’

She looked at me indignantly. ‘Oh, Herr Unteroffizier, that is pure jealousy on your part!’ and we all three laughed. Ivan fired again. The window panes shattered, splinters clattered into the wooden door frame and powder smoke drifted blue-grey towards us. Damn, that was close! The girl crouched in shock and gave us a questioning look. ‘It won’t hurt us, they don’t go through the roof,’ I told her. I went to the company command post. The platoon leader of the light infantry guns was there, zeroing-in the guns. Night had already fallen and so it was only for barrage fire.

The commander stood near him. ‘Leave it at that, Rehfeldt can do the rest.’ And to me, ‘Ah, there you are, aim for a barrage fire area,’ and showed me where he wanted it laid. There was nothing to be seen of the Russians. When the mortars were ready to fire I gave the first commands.

‘At MKZ 12, range 300m, right mortar only – fire!’ Because we had no telephone cable, every order to fire had to be passed down a human chain.

I could lay my barrage fire as close as 150m. To the sides I issued rough corrections for stray shots. The commander was worried that we no longer had any infantry in the village. All three infantry companies were positioned to the left of us. Though a heavy company, we had to protect ourselves and naturally we lacked the numbers to do that. We could set sentries only at the most important points. I had special sentries distributed. The heavy MGs were in the foremost line. My ammunition runners were distributed as security to the right. A forward artillery spotter had been assigned to us but his radio equipment did not work. He stayed with us overnight.

The commander also set up his command post in our house so that we could all be close together. Soon messengers, and group and rifle leaders arrived reporting or asking this or that. Finally we had an overall plan to defend the position. For security reasons, the light infantry guns were pulled back to the farmstead behind us and a line was set up from there to us. A couple of our men brought two prisoners to the company command post. Both were wounded. I questioned them but didn’t learn much. Probably they didn’t know much themselves. A messenger sent back by the forward artillery spotter was to take them with him. They were in pain and made a lot of noise about it. Cursing and swearing, the messenger took them off. We were put on the highest alert. The commander inspected the positions and then came to me. We also had to remain awake all night. We divided the night into two: from 2000hrs until 0100hrs the commander and I kept watch, from 0100hrs to 0600hrs the artillery lieutenant and Feldwebel Grosse. Outside it was very dark. We darkened the windows and sat at the table. I wrote out the daily report by the dim light of a paraffin lamp. Whether rations would be brought up today nobody knew. The fire roared in the stove, outside it was very cold. The villagers were all in the room set aside for sleeping, the artillery lieutenant and Feldwebel Grosse stretched out on the floor – one of them snoring loudly. With monotonous regularity the telephone gave a short ring every fifteen minutes – testing the line. Towards 2200hrs I checked the alertness of the men once more. The

sentries were gratifyingly ‘on their toes’. The observer positioned at the corner of the house by our observation post came to me in excitement to report that the Russians were working towards our village. I took my night binoculars and stared into the darkness. The ground in front of us was flat for about 300m, then rose to a small elevation behind which one could see the houses of the village of Seepothen burning brightly. Against the night sky lit bright red one could see clearly the Russians coming over the elevation singly and in groups. They were standing upright with slung rifles or entrenching tools on their shoulders. We could see soldiers digging in and running here and there behind the fence of an enclosure about 200m away. Several others were standing together, reaching out with the hands as if in greeting and stamping their feet. We observed them for a while and then I requested from the commander permission to fire. Because I had more ammunition than the light infantry guns he allowed me twenty rounds. I waited awhile observing the Russians, estimated the range again, then came the shout, ‘Ready to fire!’ I turned and gave the order, ‘Fire!’ The sound of the mortars discharging resounded loudly across the quiet night. My worst worry was not fulfilled. The muzzle fire of the mortars was not visible, only once did some sparks from a burning additional propulsive charge fly over the house behind which we had the firing position. Binoculars to my eyes, I watched with interest the flight of four bombs hissing lightly as they fell, then saw four bright lightning flashes. The echo reverberated against the houses. Good. Perfect! I sent a correction and then had them fire again. The hard, short detonation of the propulsive charge, then the bombs hissed overhead and after twenty seconds the explosions flashed: ‘*Bretch! Bretch!*’ (the typical sound of mortar bombs detonating). It was as if the Russians had been swallowed up by the earth: only a few individuals remained running around. After the last explosions there came a great cry: probably somebody had had it. ‘Well, there you hear the sound of success,’ I shouted. I reminded the sentries to stay wide awake and on their toes. ‘Keep a good lookout and if you see anything suspicious, report it to me.’

I went back into the house. The commander was seated at the table, his head sunk on his chest, asleep. I sat quietly on the sofa and thought, ‘Yes,

one can be tired – running about day and night, being driven, fighting, and always when one thinks there's a chance of a short period of rest, it flares up once more.' Outside the door there was a racket, then somebody stamped in, blinked in the light and I recognized our quartermaster, Unteroffizier Hermesmann (from Hagen). 'Well, have you brought the food?' I asked him. He nodded, and there it was. The weariest infantryman suddenly became lively! The commander awoke, looked in astonishment at his watch and shook his head: 'I really slept!' Meanwhile the word spread like wildfire. 'The rations have come!' The rationscarriers went out: the lorry also brought ammunition. This was very comforting for me to know. My messenger Günter arrived too, with a steaming mess tin. Wonderful, how hot food does you good, and we were not backward with our praise! We were hungry as wolves. Right afterwards we ate half the cold fare too on the principle of 'What's the point of keeping good food when you perhaps are soon going to be dead?' The commander discussed with the quartermaster, who had a big map case with papers to be signed, everything which could be done for us by the *Tross*. This gave us much to think over. Finally all was completed, and the *Spiess* was to bring a bottle of schnapps tomorrow. 'It's my grandmother's birthday tomorrow!' I called to the quartermaster.

'Then there's a reason to celebrate!' the commander laughed.

'Jawohl, Herr Oberleutnant!' We all laughed, then Hermesmann and I sat together. We were both from Hagen. We spoke about leave, of the recent terror bombing attacks on Hagen and whether we could expect post soon. Suddenly an MG chattered and interrupted our conversation. I asked the sentry at the corner of the house what was going on. He told me that two Russians defectors were wanting to surrender to our forward MGs. With binoculars I saw Ivans digging near the fence and others jumping around. The commander said suddenly, 'Call out to them.' I put my hands around my mouth and shouted: '*Russki, idi ssuda, poloshi orujie e ruki werch!*' ('Russians come here, lay down your weapons and hands up!') I repeated this with variations for half an hour until my throat ached. Finally some '*Pans*' came crawling up and our MG people detained them. Finally I could give up shouting. Ivan now fired a shell which whistled above us leaving a

tracer trail and finally disappeared into the night sky, and now they fired a single round into the blue at similar intervals without any correction. They hurt nobody. A glance at the luminous dial of my watch told me it was 0115hrs. Our watch period was over. I returned to the house, spoke to the sentry again and said to the commander in passing, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, you can now lay down to sleep, our watch period is over. God be praised and thanked.’ He stretched out on the sofa close to the stove and closed his eyes. I opened the door to the bedroom: in the weak light of the petrol lamp I saw the artillery lieutenant and Oberfeldwebel Grosse lying asleep on the floor. I woke them both for their watch and made myself a bed near the big tiled stove which was still warm. I hung my steel helmet and sub-machine gun on the bedpost. The belt with the magazines and haversack I left buckled up as a precautionary measure. The villagers were lying on the beds fully dressed, on the floor were the two messengers, the *Sanitäter* and the company troop leader. It was very dark in the room. I could find nothing which might serve as a pillow. Then a figure arose, rubbed its eyes and stared at me with large eyes, finally grasped the situation and smiled. The petite 18-year-old Maria had obviously forgotten the immediate situation and was shocked at finding all these soldiers in her bedroom. ‘What if the Russians come again tomorrow? I am so frightened. And what will you do?’

I felt sorry for her, but what could I tell her? ‘We have to break through to Königsberg, at the moment we are surrounded. You will have to try to get through to our *Tross*. But for myself I don’t know how things will turn out.’ That was all I could tell her. She sighed and laid back, closing her eyes. I rested my head on my arms and gazed at her. By the dim light of the lamp I could just make out her features. She had a pretty face, framed by long hair. Soon she was fast asleep. I thought about the war, how things would turn out. Doubts came to mind. I thought about home and fell asleep. Outside an MG rattled, a flare was fired and I listened with eyes open, but then quiet returned and finally I slept.



This Russian leaflet of June 1943 shows the good life for a German prisoner of war.



Names were mentioned, sometimes of real people, but often invented.

NATIONALKOMITEE

Freies Deutschland

September
1943.

AN VOLK UND WEHRMACHT!

DEUTSCHE! Es sprechen zu Euch die Männer des Nationalkomitees „Freies Deutschland“.

Wir sprechen im Namen des deutschen Volkes!

Die Lage für Deutschland ist unhalbar geworden. Ein ganzes Jahr schon geht es aus einer Niederlage in die andere. Im Osten verbluten die Männer in aussichtslosen Rückzugskämpfen. Das Kriegsmaterial geht zum Teufel. Die zerschlagenen Divisionen reichen nicht einmal mehr zur Verteidigung. Mit den letzten Reserven aus der „totalen“ Mobilmachung ist das Loch nicht zu stopfen. Aber die Gegner fangen jetzt erst an, ihre Kriegsmacht voll zu entfalten. Der Tag kann schon ausgerechnet werden, an dem der Krieg auf deutschen Boden tritt, und er wird noch schneller kommen, wenn die englisch-amerikanischen Truppen von der anderen Seite einbrechen. Damit muß jetzt ernstlich gerechnet werden.

In der Heimat geht eine Stadt nach der anderen schutzlos in Trümmer, weil die Hitlerregierung nicht abtreten und unserem Volk den Weg zu einem ehrenhaften Frieden frei machen will.

Hitlers Krieg ist verloren. Das wißt Ihr alle. Ein Teil unseres Volkes beginnt, sich gegen seine Hinoptierung zu wehren. Hitlers Antwort ist das Henkerbeil.

Hitler selbst weiß, daß sein Raubkrieg verloren ist. Worauf spekulierte er noch? Womit suchte er Euch noch Hoffnungen einzureden? Mit der angeblichen Uneinigkeit der gegnerischen Mächte. Er hat sich verrechnet und Euch betrogen. Die Moskauer Konferenz bewies die volle Einmütigkeit Sowjetrusslands, Englands und Amerikas, mit der Hitlerherrschaft auf schnellstem Weg Schluß zu machen. Alle Hoffnungen auf Kompromisse, auf Sonderabkommen sind zu Wasser geworden. Mit einem Hitler kann und wird kein Land Frieden schliefen.

Sie wollen Euch mit einem neuen 1918 schrecken. Aber ist dieses Chaos, dieses Schreckensdasein in Deutschland heute nicht schon viel schlimmer als alles, was am Ende des vorigen Krieges war? Jeder Friede wird besser sein als das, was dieser schändliche Krieg uns eingebracht hat. Und der Friede wird ein ehrenhafter und erträglicher werden, wenn unser Volk nicht wie damals mit dem Kriegsschluff wartet, bis die großen Durchhalter es in den Bankrott getrieben haben, wenn es diesmal der kriegslüsternen Nazireaktion und den Volksausplünderern für alle Zeiten das Handwerk legt. Nur dann wird unser Volk die Achtung der Welt wiedergewinnen können und im Rat der Völker mitbestimmen dürfen.

Die Deklaration der Moskauer Konferenz über Italien mag uns zur Lehre dienen: ein Volk, das aus eigener Kraft rechtzeitig seine Kriegsverbrecher absetzt, rettet damit auch den Bestand, die Freiheit und die Ehre seines Landes.



The National Committee for a Free Germany was founded by officers and men of the defeated Stalingrad army who felt sacrificed and betrayed by Hitler's strategy.

Wenn Hitler vor unserem Volk und nicht erst vor fremden Waffen kapitulieren muß, dann wird unserem Volk das Schwerste erspart bleiben.

Aber die Rettung Deutschlands liegt im schnellen und entschlossenen Handeln. Es ist fünf Minuten vor zwölf! Warten, bis es fünf Minuten nach zwölf ist, wie Hitler will, heißt mit ihm zugrunde gehen. Und nichts anderes will er ja. Dann wird unser Volk die volle Mitverantwortung für alle Verbrechen fragen müssen und zur vollen Wiedergutmachung gezwungen werden, statt als freies Volk seinen Beitrag zum Wiederaufbau Europas zu leisten.

Die Stunde drängt. Jeder Tag, der heute versäumt wird, reißt uns tiefer ins Verhängnis. Jeder Tag, den die deutschen Soldaten auf Befehl Hitlers weiter plündern, brandschatzen und morden, reißt uns tiefer in die ungeheure Schule.

GENERALE, OFFIZIERE UND SOLDATEN! Befreit Euch von dieser fürchterlichen Verantwortung, indem Ihr die Befehle zur Zersetzung und Verwüstung nicht ausführt oder ihre Ausführung verhindert.

BEFEHLSHABER! Welche Macht liegt in Euren Waffen! Verweigert Hitler den Gehorsam! Übernehmt das Kommando zum Marsch gegen Hitler, in die Heimat! Statt Eure Kräfte in sinnlosem Widerstand aufzureißen und Eure Waffen zerbrechen zu lassen, gebraucht sie gegen den wahren und einzigen Feind der Nation, gegen Hitler!

MÄNNER UND FRAUEN IN DER HEIMAT! SCHAFFENDE IN STADT UND LAND! Aus Eurer Hände Arbeit wird der Krieg gespeist. Durchkreuzt die Zwangsmaßnahmen der Gewalthaber! Leiter der Wirtschaft und des Verkehrs! Ihr habt tiefe Einsicht in den Gang der Kriegsmaschine. Bringt den Krieg aufs tote Gleis! Geistliche, Gelehrte, Schriftsteller! Schlagt die Bankrotteure mit der Waffe Eures Wortes!

Auf zur Volksaktion, zum mächtigen nationalen Einsatz! Der Rücktritt Hitlers muß erzwungen werden!
Nur Mut, Deutsche! Und jeder Terror wird an Eurer Kraft zerschellen.

Vorwärts! Für ein freies, unabhängiges Deutschland!
Nationalkomitee „Freies Deutschland“

Der Präsident:

Erich Weinert

Die Vizepräsidenten:

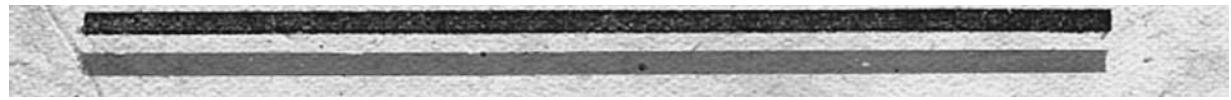
General der Artillerie Walther von Seydlitz

Generalleutnant Alexander Edler von Daniels

Major Karl Hetz

Leutnant Heinrich Graf von Einsiedel

Soldat Max Emendorfer



These names were known and identified as opponents of Hitler.

Konferenz

der Leiter der drei verbündeten Mächte: der Sowjetunion, der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika und Großbritanniens in Teheran

Vom 28. November bis zum 1. Dezember fand in Teheran eine Konferenz der Leiter der drei verbündeten Mächte statt: des Vorsitzenden des Rates der Volkskommissare der Sowjetunion J. W. STALIN, des Präsidenten der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika F. D. ROOSEVELT und des Premierministers von Großbritannien W. CHURCHILL.

An den Arbeiten der Konferenz nahmen teil:

Von seiten der Sowjetunion: der Volkskommissar für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten W. M. MOLOTOW und Marschall K. J. WOROSCHILOW.
Von seiten der Vereinigten Staaten: der Sondergehilfe des Präsidenten H. HOPKINS, der Botschafter in der Sowjetunion A. HARRIMAN, der Stabschef der Armee der USA General D. MARSHALL, der Oberkommandierende der Seestreitkräfte der USA Admiral E. KING, der Stabschef der Luftstreitkräfte der USA General H. ARNOLD, der Chef der Armeeverversorgung der USA General B. SOMERWELL, der Stabschef des Präsidenten Admiral W. LEHIGH und der Chef der Militärmmission der USA in der Sowjetunion General R. DEANE.

Von seiten Großbritanniens: der Minister für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten A. EDEN, der Botschafter in der Sowjetunion A. KERR, der Chef des Empire-Generalstabs General A. BROOK, Feldmarschall D. DILL, der Erste Seelord Flottenadmiral E. CUNNINGHAM, der Stabschef der Luftstreitkräfte Großbritanniens Hauptmarschall der Luftwaffe CH. PORTAL, der Stabschef des Verteidigungsministers General H. ISMAY und der Chef der Militärmmission Großbritanniens in der Sowjetunion General G. MARTELL.

Die Konferenz nahm eine DEKLARATION über das gemeinsame Vorgehen im Krieg gegen Deutschland und über die Zusammenarbeit der drei Mächte nach dem Kriege sowie eine Deklaration über den Iran an.

6. Dezember 1943

DEKLARATION DER DREI MÄCHTE

Wir, der Präsident der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, der Premierminister Großbritanniens und der Premier der Sowjetunion, kamen in den letzten vier Tagen in der Hauptstadt unseres Verbündeten, des Iran, zusammen und formulierten und bekraftigten unsere gemeinsame Politik.

Wir sind fest entschlossen, daß unsere Länder sowohl während des Krieges wie auch in der darauf folgenden Friedenszeit



gemeinsam arbeiten.

Current events such as the Teheran Conference of November 1943 were used in enemy propaganda as a means to convince German soldiers how pointless it was to continue their struggle.

**Was den Krieg betrifft, so haben die Vertreter unserer Armee-
stäbe an unseren Verhandlungen am runden Tisch teilgenommen,
und wir haben unsere Pläne der Vernichtung der deutschen Streit-
kräfte koordiniert.**

**Wir sind in bezug auf Ausmaß und Fristen der Operationen,
die vom Osten, Westen und Süden her unternommen
werden sollen, zu völligem Übereinkommen gelangt.**

Das von uns hier erzielte Einvernehmen gibt uns die Gewähr
für den Sieg.

Was die Friedenszeit betrifft, so sind wir davon überzeugt, daß
die zwischen uns bestehende Übereinstimmung einen dauernden
Frieden sichern wird. Wir sind uns völlig der hohen Verantwortung
bewußt, die wir und alle Vereinten Nationen für die Herbeiführung
eines Friedens tragen, der die Zustimmung der überwältigenden
Masse der Völker des Erdballs finden und das Elend und die
Schrecken des Krieges für viele Generationen beseitigen wird.

Gemeinsam mit unseren diplomatischen Beratern haben wir die
Probleme der Zukunft erörtert. Wir werden die Mitarbeit und die
aktive Beteiligung aller Länder erstreben — der großen wie der
kleinen —, deren Völker sich gleich unseren Völkern mit
Herz und Hirn der Aufgabe gewidmet haben, die Tyrannie,
Versklavung, Unterdrückung und Unduldsamkeit aus der Welt zu
schaffen. Wir werden ihren Eintritt in die Völkerfamilie der demo-
kratischen Länder begrüßen, sobald sie ihn zu vollziehen wünschen.

Keine Macht der Welt wird uns daran hindern können, die
deutschen Armeen zu Lande und ihre Unterseeboote zur See zu
vernichten sowie Ihre Rüstungsbetriebe aus der Luft zu zerstören.

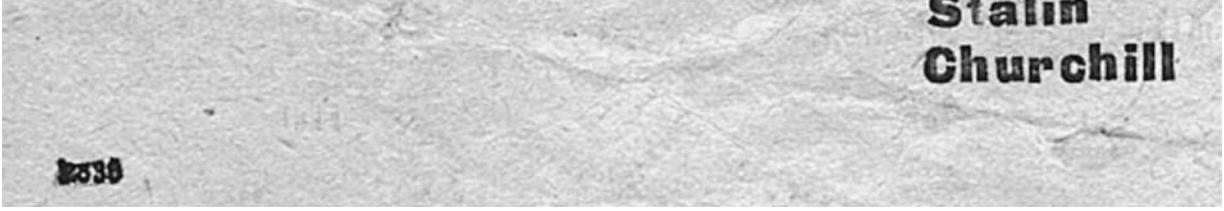
**Unsere Offensive wird schonungslos sein und
Immer stärker werden.**

Nach Beendigung unserer freundschaftlichen Beratungen er-
warten wir voller Zuversicht den Tag, da alle Völker der Welt,
ohne der Tyrannengewalt ausgesetzt zu sein, in Freiheit leben
werden und in Übereinstimmung mit ihren verschiedenen Bestre-
bungen und mit ihrem Gewissen.

Wir sind hierhergekommen, erfüllt von Hoffnung und Ent-
schlossenheit. Wir gehen von hier als wirkliche Freunde dem
Geiste und der Zielsetzung nach.

Gezeichnet in Teheran am 1. Dezember 1943:

Roosevelt



Stalin
Churchill

2230
And in May 1945 the German soldier was forced to capitulate to the overwhelming Allied coalition.

NATIONALKOMITEE „FREIES DEUTSCHLAND“

Sie klagen an!

Am 3. Februar d. J. hatte die Rote Armee im Raum Korsun-Schewtschenkowsky westlich Tscherkassy 10 Divisionen und 1 motorisierte Brigade der deutschen Wehrmacht eingekesselt. Die Lage der Eingekesselten war völlig hoffnungslos. Um das Leben der Zehntausende deutscher Soldaten und Offiziere zu retten, traf General der Artillerie Walther von Seydlitz, Präsident des Bundes Deutscher Offiziere, im Bereich des Kessels ein und schlug im Namen des Nationalkomitees „Freies Deutschland“ der Führung der eingekesselten Truppen vor, die Kampfhandlungen einzustellen und auf die Seite des Nationalkomitees zu treten.

Aus Prestigegründen befahl jedoch Hitler den Eingekesselten, „bis zum letzten auszuhalten“, und versprach ihnen, sie zu befreien. Genau so wie vor einem Jahre bei Stalingrad, belog er die Eingekesselten. Nachdem alle Versuche, den Kessel zu entsetzen, endgültig gescheitert waren, erteilte Hitler den zermürbten und ausgebluteten Truppen im Kessel den Befehl, mit eigenen Kräften durchzubrechen. Er betrog sie bewußt, als er ihnen versicherte, die Panzerspitze der Entsatarmee stände bereits dicht vor dem Kessel. So trieb Hitler deutsche Soldaten und Offiziere in das russische Feuer hinein.

55 000 deutsche Soldaten und Offiziere, die Hitler Glauben schenkten, kamen sinnlos um.

18 200 deutsche Soldaten und Offiziere, die Hitler nicht trauten, stellten die Kampfhandlungen ein und retteten somit ihr Leben.

Aus Prestigegründen hat Hitler die Eingekesselten betrogen und verraten. Aus Prestigegründen belügt und betrügt er jetzt ihre Angehörigen und unser ganzes Volk mit der Behauptung, der Kessel wäre gesprengt und die eingeschlossenen Truppen wären befreit worden.

Die 18 200 lebenden Zeugen der Tragödie von Korsun klagen Hitler des niedrigeinsten Betruges und Mordes an.

Hier sprechen die Zeugen des Verbrechens:

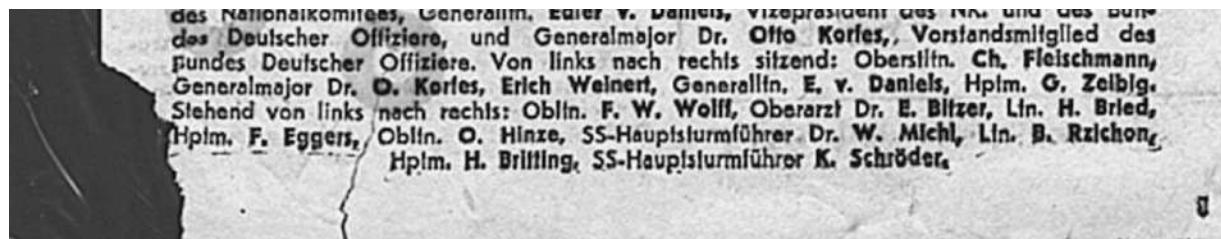
Obltn. FRIEDRICH WILHELM WOLFF,
Adjutant beim Kdr. der Korpsnachschubtruppen des XI. A. K.

General d. Art. Stemmermann, Kommand. General des XI. Armeekorps, hatte noch vor der Einkesselung vom Oberbefehlshaber der

Heeresgruppe Süd, Generalfeldmarschall von Manstein, die Zurücknahme des faktisch unheilbaren und für den Verlauf weiterer Operationen sinnlosen Frontvorsprungs, „des Balkons“, verlangt. Manstein jedoch antwortete mit einem Befehl des Führerhauptquartiers: „Die Stellung ist um jeden Preis zu halten.“ Mit diesem Führer-



Deutsche Offiziere aus dem Kessel von Korsun im Gespräch mit Erich Weinert, Präsidenten des Nationalkomitees „Freies Deutschland“.



des Nationalkomitees, Generallm. Eader v. Daniels, Vizepräsident des NKK und des Bund
des Deutschen Offiziere, und Generalmajor Dr. Otto Korfes, Vorstandsmitglied des
Bundes Deutscher Offiziere. Von links nach rechts sitzend: Oberstlm. Ch. Fleischmann,
Generalmajor Dr. O. Korfes, Erich Weinert, Generallm. E. v. Daniels, Hplm. G. Zelbig.
Stehend von links nach rechts: Obltn. F. W. Wolff, Oberarzt Dr. E. Blitzer, Lin. H. Bried,
Hplm. F. Eggers, Obltn. O. Hinze, SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. W. Michl, Lin. B. Rzichong,
Hplm. H. Brüting, SS-Hauptsturmführer K. Schröder.

In this pamphlet German prisoners captured in the Cherkassy Pocket (February 1944) speak out (believably or not).



meinten und dem Preisgut der Tag
begrenzten. Dagegen den Vertrag auf
Sicherheit für Offiziere kann man nur
mit einer Sicherung glauben. Das
wurde ja schon von Ihnen gesagt.

Fleischmann
Oberstleutnant

Oberstleutnant Christof Fleischmann



Am 10. Februar
wurde das Kesselgebiet
von uns ausgeschritten
und eigentlich nicht mehr
erreicht. Doch wir mussten
etwa 15000
Männer nicht mehr an
den Platz
oder von den Platz
und Lagerstätten
entfernen.

Dr. Walther Michl
Hauptsturmführer
Wiking

SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. Walther Michl



Am 10. Februar
wurde das Kesselgebiet
von uns ausgeschritten
und eigentlich nicht mehr
erreicht. Doch wir
mussten nicht mehr an
den Platz
oder von den Platz
und Lagerstätten
entfernen.

Hptm. Gustav Zeibig

Befehl wurde die ganze Kommande Tragödie,
der Untergang von zwei Armeekorps, herauf-
beschworen."

Die ersten Tage im Kessel

Obltn. FRIEDRICH WILHELM WOLFF:

"Die noch in Betrieb befindliche, doppelglei-
sige Eisenbahn von Kapitanowka bis Korsun,
also quer durch den Kessel, war geradezu die
Lebensader für die Verschlebung von Versor-
gungsgütern und Munition und für den Ver-
wundetentransport. Am 30. Januar jedoch
geschah das Unglaubliche: wir hörten Spreng-
ungen und mußten dann feststellen, daß durch
den bewollmächtigten Transportoffizier der 8.
Armeo unter ausdrücklichem Hinweis, auf örtli-
che Befehlsgebung keine Rücksicht zu nehmen,
die ganze Bahn gesprengt wurde. Bedarf es
neben diesem von außen erteilten Befehl noch
eines stärkeren Beweises dafür, daß wir im Kessel
schon am 30. Januar abgeschrieben waren!"

SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. WALTHER MICHL,
Abteilungsarzt der SS AA/5, SS-Panzerdivision
„Wiking“:

"Ich sah eine unvorstellbare Desorganisation.
Die drei Lazarette waren bis auf den Korridor
überfüllt. Mein Verbandplatz, überfüllt mit Ver-
wundeten, lag wie auf dem Präsentierteller im
feindlichen Granatfeuer. Der Abtransport war
unmöglich, da beide Krankenwagen außerhalb
des Kessels beim Rückzug steckengeblieben
waren. Auf dem Flugplatz stauten sich eine
Menge Leichtverwundeter. Kein einziger Schwer-
verwundeter wurde ausgeflogen. Wohl aber
drängten sich offensichtliche Simulanten in die
Maschinen. Leider sah ich darunter auch solche
mit silbernen Achselstücken."

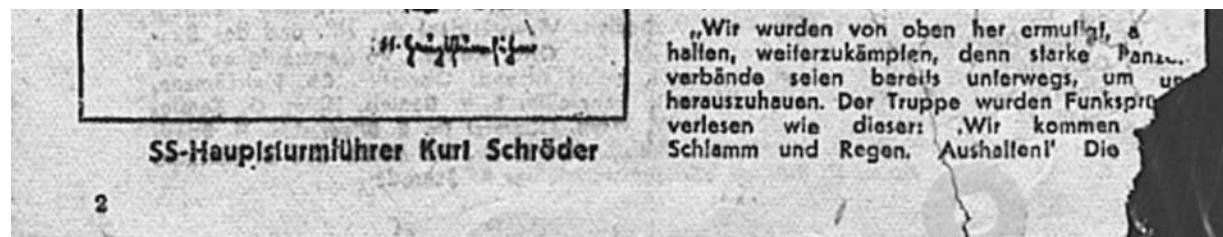
SS-Hauptsturmführer KURT SCHRÖDER,
II/Rgt. „Germania“, SS-Panzerdivision „Wiking“:

"Zwischen dem 10. und 12. Februar wurde
bekannt, daß in den Stellungen der 112. I. D.
ein persönlicher Brief von General von Seydlitz
eingetroffen war, der den eingekesselten
Truppen ein ehrenvolles Übergabeangebot
machte, das General von Seydlitz mit dem
Kommando der Roten Armee vereinbart hatte.
Sowohl General Stemmermann wie Gruppenführer
Gille erhielten persönliche Schreiben des Generals
der Artillerie von Seydlitz. Der genauere Inhalt
dieser Briefe blieb mir unbekannt. Das Angebot
wurde abgelehnt. Unter den Kameraden war die
Rede davon, daß Gruppenführer Gille General
Stemmermann gezwungen habe, eine negative
Antwort zu geben. General Stemmermann hegte
schon früher die Absicht, Verhandlungen über
die Übergabe der sich im Kessel befindlichen
Truppen aufzunehmen."

Hptm. GUSTAV ZEIBIG, Adjutant, Grenadier-
regiment 339:

"Uns wurde gesagt, daß deutsche Panzerver-
bände aus Süden und Westen im Angriff seien, um
uns zu befreien. Wir klammerten uns an diese
Versprechungen und hofften von einem Tag auf
den anderen auf Entsetz. Aber man hat uns bitter
gefäuscht. Die Panzer kamen nicht."

Ltn. BERTHOLD RZICHON, Adjutant III/A,
188. I. D.:



The Battle of Cherkassy exacted a high toll in blood, although thousands did manage to break out of the encirclement.

Ansehen und weitergeben!

FRONT-ILLUSTRIERTE

Nr. 6 (79)

FÜR DEN DEUTSCHEN SOLDATEN

März 1944

Totgesagte zeugen gegen Hitlerlügen

Deutsche Offiziere
in russischer
Kriegsgefangenschaft.

Deutscher Soldat, sieh
Dir Deine ehemaligen
Vorgesetzten an! Sie
waren vernünftig und
zogen das Leben in russi-
scher Kriegsgefangen-
schaft dem sinnlosen Tod
für Hitler vor.

Die meisten, deren Bil-
der Du hier siehst, gaben
sich vor Stalingrad gefan-
gen. Sie brauchten nicht
wie Du und Deine Kame-
raden all das Schwere
eines Rückzugs von der
Wolga bis an den Pruth
durchzumachen. Sie ha-
ben sich von Hitler ge-
trennt, sind frei von Ver-
antwortung für seinen
Raubkrieg und leben
jetzt unter menschen-
würdigen Bedingungen.
Sie alle werden nach dem
Kriege heimkehren.



Hier — zwei Brüder: Hptm.
Heinz Ilse und Obltn. Wol-
fgang Ilse. Seit Kriegsbeginn
im Felde, hatten sie sich
jahrelang nicht gesehen. Bei-
de waren dem Tode nahe,
wie jeder deutsche Soldat der
Hitlerarmee. Doch die Brüder
Ilse fanden, jeder für sich,
den rettenden Ausweg. Nur
derum konnten sie ein glück-
liches Wiedersehen in einem
russischen Kriegsgefangen-
lager feiern.

March 1944, and by then the era of the primitive Russian leaflet was over. Quality propaganda material was now produced by German prisoners working for the Russians.

Schöne Gegend, gesundes Klima, weitläufiges Lagergelände und solide Wohngebäude — hier leben die kriegsgefangenen deutschen Offiziere. Jeder verbringt die Zeit, wie es ihm gefällt. Denn, streng nach dem Völkerrecht, werden sie hier nur auf eigenen Wunsch zur Arbeit herangezogen.



Auf zum Frühspor in strahlender Wintersonne!

Wer Lust hat, kann lernen, sich weiterbilden. Neben Kursen für Mathematik, Chemie, Biologie u. a. wird auch der russische Sprachkursus eifrig besucht.



Kriegsgefangene Offiziere beim Morgenappell. Sie sind Hitler nicht in die Katastrophe gefolgt, in die er heute die ganze Wehrmacht geführt hat.



Good photography and a refined text presented the hopeless situation for the German Army.



A peaceful and comfortable life in Russian captivity, as emphasized in such leaflets, never existed.



Schnitzen, formen, malen und zeichnen... Alle Arten von Klein-kunst-Arbeiten entstehen im Kriegsgefangenenlager. Obltn. Amdt und Obltn. Schneider stellen das Werk zur Schau.



Ein neues Lied für den Lagerchor. Der Chormeister und Komponist Ltn. Bödeker hinter seinen Notenblättern.



← Der Geburtstagstisch für Ltn. Kilperl als Aufmerksamkeit seiner Stubenkameraden.



→ Ein Brief aus der Heimat. Auf einem weiten Umweg, über die Schweiz, hat Ltn. Albert Rechberg Antwort von seinen Angehörigen erhalten. Die Hitlerregierung lässt keine Briefe herein und hinaus, die die Verbindung zwischen den Kriegsgefangenen in Rußland und ihren Angehörigen daheim herstellen sollen. Denn in Deutschland soll niemand wissen, daß die Kriegsgefangenen leben und daß es ihnen in Rußland gut geht. Dennoch findet so mancher Brief seinen Weg durch die Sperrre der Hitlerzensur.

U. B.: Lin. Krause, Lin. Rechberg, Ltn. Greve.

Fair words buoyed up false hopes for a better world. Committed German Communists were never offered it in the Soviet Union.



The National Committee for a Free Germany became ever more active in 1943/44. This opposition arising from within the ranks tended to unsettle the German leadership.



By the spoken and written word, Russian propaganda was continuously unloaded on the German soldier in the front-line trenches.



German generals (Generalmajor Lattmann seen here), tried to win over German prisoners of war for collaboration with the National Committee for a Free Germany.

in den Untergang tunne, um sein Prestige zu retten. Von links nach rechts: Oberstltn. Christof Fleischmann, Kdr. I. R. 246; Obih. Friedhelm Wolff, Adjutant beim Kdr. Korps-Nachschubtruppen XI. A. K.; Erich Weisert; SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. Walther Michl, Abtgts-Arzt der SS AA/S. SS-Panzerdivision „Wiking“.



MIT JEDEM TAG WACHSEN DIE REIHEN DER FREIHEITSKÄMPFER! U. B. (oben): Der Sekretär einer Lagergruppe „Freies Deutschland“, Oberzahmleiter Hohmann, begrüßt mit Handschlag das neue Mitglied Ltn. Philipp; Obih. Schreierschwarz, Lagerbevollmächtigter des BDO, wohnt dem Aufnahmetakt bei.



Haufe, Mitglieder einer Lagergruppe des NK, bei der Verteilung der Zeitung „Freies Deutschland“.



U. B. (unten): Generalleutnant Helmut SCHLÖMER, Mitglied des Bundes Deutscher Offiziere, und Generalmajor Martin LATTMANN werden von einem Lagerbevollmächtigten des NK, Oberst Pückel, über Besold und Arbeit der Lagergruppe „Freies Deutschland“ unterrichtet.



Offiziere! Soldaten! Folgt dem Beispiel derer, die zum Kampf gegen Hitler und seinen verbrecherischen Krieg angetreten sind!

German officers were deliberately photographed wearing their decorations to show Russian esteem for the brave soldier. Frequently, however, decorations meant death for the captured soldier since they showed that he had risked all for the 'German Fascists'.

E-Schein

Entlausungsschein

Der Inhaber dieser Bescheinigung

(Dienstgrad)

(Name)

(Feldpost-Nummer)

(Leserliche, eigenhändige Unterschrift des Inhabers)

ist heute hier entlaust worden.

Er ist frei von ansteckenden Krankheiten und Ungeziefer und somit zur Benutzung der vorgesehenen Beförderungsmittel zur Erreichung seines Bestimmungsortes zugelassen.

Die Bescheinigung ist in das Soldbuch einzulegen und auf Verlangen den Überwachungsorganen der Wehrmacht vorzuzeigen.

57. Heer. Betr. Komp. (E)

Tagessstempel

Przemysl

Stempel der

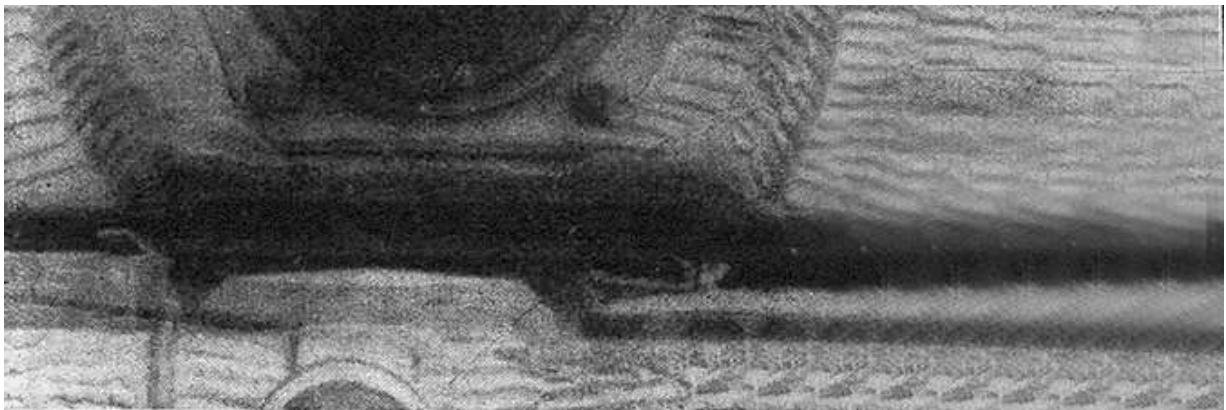
Entlausungs-Anstalt

5 JAN. 1944

2111 Maximilian-Verlag, Berlin SW 68, Ritterstr. 33 (4.43) WCo.

An important document for every German soldier was his delousing certificate. The one shown was issued to the author on 5 January 1944 at Przemysl, a station on the leavetakers' railway line to Cracow.





This photo from an illustrated magazine provides an impressive view of the 8.8cm gun of the Tiger.



Summer 1944. A Panther advancing with *Grossdeutschland* grenadiers.



A signpost for *Grossdeutschland* units, winter 1943–4.



A gun captain of the *Grossdeutschland* artillery, seen here by a 15-cm howitzer.



A pioneer officer speaking with men of an armoured personnel carrier.



Jumping down from a VW amphibious car. The *Grossdeutschland* white helmet insignia can be seen by the officer's knee.



General Hasso von Manteuffel with his No. 1 General Staff Officer, Oberst von Netzmer.



Oberstleutnant Gerhard Konopka, CO II *Grossdeutschland*-Regiment [mot.] at a meeting with Dr Goebbels. Konopka was much decorated for personal bravery, and besides the Knight's Cross wore the German Cross in Gold, Tank Destruction Badges and the rarely-awarded Close Combat Clasp in Gold.

Chapter 16

A Last Attempt

31 January 1945

I awoke to fairly loud and animated discussions. Daylight was already pouring through the window. I jumped to my feet, sub-machine gun in hand. The villagers fled with all their belongings into the cellar. I put on my steel helmet, thrust a cigarette between my lips and woke the sleeping Maria. ‘Quick, down into the cellar, Ivan is attacking.’

‘What will you be doing? Are you going to stay?’ she asked with fear in her voice.

‘Yes, of course we’re staying. Now go down into the cellar quickly. She did as I told her. The firing outside began with Russian anti-tank guns, following by increasing mortar fire. It sounded like they meant it! ‘Man, such a racket first thing in the morning!', my messenger Günter Lorenz said, and then finished off what remained of his cold rations.

‘At least you’re going to be well fed before your heroic death,’ I told him. The Russian MGs began to chatter and then the first aimed rifle rounds whipped into the houses. ‘Ivan is coming. Ivan is attacking!’ Everybody was wide awake now. I ran to the door at the rear and shouted my firing orders but now that haste counted it was not forthcoming. I fumed inwardly. Finally, finally! ‘Ready to fire!’ With great satisfaction I watched my mortar bombs fly towards the enemy. These first rounds fell too long. Above the din my voice was heard: ‘Cut short 100m, ten less, each mortar five rounds. Report readiness to fire!’ I waited for the response – there! This time twenty rounds (four mortars each five rounds) left the barrels in quick succession. While surveying the terrain with the particular purpose of finding the anti-tank guns which had raked us, I noticed well to the right,

behind the railway embankment, a crowd of Russian infantry which had dug in and now looked as if preparing to advance. We had no Front there or anywhere. I promised myself that at the next opportunity I would smoke them out, but for the moment I concentrated on the coming attack. This turned out to be a feint, for they did not actually come any nearer, their intention being possibly to establish our strength. Gradually things grew quieter and the tension eased. I informed the commander of my intention to take out the Russians to the far right of us with the mortars: he was very taken with the idea and wanted to include the light infantry guns too. I called to Unteroffizier Sprengala to remain at the observation post, and then ran with long strides to the mortar position. The younger soldiers were in the house, the sentries on watch outside, the drivers and co-drivers of the lorries with them. Insufficient fuel was available for the journey back and the quartermaster, Unteroffizier Hermesmann, had gone off on foot to find some. The sentries were camouflaged behind the houses, but from far right Ivan could possibly monitor us. This was why Ivan needed to be dealt with urgently. I ordered the count of mortar bombs to be reported and was taken aback when told that we had only 100 rounds for the four mortars. ‘Didn’t any more ammunition come yesterday evening?’ I asked. Yes, but it was still on the lorry! Nobody had unloaded it. I gave them a dressing-down and soon we had the lorry unloaded. I could count on almost 400 bombs. That was really something! A really favourable observation post could not be found and I had to direct fire without good cover: apart from the garden hedge there was nothing. I was standing behind a rabbit hutch; the mortars were in the open 10m behind me. I could shout my instructions directly.

The light infantry guns were firing at a railway linesman’s house which they suspected was being used by an anti-tank gun. My first four rounds exploded in the midst of the Russian infantry, then round after round followed. A cloud of smoke rose over there, then others, colouring the snow dark. Now and again items flew through the air, slats or boarding. ‘Direct hit! Direct hit!’ the commander shouted, enjoying himself like a child. I thought it was fun too. I could have kept firing until the ammunition ran out but unfortunately I had to call a halt. A large group of Russians had disappeared into a depression to the left. I wanted to keep them waiting, but

then a shell came hissing in my direction and fell no more than 20m from me in the snow. A pause in the firing allowed us to take full cover and then three shells went into the house. This type of gun, the 7.62cm general purpose, was dangerous because one heard the detonation first, and if one survived it, seconds later one heard the report as it was fired.¹ Ivan's priority appeared to be to eliminate my mortars at all costs, but the shell had to go first through two walls and we are great optimists!

For a change, Ivan now switched to hammering the village with the 15.2cm shells from the ex-naval gun which we called the 'Black Pig' – very unpleasant! Between two exploding shells landing close by the house, a messenger came running from the observation post. He was breathing heavily from his run and no wonder: in his hand he was holding the winged shaft of a Russian 12cm mortar bomb. 'Ivan landed that on our kitchen table,' he told me. This mortar bomb had gone through the roof of the observation post and exploded in the loft. Suddenly a hole appeared in the kitchen ceiling, the tail piece of the mortar bomb had fallen through with the dirt and come to rest on the table. 'We were having our meal. You should have seen their faces!' Now we had to be more cautious, and almost at once it began again – window panes shattered and the taste of powder lay on the tongue. I dived to the ground like greased lightning. It was another heavy attack and looking around I saw that everybody was crouching down or sheltering against the wall. Despite the seriousness of the situation, it looked comical. The bombardment was repeated almost at once. This time we really *were* lucky. Nobody spoke, everyone listened. Whatever it was, we heard never heard the like before! It hissed overhead with a strange, new sound. Then the earthquake effect. The house shook, plaster, whitewash and mortar fell from the ceiling and walls. New shocks jolted us, window panes were forced in by the blast. And it made the strangest noise. We looked at each other in astonishment. If they had hit houses in the village I did not like to imagine the destruction they would have wrought. We found twenty to thirty impact sites, large, black craters 8 to 10m in diameter surrounded by thick frozen lumps of earth hurled out by the blast. These projectiles had all been fired 300m too long beyond Jäskeim. I hoped never to be on the

receiving end of such things again. I thought it likely that Ivan had used captured ‘Stuka zu Fuss’ against us.²

He had rockets of various calibres: the 28cm of the ‘M-28’ with 60kg of HE! Luckily for us it was the first time he had used them in earnest. I was just weighing up if we should change location, because undoubtedly our presence was known, when there came a tremendous explosion and after it loud rumbling as if the entire house was about to collapse. Somebody went out cautiously to inspect the outside and ran back shouting ‘Quick, out! The house is on fire!’. We could see the first signs of the house beginning to break up, and saw the smoke. I gave the order to assemble by the other five houses and look for a new position. I went with my messenger to look for a new firing position. This was not so easy. The Russians, who could see all movement in front of the houses, even fired at individual soldiers with anti-tank guns, of which a number were already zeroed-in. As I leapt between two houses one fired and I almost ran into the line of fire of the shell. This was a nasty shock and behind the next house I stopped first to take a breather. Günter was still behind the last house, ‘Come on, he’s not shooting right now!’ I called out. He peered cautiously around the corner of the house. A sharp report and the shell hit the roof of the house under which I was sheltering. Günter took his chance and ran. As a veteran soldier he knew that one had to run immediately after the shell hit, for the enemy gunners had to reload and report ready before firing the next. Günter gave me a grin and then we both ducked down for Ivan had seen him running and fired a shell which hit the front wall of the house and made the bricks spray everywhere: we waited a few seconds and then sprinted together through the snow to the protection of the next house. I cannot complain of being cold: Ivan has forced us to keep warm with all this sprinting. My people were distributed behind various houses, working their way forward slowly to us. I watched with concern the jump or sprint of each of them. The anti-tank gun cannonade grew more violent: some of the houses were on fire, we watched a roof collapse with a huge upward flight of sparks. I could see that it was madness to change position in broad daylight under the observation of the enemy, but we had to do it. Another of my men came through the snow gasping for breath, carrying an ammunition case and the 25kg mortar

baseplate on his back. At the moment I had no mortar ready to fire, and could not see either of the troop leaders anywhere. Nobody knew where they were. Despite all the firing we still had no casualties. Now I had to concentrate all my energies on getting at least one mortar operational. Contact with the observation post was still not possible. Since I did not know the whereabouts of the commander I had to act independently. I was very annoyed that neither of the mortar group leaders was supporting me. The commander of 7 Rifle Company appeared from a house with several men. I called to him and asked where 7 Company was. ‘This is our company command post, we will stay with you in the village,’ he assured me. He deployed his troops to defend the village. I informed him of my own situation and showed him my firing position. Ivan was now firing again from all barrels, anti-tank shells bursting almost without a break. Since Ivan did not know in which houses German soldiers were to be found he contented himself with firing a couple of shells into each house from time to time. All the house fronts were pocked with shell hits. In concern for my platoon, I went out and called my men together. It seemed almost impossible to get from one house to another as before. The men stood waiting behind the houses under cover. In order to have one mortar operational I called for a bipod and a barrel irrespective of whether they came from the same set or not, and as much ammunition as could be found. Gefreiter Bleuel, a mortar captain, brought the baseplate and went behind the schoolhouse with it. A bipod and barrel soon followed. The mortar was complete and ready to fire, ammunition was on its way by hook or by crook. Our good luck in having no casualties continued: I asked repeatedly for the whereabouts of my two NCOs. Finally I was told, ‘They are in a deep cellar drinking. They found some schnapps.’ I was furious! It didn’t do any good though and so I let them be, but I was seized by a silent rage that I was exposing my messenger Gefreiter Günter Lorenz (fell, March 1945) to the greatest danger while these two enjoyed a drinking bout. Finally, to my relief confirmation came that we had one mortar operational. I was very grateful to Gefreiter Bleuel, the man had guts. ‘Does Bleuel have the Iron Cross Second Class?’ I asked.

‘No, Herr Unteroffizier!’ came the answer. We will see about that. Enemy mortar strikes were increasing. We listened, this was suspicious. The Russians MGs began to chatter and sub-machine guns fired. Explosive rounds flew and exploded against trees, bushes and house walls. I peered around the corner of a house to see the ground in front of us. Aha, here they come. Individual Ivans were advancing towards us wearing white camouflage clothing and firing their rifles or sub-machine guns. They were damned close to my former observation post. Our men were firing from every window. The shooting was coming closer to me. Very carefully I raised my sub-machine gun and shot two Russians dead as they approached. Near me somebody was firing a Russian self-loading rifle at Russian MG gunners. I observed the bullets spray the snow one-two-three and at the fourth an Ivan stumbled, fell head-first and lay without moving. I gave a glance in recognition to the rifleman. He put his head out of the window and gave me a grin. ‘Next please!’ and he fired again. I had fifteen rounds in my magazine. The Ivans were running towards us with a hoarse ‘Urrraah!’. We had to make sure that none made it to the corner of a house. We fired with MGs, sub-machine guns or rifles from all windows and from behind all corners, and from my old observation post came the typical ‘thin’ report of pistols. Ivan must have got very close to them there. Two anti-tank shells hit the neighbouring house. Our heavy MG, which had fired uninterruptedly, fell silent. I had binoculars to my eyes. Damn, they had wiped it out. A man came running over alone, under heavy enemy fire. The heavy MG was finished. Suddenly in the general tumult I heard our own mortar fire. Surprised, I looked round. They were firing independently without orders! Excellent! They were accurate, and I shouted to Bleuel, ‘Keep firing!’, pleased at his aim. He had done it perfectly. The independent fire continued, but soon fell to only a few rounds and then silence. They were out of ammunition. Then came the whistle of shells overhead from our rear. Our light infantry guns were shooting, but only single rounds, indicating their shortage of ammunition. Each round was aimed to count, the attackers received the last of them and the guns fell silent. We had barely fifty men to defend a village against an enemy force three times as

strong and with heavy weapons at his disposal. Now it was every man for himself!

We allowed the Ivans to approach fairly close: 100m, 50m! But then, as on the shooting range: fire at targets! Every round a hit! More and more Russians were shot down individually. The others threw themselves down in the snow, wanting to retreat. It was not a good decision. Three of us fired at the same time at a Russian who wanted to bury himself in the snow. He dug for a short time with his arms, then collapsed and lay motionless. Thus one after another was ‘picked off’. Some wanted to run for it, and of these we shot down a few. We saw their dark forms lying in the snow but also recognized what good camouflage was provided by the white winter uniform. Some moved an arm or leg briefly, another made a laborious attempt to stand, ‘*peng*’ and he sank back, finally. With a sigh of relief we lowered our rifles and sub-machine guns. We had beaten off the attack.

‘You shot wonderfully well with the one mortar! Excellent direct hitting! Just look there, Kanakas – more than fifteen dead,’ Oberleutnant Hinnerk called to me. I looked to where he was pointing and saw the mortar craters. Good, Bleuel, well done. For me there was no doubt he had to be awarded the Iron Cross Second Class.

The attack had been fended off, but what next? We had fired off all the ammunition for our mortars and the light infantry guns. The situation was therefore anything but rosy. I had the mortar dismantled and placed under cover. Now we had to prepare for close combat defence. Every man was needed regardless of whether he had a rifle or only a pistol. Hand grenades were readied. I divided up my men. I evacuated the first row of houses except for the observation post in order to avoid unnecessary losses. This could be a long day!

If only the night would come soon to enable ammunition to be brought up. It was too dangerous to attempt it in daylight, Ivan would pick off the messenger too easily. I sat with my sub-machine gun between my knees, steel helmet in my hand, beside the 7 Company commander. His face was very serious, his company was only twenty-two strong! He wanted to speak to our 8 Company commander urgently, but he was at the observation post. At the very moment when he rose to go there, the door opened and our

commander entered. ‘Thank God, Ivan is firing his anti-tank gun at every individual he sees running!’ He sat on the sofa, wiped the sweat from his brow and removed his steel helmet. His hair hung tousled and damp beneath it: he had a stubbly beard. The two officers now discussed the defence of the village. The main subject was the shortage of ammunition. The ammunition cases were newly distributed, the MG rounds removed from the belts in two cases to provide rifle ammunition. Everything was in short supply – and no prospect of getting any more. By some miracle the telephone connection to Battalion (II Battalion Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*) was still intact. Our commander wanted to speak to the commanding officer. I rang through and requested him to come to the receiver. Just at that moment Ivan sent over a bombardment, and there was a strange noise in the connection. I rang through again but knew from the ease with which I could turn the crank that the connection was severed. I hung up the receiver and said with a regretful smile, ‘Linesmen, search!’ Easily said, but I knew exactly what it meant. Now that we were all under cover, the Russians were sending over salvo after salvo, and the telephone linesman had to go out to find the break. Wire in hand, always following the line, looking for the damage, with numb fingers repair it and then come back. Many of these linesmen failed to return from such a mission. Our two telephonists presented themselves but the commander ordered that only one should go: we had to conserve people! The two exchanged tools and one left. I followed him to the doorway. Initially he went ducked low behind the houses, holding wire. Then he made a couple of leaps and ran even when crossing an area in the enemy’s view. The camouflage suit gave him good protection. I stayed to watch his effort. He stopped for an instant, Ivan fired and for a second a small black cloud of dirt arose near him. He lay flat in the snow, not moving. Wounded? Dead? No, he raised his head cautiously, looked around slowly and drew his legs up ready to sprint, and ran. The anti-tank gun fired again. The impact was directly before him in the snow. He fell, the effect of blast and shock. Then he ran on, this brave boy. The Ivans must have guessed how important the man was for us: he would either be a messenger or a telephone linesman. Ivan kept firing at him, at the man upon whom we had pinned all our hopes. He fell. If he stayed

down we would no longer have any contact with the outside world. He lay there as if dead. Had they got him? The anti-tank gun had ceased firing. ‘Shame about the boy,’ I thought.

There came a shout: ‘He’s moving! He’s alive! He’s coming!’ I watched him make his laborious way back to us panting. Anxious eyes followed his progress to the protection of the houses where he threw himself down breathlessly into the snow. A couple of infantrymen ran over and carried him into a house. The telephonist at the company command post reported, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, connection restored!’ The commander rang through and asked for reinforcements, ammunition and sleds to transport out the wounded. He spoke in a way I had not heard before, almost imploring the commanding officer. The latter promised to do whatever he could. With a tired gesture of the hand, the commander replaced the receiver of the field telephone and fell back into an armchair with a sigh: ‘If that does not get here soon, we’ll all be dead by early morning. Then they’ll write in the great book, “They died true to their oath of allegiance”, left to their own devices – abandoned and betrayed. Shit! Shit!’ The last two words he shouted loudly. Then he turned his head to my messenger and asked, ‘Felbermeyer, give me a cigarette, or have you run out of them too?’ The messenger grinned and produced from his map case a packet of ‘Nordland’. The commander offered them round. I held my lighter under his nose. ‘A real flamethrower,’ he said with a laugh and inhaled. Then he asked, ‘How is the house in which we put up our tents? Can one still feel safe there?’ He had hardly said this than there came a loud explosion, the pressure hard on the ears and lungs. Dead silence! Whatever it was had come in. Nobody moved, my hand trembled as I put the cigarette to my lips. Slowly with exaggerated calm I stood up to investigate. The floor was covered with plaster, whitewashed bits of wall and bricks. Pictures lay on the ground, the shards of glass under my feet. From the door I looked into the next room. It faced the enemy. A large hole had appeared in the wall near the window. The anti-tank shell had gone through the outer wall, then through the inner wall leaving a smaller hole and exploded in the parlour. I thought that we had been lucky and was just about to go outside when two soldiers came running to the house entrance at an alarming speed. Two mortar bombs

exploded behind the house, one after the other. ‘My dear man,’ they laughed, listened out for a while and then ran on. The Russians must have noticed the brisk activity involving this house. The anti-tank fire increased, now from several guns. Some neighbouring houses were already on fire. Then came a very heavy mortar attack following which we heard the hoarse ‘Urrraah!’ cry of attacking Bolsheviks. They must have discovered by now that we had no heavy weapons. We were under such heavy fire that it was unwise to show one’s head in the street. The commander came to the doorway, his steel helmet facing the wrong way, a cigarette between his teeth. He released the safety catch of his pistol. Despite the grave situation, Bubi Felbermeyer asked him, ‘Does the Herr Oberleutnant intend firing on those people with his pocket Flak?’

The commander looked at his 7.65mm pistol and gave him a bitter smile: ‘It’s still better than a toy gun.’ Meanwhile everybody had taken up position under cover and with a good field of fire. I checked my magazine again and released the safety. Through binoculars I saw a horse-drawn anti-tank gun approaching 800m away. That would be a good target if only we had enough ammunition. Our last heavy MG rattled. I saw the snow spray up, the burst headed for the target. Excellent! The horse collapsed, a man fell from the animal, the contraption halted. The crew was now manhandling the gun. Our MG fired like crazy. wonderful how it pinned down the Ivans over there. Then it jammed. Immediately the Russians unlimbered their gun and got it into a firing position. It flashed: snow and earth whirled around us. One direct hit after another into the house with the MG position. The house had fallen silent. Was the MG out of action? I saw that our infantry had planted their bayonets in the ground and laid out hand grenades in readiness. Their faces were pale and showed deadly earnest. Only when the shells fell too close and shrapnel whizzed and whirred around did they fall back and duck down. A dangerous quiet! The first Russians, wearing long greatcoats, were close to the houses, holding long rifles with the three-sided bayonet fixed. They approached hesitantly. I raised my sub-machine gun, made careful aim and pulled the trigger. The burst hit an Ivan only 30 to 40m away and he collapsed. His cap flew from his head. I lowered the barrel and searched for the next target. As if at the word of command round

after round rang out with a pause between each. We had to spare ammunition. The rounds were all well aimed, nearly all of them found their man. I still had three full magazines, almost ninety to a hundred rounds. How little that was, however, if every burst of fire consumed ten to fifteen rounds. Therefore less, but more accuracy. I heard the thin whip of pistol rounds and to the right of us the dull detonation of hand grenades. Five Ivans came up at the double together firing sub-machine guns. They couldn't see us, we were well hidden behind walls and window frames. Their fire was wild, the rounds clattering into the house walls. I ducked down, put my sub-machine gun to my shoulder and let them have a full magazine of thirty rounds. This stopped them. Two fell forward and made no further movement, the other three were wounded and fell down in the snow still capable of moving arms and legs. This situation had been resolved but to the right it was critical, with sounds of fighting. From the flank I picked off more Russians who fell and stayed down. A withering fire came from every window, front porch and behind the house corners. More Ivans were arriving but did not care to venture into the village. One needed good nerves. The Russians could not employ their heavy weapons against us for fear of endangering their own troops. Now it was a fight, man against man. Now the 'single-handed warrior' came into his own. Because of our shortage of ammunition it was wasteful to fire the MG at lone Russians, therefore the MG gunners had taken to delivering aimed fire with the carbine. I took a look at the positions in and along the house fronts to ensure that the nerve of the men would hold. If ejected from the houses and rubble we would be lost, being then without cover and unable to escape on foot through deep snow. Our motto had to be: Stay – Fight – Fall! The enemy attacking here had been deprived of his fantasies of victory by our determined resistance, the crack of our shells and the 'bark' of our MG.

We were precisely on the encirclement ring around Königsberg, having coming up from the south, practically attacking the Russians in their rear. Thus Ivan had two fronts. The planking flew as an MG burst clattered into the fence behind which I was sheltering. I sprang back, changing my cover, fitting a new magazine. The last! Everybody was out of ammunition. I turned to Günter my messenger. He held up a snow and ice-encrusted

bullet, wiped it clean and put it into the breech. I raised my sub-machine gun to show him, said, ‘The last magazine, Günter,’ then looked again to my front. Everywhere brownclad figures lying in the snow, unmoving, limbs as if frozen. Around me a few carbine rounds rang out and it grew quieter.

Then the surviving Russians pulled back. Here and there an individual, there several, stumbling back through the snow. Now we had to conserve ammunition. I had only six rounds left in my magazine and didn’t fire. Günter raised his rifle, aimed and fired once. His eyes bored into the target. ‘He’s down,’ he said simply. My radio operator had twenty rounds and passed five of them to Günter. The calm after the storm. I distributed new observation posts, had all remaining ammunition shared out as equally as possible and then returned to the command post. With a light whistling sound three light infantry gun shells passed overhead and detonated amongst the retreating Russians. The last three shells. Who knew where they had got them from? The two commanders sat together in the parlour of the command post. They were not happy, for the telephone line to Battalion had been cut again. I removed my steel helmet and reported the situation with the ammunition. I was told: ‘So that you know, no ammunition will arrive by day. We have to hold out at all costs until evening.’ Messengers came to us. What they had to report was not encouraging. Casualties, dead and wounded, shortage of ammunition, a light MG had a cartridge jammed in it which had not yet been cleared. We did not let it unnerve us. One of my troop leaders, Obergefreiter Hans Esser, came from our observation post to report on the situation. The house had been shot through like a sieve. At least during the previous night the inhabitants had fled. At the moment there were only three men forward. In one house to our right Ivan had got in and was holding the ruins despite our counter-attacks.

‘What? Russians in our village? They must be thrown out at once!’ The sound of short, violent firing and hand grenades exploding reached us through the window but calmed swiftly. Suddenly the ring of the field telephone surprised us. It had been forgotten: I picked up the receiver: ‘Rehfeldt here! 8 Company mortar platoon leader.’

Then I heard as if from afar an excited voice: ‘Who is there? Unteroffizier Rehfeldt you are beyond reproach. Are you people still in the old position? Is Ivan still attacking? Have you enough ammunition? Your position, the village, must be held at all costs! Do you hear me? At all costs! The regimental commander was just here and expressed his recognition of your achievement. But you must hold out!’

‘*Jawohl*, Herr Hauptmann, I am passing you to Herr Oberleutnant Hinnerks!’ The commander stood, took the receiver and then for a while I heard him say nothing but ‘*Jawohl*’ over and over.

‘*Jawohl*, but . . .’ No buts! The commanding officer spoke without emotion, Hinnerks had a tired smile, then suddenly his eyes opened wide. His face showed animation! He seemed pleasantly surprised and we gave him an enquiring look. ‘*Jawohl*, Herr Hauptmann. Over.’ Hinnerks collapsed into the armchair. ‘This evening we are being relieved.’ There would have been a tremendous noise if all the weights that fell from our hearts at that moment had crashed to the wooden floor! Outside there was loud talking, the outer front door was thrown open forcefully, then we heard heavy footsteps. The parlour door was opened and two men with red faces and sweating entered carrying a third person between them, our company troop leader. He stood with teeth clenched and limped to the chair, exhausted and groaning quietly. In response to the commander’s question he replied: ‘I undertook a counter-attack with five men to force the Russians out of the house but they are back in it again. I have a pistol round in the thigh. The entire MG crew, except the Unteroffizier, have been killed by an anti-tank shell.’ Therefore, the Russians had succeeded in occupying one of the houses and obviously the intention would be to take one after another. A new counter-attack was required. The 7 Company commander would lead it himself. The preparations were made in haste, and then the assault troops left. It was 1800hrs and gradually falling darker outside. The messengers could also be sent out without the Russians seeing them. Soon the first messengers arrived from the rear, advising us of ammunition being brought up. Sleds were also on the way to bring out the wounded and dead. And the most important thing: our relief was on its way to us!

‘Who is coming?’

‘A Volksgrenadier Battalion, crazy soldiers.’ We did not find these words inspiring. Weren’t these all bootmakers, tailors, drivers, serfs from the *Tross*? We could not imagine that they would be up to much but it was all the same to us who came, provided they were here soon! I sent my messenger Günter to my group leaders on account of the daily bulletin I had to compile, but they soon came themselves, after drinking heaven only knows what in some cellar. Neither was really sober and I decided to relieve them both of their posts when the opportunity arose. Much talking did not pay off. Obergefreiter Hans Esser, who gave me whole-hearted support, arranged the rest of my people as close security around the command post. Outside it was now dark, in the village the flames of the burning houses flickered. Individual messengers flitted like dark shadows from house to house. Occasionally Ivan’s artillery bombarded the village and the explosions resounded across the night. The important things was that they wouldn’t attack tonight. I glanced at my watch – 1940hrs. 7 Company (i.e. the remnants still capable of fighting) launched the planned counter-attack against ‘The Russian House’. I stepped out into the open: the starry sky formed a vault over the land. It was very cold. A green flare rose up and immediately after the explosions of ‘balled charges’ (a stick grenade with four or five extra warheads strapped to it). Sub-machine guns barked and individual hand grenades detonated. We heard loud shouts of ‘Hurrah!’ Ivan answered with rapid MG fire from at least four weapons, and in connection with that the first anti-tank grenades reduced the nearby houses to shreds and tatters. I returned to the cover of the parlour. A deafening explosion ripped away the corner of the house. I was writing up my daily report near the stove when an infantryman entered and asked for me. ‘I am here. What’s up?’

‘Grenadier Bleuel, Herr Unteroffizier. I am wounded.’ I raised the candle high and looked into his pallid face. He gave me an embarrassed smile. ‘All full of splinters, Herr Unteroffizier!’

I asked him if it was very bad. ‘Can you still smoke?’

‘Definitely, but I haven’t got any.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant.’ I gave him three cigarettes from a Möwe packet and lit one for myself. When the sleds arrived I made sure he was

with the first aboard. A look into his loyal eyes and then, ‘Look after yourself!’

The horses harnessed to the sled panted and puffed – then he disappeared into the darkness of the night. The seriously wounded whimpered and groaned, I spoke encouraging words to them – they would soon be in the warm in safety. Just lie quiet. Those lying on the ground who could not be taken looked at us with anxious eyes. ‘Don’t leave us lying here! Don’t forget us!’ From the command post our commander rang the battalion commanding officer and asked when the relief would be arriving. Naturally all encrypted. ‘When is the ascension of Christ? Are the young men coming soon?’

Günter said, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, if Ivan hears that he will definitely think, “Germanski Bible they not much know about”’. We laughed aloud at this. We learned that the relief was on the way and even the munitions sled could be expected soon. It arrived and the driver asked me where he should unload the ammunition cases. I received sixty cases, each with three mortar bombs, an enormous quantity! Also MG ammunition, hand grenades and sub-machine gun ammunition. The grenadiers with carbines were to take rounds from the MG belts. The two lorry drivers, standing to one side, asked if there were any petrol canisters but the sled drivers shook their heads. I called Battalion and asked what we should do with the lorries without fuel. At that moment the Russian artillery and anti-tank guns sent a bombardment. Hastily I distributed the mortar ammunition and had them all set up and readied for barrage fire but without previously zeroing-in. Ivan would have a surprise if he attacked! Behind me I heard a voice calling quietly, ‘Hallo, 8 Company – 7 Company *Grossdeutschland*.’

I responded in a hushed voice, ‘Here! Here!’ and then I saw the relief coming, at its head an officer and the battalion instructor, behind them a line of infantry, spaced well apart. Thank God! ‘Command post here!’ I called to them again, then went into the house and reported, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, the relief is here.’ At that the unit leader entered, his platoon leaders remained in the porch. The commander rose, went towards them, saluted and said, ‘Hinnerk, wonderful to see you, please take a seat!’ Each gave the other his hand with a noble gesture, bowed and then sat facing each other at the table.

Our commander asked for the name of the unit, strength, armament, ammunition and morale, the provenance of the troops and much else besides. The company troop messengers had already informed the platoon and group leaders that they were traipsing in. The new arrivals were a motley bunch, exactly as the messengers had described: old and young mixed together, only a very few having played at infantryman before. I had the feeling this would not go well. They went behind us under cover in the houses. We still had security for the village. The leader of the unit spoke quite openly and without embarrassment of his ‘elite troops’. He envied our commander because by its famous name our unit was a real elite. Then he produced a bottle of schnapps from a pocket of his fur coat and broke off the neck of the bottle. Bubi Felbermeyer brought three glasses from his map case – an ideal messenger! Then the officers drank to their and our health and *Soldatenglück*. Finally the bottle did the rounds of the corporals and Oberfeldwebel Grosse.

Our commander now stated the situation, chalking a sketch of the village on the table top: ‘. . . and the house down here unfortunately has Russians in it. We have tried two counter-attacks, but without ammunition it has been impossible to winkle them out.’ We could see by the face of the relieving officer that he would have preferred it if we could still drive them out ourselves, but our commander wanted to hand over as quickly as possible and leave. I suggested we could make a sudden attack with my four mortars and then smoke them out with the ammunition we had just received, then take and occupy the house. I liked the idea but my commander declined: ‘No racket at the handover otherwise Ivan may give us his reply when we pull out.’ I saw the point. I was just a bit sorry that I had to abandon 200 mortar bombs to the relief. Then the individual group leaders of the relief were shown the observation positions and informed of whatever else was necessary regarding the situation, enemy strengths and known positions of anti-tank guns. After the handover was complete, our sentries were withdrawn and our own men ordered to assemble behind the houses. They reported all present and correct to the commander and gathered cautiously and quietly in cover; the group leaders reported ‘All ready’. I went to the commander and stated, ‘Herr Oberleutnant, mortar platoon has handed over

everything correctly and is ready to move out. Men and equipment all accounted for, of the recently received ammunition we have seventy-two bombs in twenty-four cases, that is, eighteen rounds per mortar. The rest has been passed to the relief as ordered.'

'Very good, Rehfeldt. Tell Oberfeldwebel Grosse he should lead 8 Company to Gut Maulen. He knows the way!' When I stepped out, I saw the company already marching off in a long file with spaces between each man – and without noise. The Russians fired blindly now and again with anti-tank guns and mortars. I went to my platoon: a couple of mortar bombs from Ivan hissed overhead and exploded in the yard of the next farmstead. This gave rise to a tumult. They landed in the midst of a group of relieving soldiers leaving them with three dead and four wounded! Unwisely they had been standing in a group. I just shook my head. Inexperience – these boys had no idea. Soon we left behind us the village of Jäskeim which we of 8 Company and elements of 7 Company had defended and held. We towed a sled with wounded along with us; nobody was left behind. I went ahead through the deep snow to Oberfeldwebel Grosse. Passing my platoon I counted them again. I had only one casualty, a wounded man. What luck! The men trotted through the snow wearily. Grosse took out his compass: he seemed to know the direction. It lay parallel to the main battle Front. We were stopped by an infantryman on sentry duty lying on straw in the snow.

'Which company?'

'2 Company, III Battalion, security!' Aha! We halted at a farm for directions and then continued. Scarcely had we done so than Ivan showered the countryside with curtain fire. The Russians did not know what unit we were and our strength. We kept going without being seen. After a march lasting an age we arrived at Gut Maulen. There we rested awaiting our lorries. 'Everybody aboard!' I shared out my platoon over two lorries and got into the Peugeot as co-driver. It was icy cold in the driving cab. For reasons of fuel economy we were being towed by other lorries. The motors roared up. With the shaking and jolting I was soon asleep. When I awoke, Königsberg lay before us. We drove over a large railway bridge into the city.

The withdrawal of Panzer Grenadier Division Grossdeutschland from the Praschnitz area in an almost northerly direction through East Prussia to the Baltic has been concluded. On its roads and paths, in the villages and towns through which they passed, comrades remain who paid tribute with their lives. They and their graves in East Prussian lands bear witness to their bravery in the struggle for their homeland.

(From: Helmuth Spaeter, *Die Geschichte des Panzerkorps Grossdeutschland*, Vol 3, p. 261, with my own additions.)

30–31 January 1945

In the same night after handing over Jäskeim to the Volksgrenadier relief, the remnants of II Battalion under Hauptmann Mackert transferred behind the Front across Haff Strasse to Königsberg. The access to Königsberg had grown very narrow. We occupied billets in one of the south-western suburbs of the city and slept our fill. The dwellings were abandoned: it was obvious with what haste that must have happened!

1–2 February 1945

The houses had working telephones, radios, electric light, water on tap, things we had long had to do without. The infantry set about ‘organizing’ everything edible and soon the larders were full. In the evening the platoon leaders and I spent a few hours together with the commander when the officers were suddenly called away. Then I went into the kitchen and removed my fur boots. These were no longer the Russian captured fur boots, the ‘Valenkis’, made from a slab of shaped fur, but German, leather and fur combined. Because they were wet I placed them on the stove which had only a low fire and then, exhausted, I fell asleep. I was awakened by a dreadful stink. Somehow the top plate had got too hot, the sole and other leather parts were carbonized. Where was I to obtain a new pair? In my misfortune I was in luck. In the broom cupboard I discovered some rubber boots. I put strapping around my ankles for a tighter fit. I continued to wear these boots until Ivan put me out of action on 17 March 1945 at the edge of the wood behind Pörschken, with his mortars of all things. Scarcely had I

fallen asleep once more than a messenger came: ‘Everybody, ready up! We are advancing early this morning. We leave in an hour!’

Notes

1. This was a field gun made up of an L-11 barrel on the split-trail carriage used by the ZiS-3. Its Russian designation is not known but the Germans referred to it as the ‘7.62cm FK 250 (r)’ and nicknamed it the ‘*ratsch-boom*’ for the characteristic of the exploding shell being heard before the report at firing. Peter Chamberlain, *Light and Medium Field Artillery*, Arco, 1975, p. 62. (TN)
2. The ‘Stuka zu Fuss’ were 28cm and 32cm rockets fired from launchers fitted on the sides of the S.Kfz. 251/1 medium armoured infantry carrier. The 28cm mortar had a filling of HE and a range of 1,900m. The 32cm contained flamethrower fuel and had a range of 2,200m. Six such mortars were carried, the usual salvo being five 28cm and one 32cm. Although not accurate, their effect was devastating. Alexander Lüdeke, *Panzer der Wehrmacht Band 2, Rad und Halbkettenfahrzeuge 1939–1945*, Motorbuch Verlag, 2012, pp. 96–7. (TN)

Chapter 17

East Prussia – Cut Off From the Reich

3 February 1945

The men, dead tired, were woken up, everything was made combat-ready and after an hour, towards 0500hrs, II Battalion set off in a generally western direction. Along the coast near Reichs Strasse 1 (which runs from the Dutch border north of Aachen via Dortmund, Berlin to Königsberg and beyond), as far as Kalgen before first light. There into readiness position. West towards Brandenburg, the Russians had pushed forward across Reichs Strasse 1 between Warthen and Heide Waldburg to the coast. We had no accurate information. While we were preparing, the officers had another important conference and were away for some time. This created a difficult situation for us! Hardly any of us knew what was being ‘played out’. Oberfeldwebel Grosse, platoon leader of our light infantry guns, and I consulted passing infantry platoon leaders from 6 and 7 Company, but all they knew was that: ‘An attack has been ordered.’ It was very odd. Behind us was the city of Königsberg, burning brightly in many places with additionally the loud thundering of heavy guns being fired and exploding shells, ours as well as Russian. Interspersed somewhere were the light and fast rattle of the German MG42 and the slower tack-tack-tack and chatter of Russian MGs. Flares rose up everywhere, ours harsh white and theirs more greenish-white. Situation in a shit state. Königsberg under direct threat from the enemy, as good as encircled. East Prussia already cut off from the Reich. Ivan close to Danzig. We here at the Haff, in the narrowest area. Was this the end? Was this where we went down? The slogan of the East Prussian warrior was: *Tapfer und Treu* – Brave and True.

Cautiously we advanced from Kalgen towards Warthen. Later we found out our objective. We had to recapture Reichs Strasse 1 south of Haffström, then push south-west to Warthen and take the town. As dawn broke the artillery of both sides grew stronger. The thunder of the guns rolled in the air. To our left, Ivan fired his Stalin organs at us. Suddenly came MG and rifle fire from ahead. This was it! We had encountered the enemy. Somehow I had the impression that Ivan had advanced very close to Reichs Strasse 1, but almost immediately we saw that he was already at the Haff coast. Soon we were receiving very fierce defensive fire from our right, from ahead and in rich measure from our left flank! We advanced with wide spaces between each of us. The enemy was very strong here. Because this was supposed to be a surprise attack, we would have no artillery softening-up in support. Strong anti-tank fire forced us to the ground repeatedly. We had almost got to Reichs Strasse 1 when we were forced to lie down again. In this attack, 6 Company commander Oberleutnant Ochmann fell; two NCOs and nine men were carried back wounded. Our own company commander had not yet arrived. When the Russians saw that we intended to go through, we came under their artillery fire. This was a very unpleasant experience since we were in open fields without any possibility of cover. When it grew lighter, we noticed a large, grey concrete bunker about 200m behind us. As I discovered later, the fortress of Königsberg was surrounded by fifteen unfortunately obsolete forts from the First World War. Their names, beginning 'I Stein' east of the city and north of the river Pregel, were: Ia Groeben, II Bronsart, IIa Barnekow, III Friedrich Wilhelm I, IV Gneisenau, V Friedrich Wilhelm III, Va Lehndorf, VI Königin Luise, VII von Holstein, VIII Friedrich Wilhelm IV, IX Dohna, X Kanitz, XI Dönhoff and XII Eulenburg. These old forts were set around the city anti-clockwise. I thought that we would be much safer in one of these. I sent out a messenger who returned fairly quickly to inform us that there was a Volkssturm unit in the big bunker, and that they had no positions outside it. Thus we decided to make use of it. The men made for it under heavy fire. Once my people were nearly all under the protecting concrete I stood for a moment a few metres outside in front of the entrance looking for a possible observation post. Ivan was firing with his artillery constantly in the surrounding area and then I

heard shells howling towards me! I couldn't get back to the bunker fast enough when two or three shells hit the concrete edge above the doorway spraying splinters and lumps of concrete in all directions. I emerged from it unscathed. I had luck – *Soldatenglück*!

In the bunker we found the company commander of a Volkssturm unit, men from the region around Königsberg. With relief he sent his soldiers outside in order to 'assess the situation'. He was happy that we were there, and we were happy to have a few more men attached to us. We gave this fort (Friedrich Wilhelm IV) a close inspection. It had no rifle slits or any other kind of aperture from which one could shoot or observe. The inner rooms were sealed off by heavy barred gates with thick locks for which no key could be found. Therefore we had to set up our defensive position near the bunker. The Russians attacked us a couple of times, but were beaten off.

A chance presented itself here to take a Russian captain prisoner. A group of four to five Ivans were towing an MG, led by a tall man who was obviously their officer. Whenever we fired they threw themselves down, then picked themselves up and set off again. In his hand the officer held a pistol attached by a strap to his belt. Recognizing him as an officer by the broad gold shoulder straps and his always throwing himself down when we fired, I ordered my men to shoot only at the MG crew because I wanted to capture him. The MG gunners then either stayed down or were hit by our fire: the officer looked around, tore off his pistol, threw it aside and ran towards us. I shouted to him loudly: '*Idi ssuda! skorje! ruki wwerch! Dawai, dawai*' ('Come over here, quickly, hands up, do it, do it!') I stood near the bunker with my sub-machine gun and showed myself, and he came running with his hands up. Being able to converse well with him in Russian, I brought him into the bunker for interrogation. He was the commanding officer of a pioneer unit. Why was he with an MG unit then? I did not understand his reply but had the impression that it was possibly a disciplinary transfer. He was over 30 years old, an engineer from the Leningrad area. He made a good, almost pleasant impression on me. I was still 21 then! I was using my fairly basic Russian with him but when I produced from a pocket a small phrasebook for German soldiers in Russia he said to me, 'Please speak English.' Then things naturally went much

better. He could also speak French. We smoked and then it occurred to me that he was wearing a watch. I asked him for the time, and as he looked at his watch I showed him my naked wrist and said that my own watch had been destroyed in battle, would he not give me his? I had spared his life, and during his later captivity he was bound to lose it somewhere along the way. I also offered him 100 Möwe cigarettes for it. He looked at me with an ‘understanding’ smile and handed me his watch. All of this occurred in the presence of curious colleagues. The watch was probably a US-made Hamilton engraved on the rear with words to the effect ‘To the heroic Russian people – help from the USA.’ It seemed to me that such a man should be taken to Regimental Staff. Perhaps he could tell us something useful. Meanwhile I had other things to do: indicate positions, place the security watch and provide aiming points for the mortars. After several alarms in the late evening the rest of the night passed quietly and I had a good night’s sleep.

4 February 1945

Next morning we advanced towards Reichs Strasse 1 again but this time the Russians were too strong and we had to return to the starting point near the bunker. Here the vehicles for the three light infantry guns had arrived, I think they were two Opel-Blitz and a ‘Muli’ (half-track lorry). We were ordered to sit up with the gunners on these three lorries for the ride to Brandenburg along Reichs Strasse 1. There we were to report. I was not happy about this. The three lorries were to proceed westwards along the highway raised 2m above the ground and running through the battlefield. Where did this idea come from? Had the situation changed suddenly?

Before we drove off I asked, ‘Is the highway free of the enemy?’

‘Yes, it can be travelled.’ Therefore we departed. I had my Russian captain travel in my lorry. I spread my three mortar groups between the three lorries. The platoon leader of the light infantry guns would ride with the first lorry, I would be on the running board of the last lorry, not wishing to be in the cab when under fire. In my almost four years of war I had seen many wrecked vehicles with their drivers and co-drivers dead and burned to a crisp where they sat. The memory was imprinted on my mind. That was

not how I wished to end my mortal span. I would rather jump free and seek cover on the ground if it became too hot. First we travelled cross-country with much rocking and shaking and arrived at the highway with 100m between each lorry. Reichs Strasse 1 was strewn with the wreckage of civilian and military vehicles. Large bomb or shell craters had to be negotiated slowly and carefully. With a roar a cloud of dirt rose up close behind the leading lorry. It came from the right, the northern side, two shells both too short. Then we came under MG fire from both sides. We could see the line of bullets coming directly for us but escaped unharmed. Accursed anti-tank fire came from the right, aimed at the middle lorry. Ivan was sitting at the Haff and we were in the middle of it, went through my head. The highway was slightly raised through the low ground. Five metres to my right an anti-tank shell exploded against the slope. What with the heat of the blast and the shock to my system I almost fell off the running board. Mud and earth flew about my ears and into my face. The windscreen was sprayed over and the driver shouted, ‘I can’t see anything! I can’t see anything any more!’ I held the window frame for support with my left hand and wiped the windscreen clean as best I could with my right. I nearly lost my foothold again when the lorry swerved suddenly to avoid a shell crater. I saw the Russian captain stick his head out through a hole in the tarpaulin cover: the men in the back of the lorry were in a state of great disquiet at all this. The three lorries were speeding as fast as all the wreckage along the road allowed. Anti-tank gun fire came once more from the Haff side and hit the light infantry gun being towed by the second lorry 100m ahead. The gun began to roll because the right wheel had been hit, converting it into towed heavy scrap! I also saw a small burst of flame shoot up from amongst several men sitting ducked low on the rear flap. These were some additional propellant charges which one of my mortar men had put into his breast pocket and had gone up in flames! I could not see any more, for the firing had grown heavier and I had to hold on grimly.

It was a crazy road race. We were taking fire from both sides. This could not turn out well. The leading lorry slowed. Looking forward I saw it leaving the highway on the right side, carefully and slowly driving down the slope. There was a small road bridge over the Frisching, which flows

from here to the Haff: this bridge had been destroyed and the shallow river had to be forded. I watched the manoeuvre with concern. The vehicles were moving very slowly. The men jumped out to push them up the opposite slope. We were a good target here for the Russian anti-tank gun battery but were to some extent provided with cover by trees and bushes. Everything went off well. Once on the road on the other side we resumed the fast pace, the damaged gun still slipping and sliding behind the second lorry. It did not take much longer before we reached the outskirts of Brandenburg to be received by astonished soldiers shaking their heads. ‘Man, it is sheer madness to drive down that road. The Russians are sitting there on both sides!’ We happened to have noticed that! We set up new firing positions on the Haff. Now I had the opportunity to hand over my Russian captain, and entrusted him to my messenger. I drove off, searching for the regimental command post. When I returned, my Ivan was no longer there. A lieutenant had come and included him with a bunch of other prisoners. Angrily I grabbed a motor cycle and rode there, I knew it could not be far. Soon I overtook the trotting prisoners. My ‘captain’ gave me a wave. I informed the escort and took him out. He was glad of it. Now on to the regimental command post. The adjutant wanted to take him straight away to the commanding officer, but I interjected: ‘Herr Oberleutnant, there is a price to pay for the captain. A good bottle and cigarettes.’

The adjutant laughed. ‘You’re a real extortionist, but go to Feldwebel N. and have your reward, mentioning my name.’ I provided him with the details of the capture of the captain and then went off to collect my bounty. Whether he revealed anything of real importance I never found out. Unfortunately I lost track of his name and home address. Later an instruction made its rounds of the troops stating that captured officers had to be registered and then brought to the command post. Very probably therefore he may have been able to provide useful information. It would have interested me to learn of his future. We did not tarry long at the Haff and went into Brandenburg. We soon noticed that something was brewing on our side. Units were being grouped and preparations made for an attack.

Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland*, 1a. Divisional Command Post, 5 February 1945.

Divisional Orders for 5 February 1945

1. Enemy is in front of the division with elements XVI G.S.K. (with 11 and 31 G.S.D,) also elements XXXVI G.S.K. (with 16 and 18 G.S.D.) and remnants of the 26 G.S.D. The original intention to push through with XVI G.S.K. from the Godrienen – Wundlaken – Maulen area to Königsberg Haff and then with 11 G.S.D and elements of XXXVI G.S.K. to wheel to the south-west along the Königsberg-Brandenburg Rollbahn has been prevented by our own attacks. Despite his extraordinarily high losses the enemy will hold fast to his intention to reach Königsberg Haff, if necessary releasing forces on the Königsberg southern Front. Furthermore the arrival of a unit of assault guns and Stalin tanks is to be reckoned with in the area Warthen – Maulen – Waldburg.
2. On 5 February 1945, Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland* held the gained line Neu Colbnicken – Waldburg – Maulen – Warthen with the intention, after rest and regrouping of individual units, to advance on 6 February 1945 in order to capture the Kobbelbude-Königsberg railway.
3. To the division are subordinated: Grenadier Regiment 975 (367 Infantry Division) and heavy howitzer/mortar detachment 816 cooperating with Mortar Regiment 81 and 1 Flak Regiment 64.
4. For the defence on 5 February the arrangement is:
Right: Panzer Fusilier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* without I.Battalion.
Left: Grenadier Regiment 975 with subordinated I Panzer Fusilier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* and II Panzer Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*, Pak (anti-tank gun) and Flak Company, Panzer Regiment *Grossdeutschland* and 1 Panzer-Jäger-Abtg. (Anti-tank panzer detachment) *Grossdeutschland*.
Border: Right to 562 Volksgrenadier Division Schoschen: (562) – Neu Colbnicken (*Grossdeutschland*) – Bergau *Grossdeutschland*

- between Panzer Fusilier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* and Grenadier Regiment (975) – Factory – 500 metres eastwards of Heide Waldburg – ‘Point 05’ 750 metres north-east of Schloss Waldburg – south-west corner to Maulen – Ludwigshof farmstead (Füsiliers).
5. The following are to transfer to the availability of the division:
Panzer Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* – without II Battalion and without the Pak- and Flak Company to Brandenburg.
II Grenadier Regiment 975 to Heide Maulen.
Battalion *Brandenburg* to Brandenburg.
Pioneer units to Pokarben.
Panzer-Aufklärungs (reconnaissance) Detachment *Grossdeutschland* to the Pörschken – Brandenburg area – Division Escort Company to Heide Waldburg.
 6. Fighting Plan: A cleansing of the main battle line, from which an attack will be launched on 6 February 1945 after restructuring, is to be undertaken by Panzer Fusilier Regiment *Grossdeutschland* Waldburg and Grenadier Regiment 975 Maulen-North on the night of 4 February, and Grenadier Regiment 975 will also prepare to recapture Maulen-South.
 7. In the area of Honogbaum Wood, north of Waldburg, Heide Maulen and Warthen, Panzer Regiment *Grossdeutschland* will support the advance of the Grenadier Regiments by a panzer group cooperating with the Grenadier Regiments close to the Front. Communication between the regimental and battalion commanders of the panzers is to be guaranteed!
 8. Panzer Artillery Regiment *Grossdeutschland* (with subordinate heavy howitzer/ mortar Detachment 816 with supporting Mortar Regiment 81) is to break down recognized enemy assembly positions and advances and cooperate with both neighbouring divisions by overlapping. Artillery ammunition is not to be used for minor, purely infantry-type attacks. Nuisance fire and

engagements against enemy artillery remains discontinued.
Instructed to cooperate are:

I Panzer Artillery Regiment *Grossdeutschland* with Grenadier Regiment 975.

II Panzer Artillery Regiment *Grossdeutschland* with Panzer Fusilier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*.

Unfortunately I do not have in my possession the remainder of the divisional orders. Our II Battalion, Grenadier Regiment remained as a reserve for counter-attacks behind the attacking III Battalion. Assembly point was behind a small wood. The general Front ran approximately: Colbnicken–Neu Colbnicken–Waldburg–Maulen–Warthen.

We went to the indicated position with our mortars. Vehicles moved up from the rear slowly. It would soon begin! The plan was: thrust to Neu Colbnicken– Colbnicken farmstead – then Waldpothen (brickworks) and next Seepothen. We were ready, well camouflaged, protected against being seen. We had still not fired yet. Weird. Has Ivan noticed anything?

5 February 1945

Dawn came up. The ‘Pistol Woods’ in front of us, so-called for their shape, did not appear to be free of the enemy. We had to go inside. It seemed like X-hour for us. We set off, commanding officer Oberst Heesemann leading. Suddenly fire was opened diagonally to the left of us and by the rocket launchers behind us to the right. ‘Well, that will give the Russians a nice display of fireworks’ I was thinking maliciously when we saw the whole delivery heading for us! Six came hissing over, exploding almost together. And then the battery fired again. ‘Everybody runs, saves, flees – bright as day the night is lit’ (free translation of Schiller!) I sought cover, no hole in the ground could be seen and so I lay flat on my stomach like a postage stamp, on the frozen soil covered with only a thin layer of snow. I dared not raise my head and kept my nose down. Initially I thought that our own launchers had fired. The projectiles had impacted close around us. After that it fell quiet: all around us were the ugly black holes they had left. Ivan had now awoken and fired his heavy mortars into the wood. Suddenly all

hell was let loose. I heard the cry of the wounded: ‘Sanitäter!’ and then a loud shout, ‘The Oberst has been killed!’ He was in charge of the whole operation. I heard that he was standing near his command vehicle telephoning General Lorenz, the regimental commanding officer, when he was fatally wounded by mortar shrapnel.

The initial uproar quietened quickly. We were attacking, but only slowly. Even this ‘Pistol Wood’ which had been selected for us for our firing position had first to be ‘cleansed’ of the enemy. We faced our position north-east towards the Front. It grew gradually calmer. We had never previously been thrown into it as we had been on this attack. We confirmed that the Russians are very strong here. We were relieved and drove past the forward regimental command post into a small village. Here there was a very active rocket battery. Being near to it when it fired sent an ice-cold shiver up my spine. To be in the vicinity of such a battery is sometimes dangerous. Ivan was firing his 15.2cm ‘Black Pig’ naval gun at the village because he suspected the rocket launcher was situated there. Whenever we heard this gun fire, we ran like ‘greased lightning’ to the nearest foxhole. The rocket launcher people gave us some samples from their ‘Nazi parcels’ which they had in some numbers. The wrapping said: ‘Only for Front soldiers in battle.’ The parcels had been around since mid-1943 (*Zitadelle*) and contained one box of ‘Juno’ biscuits, vitamin sweets and the good Scho-Ka-Kola chocolate in a round tin. This was very good. Our company battle post was in the cellar of a house. It was fairly narrow but the masonry looked trustworthy. My mortars had good firing positions, everything was ready. Then I was summoned to my company commander, Oberleutnant Hinnerk, together with an Unteroffizier of the light infantry guns. We reported and awaited some new order.

7–8 February 1945

We had to come to attention stiffly for Oberleutnant Hinnerk to award us both in the name of the regimental commanding officer the Iron Cross First Class. Scarcely had the citation been read out, and that was over quickly, than a shell came howling over, searching for our rocket launcher. We delayed a little, then came the shaking of hands: ‘Good luck, men!’ and we

were outside again. My men rejoiced with me. Whether we had time for a schnapps to celebrate I cannot for the life of me remember.

On the night of 8 February we changed position again to the very large Wesdehlen estate lying in the floodplain near Kobbeldude. The mortars were set up between the buildings, sentries posted and ‘quarters’ arranged. In making these choices attention had always to be paid to where the enemy side was, whether Ivan would be able to fire into the windows directly and other matters of security.

Chapter 18

In the Mehlsack – Heiligenbeil – Zinthen Pocket

9–28 February 1945

Looking at our situation at daybreak, I saw that we were occupying a sector which projected eastwards like a spearhead. After establishing the firing positions we improved our accommodation. The first group, Unteroffizier Ramm, had his mortars behind the cowshed, the bunker itself protected with thick beams. My second group, Unteroffizier Sprengala, lodged in one of the dwellings, the mortars between the buildings. There was also a rifle company here at Wesdehlen. In the search for an observation post, we saw a hill several hundred metres to the north which at 29.9m was one of the highest points in the area according to the map. The entry on the map read ‘Sand Hill’. Since we were almost on our own here I looked for a good, suitable spot on the upper edges of the ‘Sand Hill’ for my observation post. From up here one had a very good panoramic view. To the north, I could see beyond Neu Colbnicken almost to Waldburg. To the east was Jäskeim and to the north-east Seepothen. A few hundred metres eastwards in the tip of our bend in the Front lay the farmstead Wangnicken. I put a second observation post in the roof of the farmhouse behind the chimney. To the south and south-east is a large flood plain almost to the railway line to Königsberg: the farmstead of Catharinlauk lies beside the tracks. Further south is the village of Kobbeldude between the railway line and the autobahn to Königsberg. Of the places I have mentioned, Kobbeldude and the Wangnicken farmstead were in our hands. On account of the outstanding vantage point, over the next few days observation posts were set up on the Sand Hill by other Wehrmacht units. The telephonists and radio operators were located in the sandy depression behind the Sand Hill.

Because we were encircled, it was very important to have a very good all-round view. Over the next few days we heard loud fighting – artillery and tank fire. It came from the area of Mehlsack, Heiligenbeil and Zinthen. With good visibility I could see the smoke from burning houses and the grey-white fingers from our rocket launchers. It remained quiet with us initially. The attic window of a tall building in Wesdahlen gave a good view of the flood plain and at Catharinlauk a railway linesmen's house alongside the tracks. The Russians were there. Range 1,800m. I could make out a Russian mortar site at the side of the house. There was no true Front in that direction because of the water, but I always kept a close watch on Ivan there even if I was not on the Sand Hill. From the observation post in the roof of the house at Wangnicken I could see the roofs of Jäskeim. From the Sand Hill the distance to the Haff is about 5km. Not far! Heiligenbeil is farther, however. Not far to the west is the Morken farmstead where the battalion command post was located.

From the 'Sand Hill' observation post I had a good view of Ivan and the surrounding countryside using scissors-binoculars taken from a wrecked armoured personnel carrier. There was less cover at the Wangnicken farmstead but a tremendous view. The path there was dangerous because of Russian snipers. In front of our sandhill, the Russians had dug a trench system on the Jäskeim– Wardien road. I saw anti-tank guns near a small wood. One day in broad daylight they dug anti-tank gun emplacements behind the road then brought up the guns. It irritated me that they were able to do this without opposition. Why were they not fired on by our artillery? Answer: because ammunition was in such short supply. I had any number of Russian mortar bombs and a viable captured mortar, unfortunately without elevating gear. I reported out and went with 'Lotte' (nickname for the mortar) and much ammunition towards Morken. Halfway there was a large haystack in an open field. I placed the mortar behind the stack, my observation post being on top of it. The first rounds were fired at Ivan 'by rule of thumb'. He was getting his own ammunition back. I watched through the binoculars for where the bombs landed. I had heard the explosions, but could not identify where, but with the third round I had the range and adjustment for direction. Now followed bomb after bomb. It gave

one great satisfaction to pound Ivan with his own ammunition. When the first bombs landed in the trench system, the Russians ran off to the right. I concentrated my fire into it, obtained some good hits and saw a number of Russians being carried away. That would teach them to build right under our noses! We kept firing, and then I heard a hissing sound and a salvo of three mortar rounds landed 100m from the haystack and exploded there. We knew the sound of flying mortar bombs falling short or overshooting. Had they located our position? I thought it hardly likely, but I kept firing or otherwise Ivan might have thought, ‘Aha, now they fall silent. I fired good.’ The next salvo of three passed narrowly above us and landed in a depression to our rear where they did no damage. After interrupting their building project and landing some good hits, our captured mortar was dismantled and we returned to Wesdehlen.

Over the next few days the Russian force facing us grew larger. The most extreme care had been necessary to prevent them discovering the special importance which the Sand Hill had for us, but either our movement had been spotted or perhaps our radio messages triangulated. It was more probably our infantry, however, whose members wandered around openly and uncaringly. If it rained we used to go to the Sand Hill with umbrellas up. Saluting officers while carrying an umbrella often caused serious difficulties, but mostly it was done with some gallows humour. The Russians gradually began to concentrate their fire on our observation posts and soon the Sand Hill and the sandy depression behind it, in which the infantry behaved with a lack of caution because they were out of sight, came under the very unpleasant fire of Russian heavy mortars. One heard only the short hissing sound in the air before the 12cm mortars struck with a repulsively hard, short detonation, mostly six at a time. In contrast to artillery the propulsive explosions were difficult to hear because the barrel was angled steeply upwards. If infantry did hear the discharge, rare on the field of battle, they knew they had twenty seconds to get to cover. Therefore we dug deeper into the sandy ground. The ceiling of a bunker would not protect against a direct hit. Once when it rained heavily the whole loamy-sandy roof caved in, so now when it rains we just let it. In war, one must be lucky. Ivan was becoming more cocky. His artillery began bombarding the

Wesdehlen estate at night with incendiary munitions to set light to the hay on the ground. We could not save the barn, but wise from experience we threw what straw we found over and at the sides of the cowshed. In order to make my quarters splinter-proof, I laid some of the thick mattresses inside against the windows. My people found a Russian Maxim MG somewhere with plenty of ammunition. I set it up on a board on the bed upstairs and covered the window with a sack, leaving only a small hole to fire through. From there I could see the linesmen's house by the railway line and some Russians running around. My messenger took my 10 x 50 binoculars to orient himself and then I opened fire, shooting from the rear wall of the bedroom at Ivan in Katharinlauck, where he had set up a mortar near the linesmen's house.

The MG was efficient but unfortunately its noise in the room was intolerable. I sent Ivan an entire textile belt (not metal as were ours) of his ammunition back. When the commander of 6 Company complained that the noise was too much and that probably the Russians would soon reply with their mortars, with regret I ceased firing. It certainly made them jump around!

Between Wesdehlen and Katharinlauck the whole area was flooded and we had only a token security force in place there. The intention of my shooting was to demonstrate to Ivan that we were keeping a watchful eye on it. Through my binoculars I could see the Russians running out through the front door of the linesmen's house to their position. I got myself a Rifle 98 instead of the shorter Carbine 98. The longer barrel gave a better prospect of success against identified targets at the longer ranges. For a laugh, I aimed my first round over notch and bead at the cross-frame of the window. What else would I aim at from a distance of 1,800m? Aiming at the centre of house the shot rang out. My messenger watching through binoculars, reported that the bullet had fallen 100m short. 'I saw the water spray up'. With the third or fourth round, holding the barrel higher, I hit the door while aiming at the chimney. Bubi with the binoculars watched the door and waited. 'Bubi, if you see somebody coming out of the door or going in, let me know and I'll put a slug into him. Ha ha ha!' I aimed calmly at the chimney, waited a while.

‘Unteroffizier, the door is opening! Somebody is coming out.’ I took a deep breath, aimed precisely at the chimney and fired.

‘Ha ha, that gave him a shock!’ my observed called out. Whenever there was any movement at that door I fired. I didn’t hit anybody, but they didn’t use the door any more. ‘Sniper!’ they were probably thinking. At the battalion command post in the Morken farmstead in the evening I was told of a crazy plan hatched by a conference of unit leaders. There were many mortars and dug-in anti-tank guns at Katharinlauck and therefore probably thirty-five to forty Russians in the railway linesmen’s house. The plan was to stack a goods wagon with Luftwaffe bombs and have a locomotive push it towards the little house. The detonator would set off the bombs as the wagon passed the house. I heard of this plan at the evening situation conference. After the official business was concluded, we company and platoon leaders sat together and had a cosy discussion about it. My opinion was that the spectacle should be timed for midnight. We would warn our own people beforehand for fear that the blast might be so powerful as to collapse the buildings in Wesdehlen. Because the Russians could eavesdrop the telephone or our radio messages, we would have to warn our people personally or by messenger. It was agreed. I was following a narrow path along the edge of the floodplain when I came under rifle and MG fire. I took cover behind a thick tree. It was only 300m to the farmstead. Could the Russians have seen me? The night was dark, perhaps it was not aimed at me, perhaps just nuisance fire. My Russian watch showed me it was seven minutes to midnight. The bomb-train was due to make its run soon and here I was pinned down behind a tree, my people knowing nothing of the danger. Finally the stupid shooting died down and I got to our quarters at the farmstead seven minutes after midnight. Hearing my warning, the men looked at me in disbelief. Nobody wanted to go out into the cold and down the cellar: they considered they were well protected where they were. I stood with some colleagues behind the wall of the farmhouse looking and listening rather tensely towards Katharinlauck and the railway house. Then we heard a locomotive start up, the squeal of goods wagon wheels and then the wagon rolling. Mouth open, hands over the ears! But the expected

enormous explosion never happened. There had been some hitch, and after checking the sentries I returned to the farmhouse. The night remained quiet.

Next morning a single Il-2 fighter-bomber flew over and bombed the railway line at low level to prevent ‘Fritz’ carrying out his ‘vile plan’. The next night also passed quietly. I decided to pull out from the observation post on ‘Sand Hill’ with my group leaders. I tried to dig a bunker on its upper edge but the crumbly sandy ground was next to useless for the purpose.

With our small artillery scissors-binoculars we had a good view of the enemy from up there. The Ivans were moving about in the area of the road fairly undisturbed. One could see each individual clearly. The Russians were digging in so furiously that it really did not look as though they were going to attack. Of Jäskeim village we could only see the roofs. If the sound of battle grew very loud from Zinthen almost to the south-west of us (pocket: Mehlsack–Heiligenbeil– Zinthen) we watched the fall of shells from the respective sides there. The Stalin organs and our own rocket launchers fired incessantly. Ivan was very active, the ever-increasing sound of Russian tank and anti-tank fire was often worrying. I had the impression that they intended to take more territory. Before us, he was not planning an attack but engaged eagerly in improving his trenches east of the Sand Hill. Next day I recognized a broad minefield set out but not buried between our observation posts and the Russian trenches. I made the entry on my map. The following day the mines had all vanished below ground. For some time Ivan had realized that all kinds of things revolved around Sand Hill (height 29.9m). We also had radio equipment which could be triangulated and many infantrymen had been too brazen in their appearances in the relatively quiet periods. Many telephone lines ran from here to the individual emplacements and the battalion command post and it was likely that Ivan could eavesdrop these conversations.

Day by day it became less comfortable for us on Sand Hill. The Russians kept up an industrious fire on it from Jäskeim with their heavy 12cm mortars and so we dug our foxholes deeper and became more watchful. Generally one heard incoming mortar bombs too late, and Ivan had so many mortars I became envious! Some of the bombs fell into the sandy

depression directly behind us and were not without effect. It now began to rain torrentially. In the evening at the battalion command post at Morken farmstead, I received a message from the Sand Hill observation post stating that our bunker had collapsed as a result of the rains. This was bad news. We had been hoping that the clay-sand ceiling could withstand near-misses from shellfire. The men worked to restore and improve it as best they could. I am occupying my two observation posts alternately. At the Wangnicken farmstead I am up in the rotted roof behind the chimney. Near me is the observation post for the 7.5cm light infantry gun of Oberfeldwebel Grosse. When Ivan fires his artillery in this direction, we slip down into the cellars! Even here the Russians are digging trenches ahead of us. I saw a long column of Ivans coming here from Katharinlauck to excavate. They kept out of sight for a long stretch under cover of bushes. After watching them for a while and calculating when they would break apart and join others, I zeroed-in as unobtrusively as possible and then gave them all we had. When the firing point NCO reported 'Four mortars fired!' I watched the Ivans through binoculars working or talking unawares. Twenty seconds after the report I saw some of them look up, throw themselves to the ground like lightning and then the mortar bombs exploded amongst them. Those still able to do so ran back towards Katharinlauck. With my rapidly-changing firing orders, our mortars pursued them all the way there. I saw several Ivans being carried away by others. Once they got to Katharinlauck I maintained the mortar bombardment on the little railway house and their mortar emplacements there aimed at Kobbelbude. They hardly ever fired at us at the Wesdehlen estate. I can see plainly whenever Ivan attends these mortars and fires. I am able to disturb this activity with my own mortars to some extent but then he replies at Wesdehlen with artillery, shattering all the windows. At night the general came with other high-ranking officers to inspect the positions. We learned that we are going to be relieved, and when the relief arrived we assembled at the Morken farmstead (battalion command post). From there we travelled in lorries to a school at Perwilten.



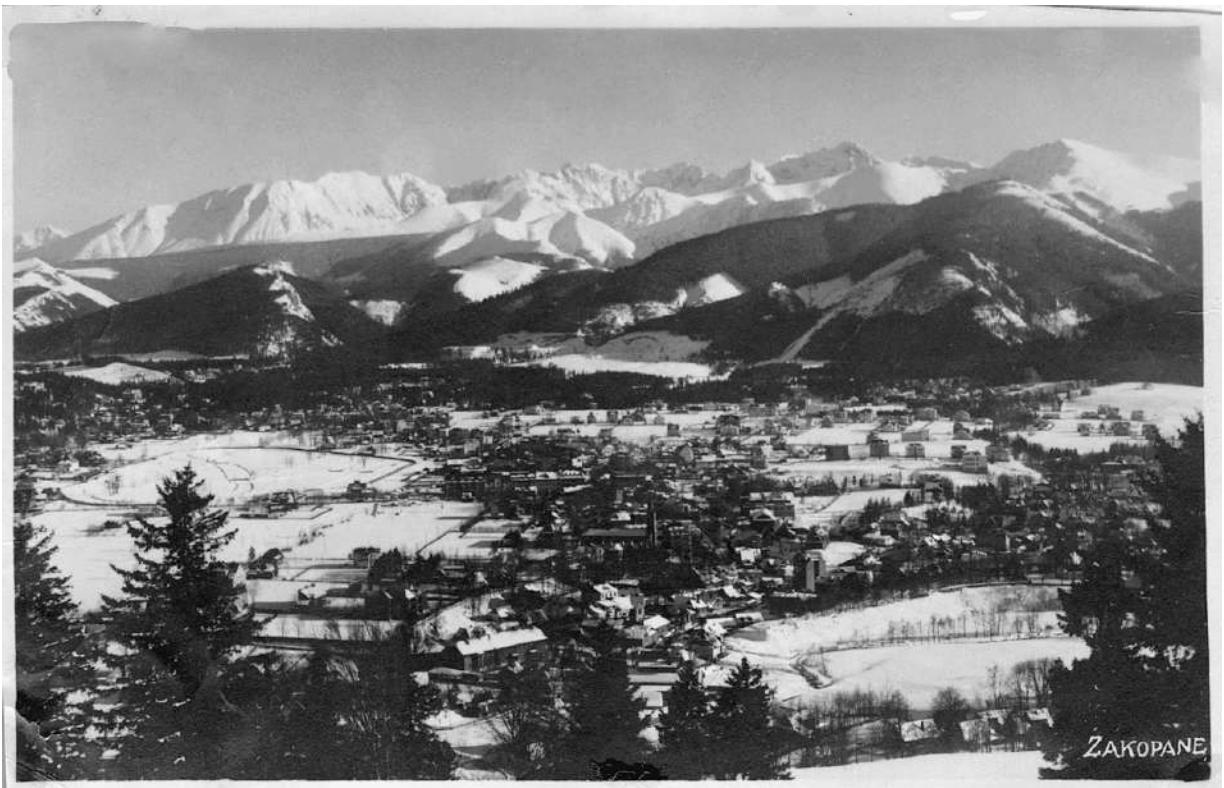
In January–February 1944 the author served at Zakopane as an instructor with 3 Company
Grossdeutschland 1029.



The author's comrade Heinz Spiess at Zakopane.



3 Company Grossdeutschland 1029 on the march to Poronin.



Zakopane in the high Tatra remains a popular winter sports venue to this day.



In Poronin. This Company was a component of 'Carpathian Battalion Kühn'.



Transferring to Romania in the spring of 1944. Shown here is a 2cm Flak for protection against low-flying aircraft.



During the rail journey, a spring-like scene . . .



. . . where peace still reigned.



The view over a twin MG34.



Removing a roadblock of trees.



Travel cross-country along muddy tracks, May–June 1944.



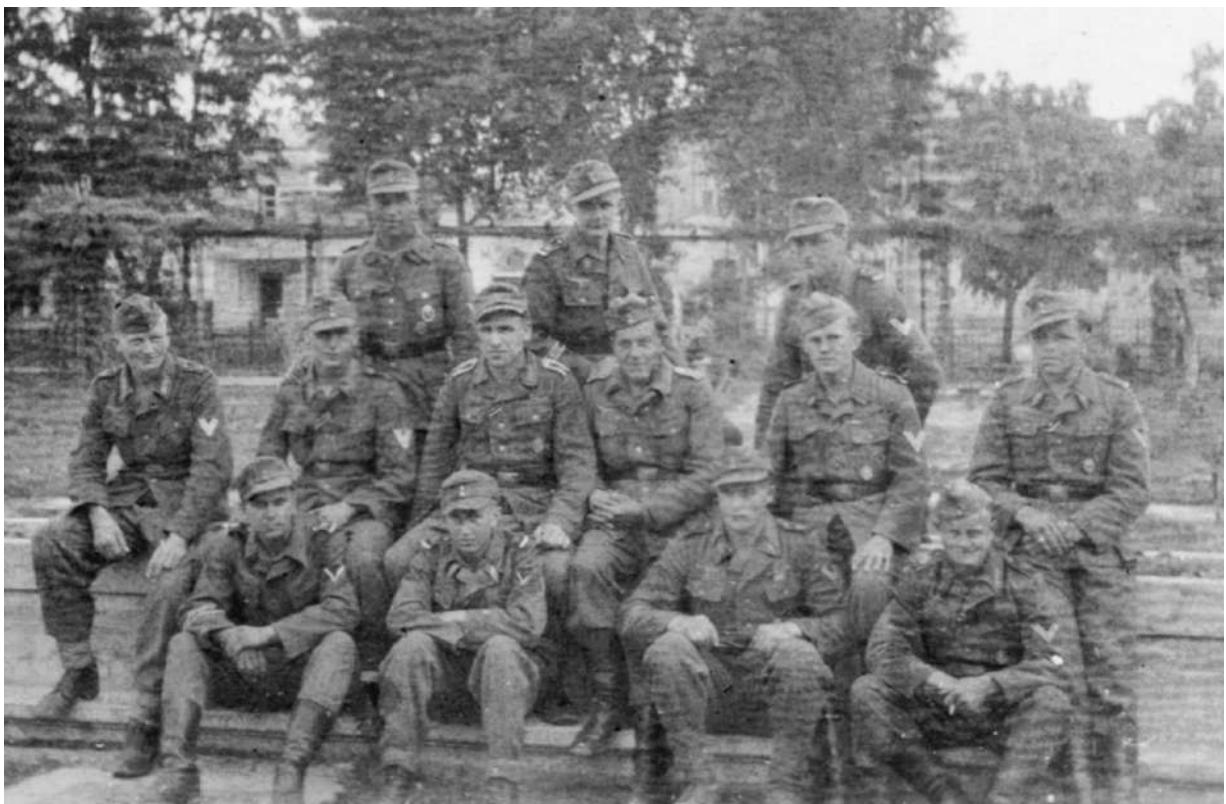
A 2cm Flak gun in the Carpathians.



Inspecting a shell crater.



The divisional convalescent home at Jassy, Romania, June 1944.



Selected men were able to convalesce here for short periods.



The author (left) with his unit at Gura Humorlui, where he celebrated his 21st birthday.



Training on the 8cm mortar, summer 1944.



Obergefreiter Josef Dörfler, seen here wearing the Close Combat Clasp in Silver.



War-wounded comrade B. Behler.

Deshalb kaempfen wir am Sereth!

DF. Schaut auf die Karte Rumäniens und Ihr werdet mit einem Blick erkennen, dass unsere Division die wichtigste Stellung dieser Front, das Tor zum Balkan, hält: Überall bilden die Hohenzöge der Vorkarpaten einen natürlichen Schutzwall Rumäniens nach Norden. Nur dort, wo die Flüsse — der Dnestr, der Pruth und der Sereth ihren Weg zwischen den Bergen von Norden nach Süden ins Schwarze Meer suchen, öffnet sich das Land zu weiten Talmulden — den eirig gangbaren Toren nach Rumänien hinein.

Wenn Ihr aber noch genauer hinseht, aus Eurem Graben dem Lauf der Eisenbahnen und Straßen nach Süden folgt und Euch die Nähe des rumänischen Erdoelgebietes vor Augen haltet und schliesslich bedenkt, dass an den Ufern des unteren Dnestr — also südostwärts von uns — ebenfalls deutsche und rumänische Kameraden stehen, dann wird Euch klar werden, dass wir hier zwischen Sereth und Pruth nicht nur irgend ein beliebiges, sondern das Tor Rumäniens gegen die Sowjets

verteidigen.

Das haben die Sowjets genau so gut erkannt wie wir. Deshalb glaubten sie im April — unsere Absetzbewegungen ausnutzend — aus dem Schwung der Bewegung hier einen leichten und billigen Durchbruch einzwingen zu können. Dass es ihnen nicht gelang, dass sie von der Straße Jassy-Târgul Frumos wieder hinweggefegt und nach Norden zurückgeworfen wurden, war eine entscheidende Tat unserer Division, die neben dem militärischen Erfolg moralische Auswirkung auf die gesamte Front hatte.

Aber die Wichtigkeit, das Tor Rumäniens am Sereth aufzustossen und die Hoffnungen, die die Sowjets damit verbanden — naemlich bis in das Kernland Rumäniens ungehindert vorstossen und damit die deutsche Südfront am Dnestr aufrollen zu können — waren viel zu gross, als dass sich die Sowjets mit ihrer Niederlage abgefunden hätten. So massierte Marschall Konjew stärkste Panzer — und Infanteriekraefte, (insgesamt 2 Panzerarmeen mit ca. 400 Panzern)

Fortsetzung Seite 2

aber er kümmerte sich wenig um mich. (Der Feind nahm ihn, zu sehr in Anspruch.) Ein guter Vetter von mir war der „Karpaten-Kurier“; er starb dieses plötzlichen Todes auf der Reise zum Sereth, da ihm nicht nur die Luft, sondern auch das Papier ausging. So zur Waise geworden, nahm mich nunmehr der Kriegsberichter-Zug in seine verwandschaftliche Obhut. Ich wurde „Feuerwehr“ getauft, weil mir in die Wiege die Bestimmung gelegt wurde, den Wissensdurst anderer zu löschen und — weil es auch sonst gut passt. Alte Leute wissen schon . . .

Zur Sache: Wenn ich von nun an jede Woche einmal bis in das vorderste Panzerdeckungsloch komme, dann will ich nichts anders sein, als Kamerad unter Kameraden. Nur für Euch zu berichten ist meine Aufgabe und auch — von Euch. Denn: Jede gute Feuerwehr braucht ihren Motor, der Motor wiederum braucht Sprit, und so kann ich nur exis-

**Wer gräbt,
hat mehr
vom Leben**

A report in the first edition of the divisional newspaper *Die Feuerwehr* of June 1944, subtitle: 'Therefore we are fighting at the Sereth.'



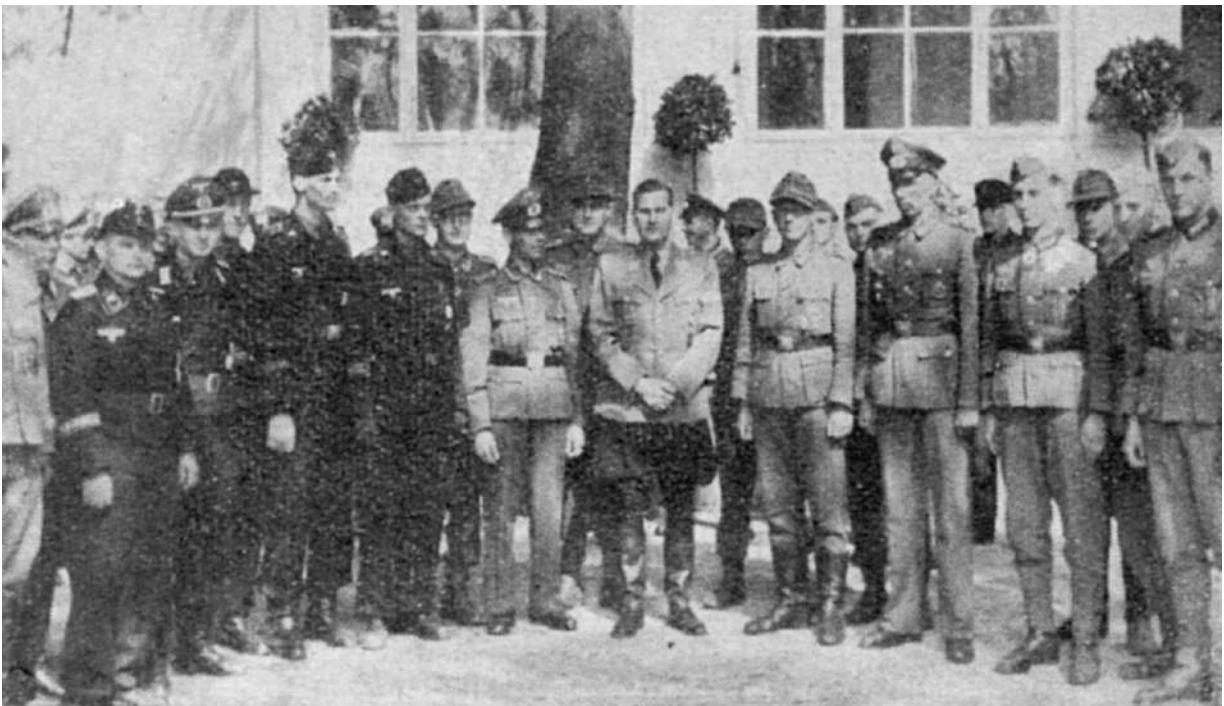
Leutnant Diddo Diddens (centre) of the *Grossdeutschland* SP assault gun unit helped beat off a Russian tank attack in the heavy fighting at Targul-Frumos.



Leutnant Diddens pictured between Major Gerbener and Oberleutnant Wentzke in Romania, 1944. As an Oberleutnant, Diddens was awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross for his part in the defensive fighting.



General Hörlein at a Hitler Youth meeting in Germany, summer 1944, aimed at recruiting volunteers for the *Grossdeutschland* Division. Behind him is Lieutenant Kremers.



Reichsleiter Baldur von Schirach
mit HJ-Führern der Panzerdivision „Großdeutschland“, unter ihnen
unser Gebietsführer Kremers (X)

The Reich Youth Leader Baldur von Schirach with a delegation of the *Grossdeutschland* Division, described incorrectly in the original caption as a 'panzer division'.

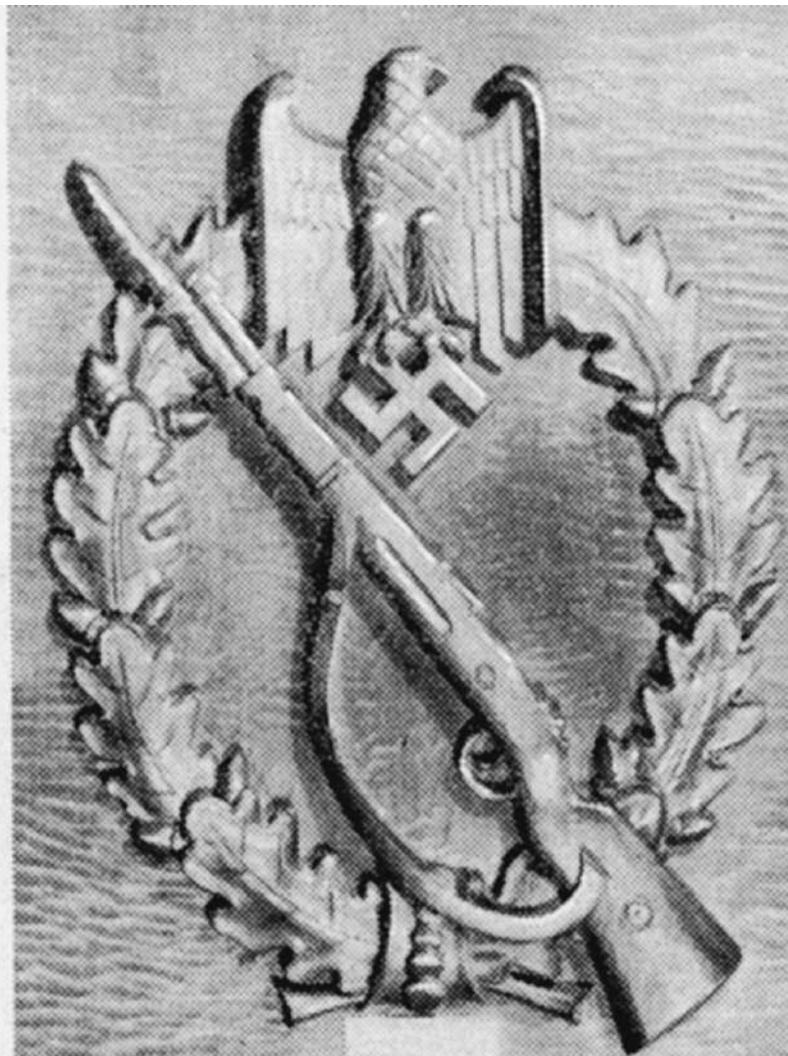


Die siegreiche Mannschaft des Bannes Stade im Schießwettkampf.

A shooting competition was held to encourage Hitler Youth boys: shown here are the 1943/1944 victors.

Der Wanderpreis

des Kommandeurs der Ersatz-Brigade „Großdeutschland“ für den Gebiets - Schießwettkampf Ost-Hannover, den für 1943/44 die Mannschaft des Ban-nes Stade der HJ. er-rang.



The Challenge Trophy of the Commanding Officer, Reserve Brigade *Grossdeutschland*, awarded to the winners of the territorial shooting competition at East Hannover. It was a large carved version of the infantry assault badge, a symbol for infantry and grenadiers.

G Die Feuerwehr

Grabenzeitung der Panzer-Grenadier-Division „Grossdeutschland“

Nr. 1

Erste Junifolge

1944

Zum Geleit

Die „GD-Feuerwehr“ will Euch Unterhaltung und damit Zerstreuung bieten sowie Anregungen und Belehrungen geben; sie will zugleich ein weiteres Bindeglied innerhalb der GD-Familie sein.

Auf dem Schlachtfeld hat uns das vorbildliche Zusammenwirken aller Waffen schoenste Erfolge gebracht, die ueber den Kampfauftrag der Division hinaus entscheidend waren. Der Gleichklang unseres Wollens wird uns unseren Herzensusch erfüllen: den Endsieg!

Heil unserem Fuehrer!

gez. von Manteuffel
Generalleutnant u. Div.-Kdr.

In eigener Sache

DF. Vor dem Richterforum der gesamten Division erscheint heute die „GD-Feuerwehr“ und sagt — zur Wahrheit ermahnt — folgendes aus:

Zur Person: Ich heiss „Die Feuerwehr“ und bin im Granatenhagel ostwaerts des rumaeinschen Sereih geboren. Ich bin das jüngste Kind einer geistigen Elte. Meine Mutter hiess „Divisionsnachrichtenblatt“; sie ist allerdings sehr frisch verstorben. Mein geistiger Vater soll aus vornehmen „ritter“-lichen Kreisen stammen, aber er kümmerte sich wenig

Despite economies, the Grossdeutschland Division continued to publish its own newspaper. This is issue No. 1 from the beginning of June 1944, shortly before the invasion of Normandy and the collapse of Army Group Centre.

Die Feuerwehr

Grabenzeitung der Panzer-Grenadier-Division „Großdeutschland“

Nr. 2

Zweite Junifolge

1944

11 Divisionen aufgerieben

Die ersten Tage der anglo-amerikanischen Invasion

DF. In den ersten Stunden des 6. Juni begannen englische und amerikanische Streitkräfte die seit langem vorbereitete und von uns erwartete Landung an der atlantischen Küste. Während Luftlandetruppen über der Seine-Bucht bei Le Havre absprangen, versuchten unter dem Schutze starker Schlachtschiffseinheiten und Luftstreitkräfte zahlreiche Landungsboote an verschiedenen Abschnitten der Atlantikküste zu landen. Der Feind erlitt an allen Stellen hohe blutige Verluste. In den ersten beiden Tagen der Landung verloren Engländer und Amerikaner rund elf Divisionen und damit etwa ein Zehntel ihrer für die Invasion bereitgestellten Verbände.

Zwischen Jassy und Le Havre

DF. Die Stunde der Entscheidung ist gekommen! Sie trifft uns nicht unvorbereitet, denn wir haben auf sie gewartet und für sie gekämpft und gearbeitet. Ist es nicht so, dass wir mehr gesucht haben, unsere Gegner konnten nicht kommen, — ist es nicht so, dass ein kraftvolles Aufatmen durch die Graeben ging, als wir die ersten Nachrichten von der Invasion hörten, das nichts anderes hieß als: Endlich!

Issue No. 2 concentrated on the long expected invasion of Normandy by the Anglo-American force on 6 June 1944, the headline being 'Eleven Divisions Wiped Out'.

G Die Feuerwehr

Grabenzeitung der Panzergrenadier-Division „Grossdeutschland“

Nr. 3

Dritte Junifolge

1944

Ein Blutbad ohnegleichen

Die hohen Verluste der feindlichen Invasionstruppen

DF. Die Kaempfe um die Brueckenkoepfe feindlicher Invasionstruppen im Westen steigern sich von Tag zu Tag in ihrer Heftigkeit. Die Schlachten im franzoesischen Kuestengebiet brachten dem Gegner, seitdem er an mehreren Stellen des Atlantikwalles zum ersten Male Fuss fasste, ueberaus hohe blutige Verluste. Neben den Verlautbarungen aus dem Lager des Gegners bestaetigen das die Aussagen gefangener Englaender und Amerikaner: „Unmittelbar nach der Landung und waehrend der folgenden harten Kaempfe erlebten wir ein Blutbad ohnegleichen!“ — In den ersten 10 Tagen haben unsere Truppen ueber 400 feindliche Panzer und ueber 1000 Flugzeuge vernichtet. Nicht eingerechnet sind die zahlreichen Panzer und schweren Waffen aller Art, die bei Angriffen von Einheiten der Kriegsmarine und Luftwaffe gegen die feindliche Landungsflotte untergingen.

*Dem Volk die Wehr,
Dem Reich die Ehr.
Und was noch mehr?
Das Herz dem Heer!*

Reichsleiter Baldur von Schirach
der Div. „Grossdeutschland“ gewidmet

Drei Jahre, Kamerad!

DF. Drei Jahre, Kamerad, kaempfen wir nun im Osten. Als wir am 22. Juni 1941 die Tore zur Sowjetunion aufbrachen und den zum vernichtenden Schlag schon ausholenden Feind von unseren Grenzen in die Weite seines Landes zurueckfrieben, da hat keiner von uns geahnt, wie schwer dieser Kampf einmal werden wird. Denkt einmal zurueck und ver-

Issue No. 3 headline 'A Bloodbath without Parallel', allegedly a quote from Allied prisoners of war: 'Immediately after the landings and during the fierce fighting subsequently we experienced a bloodbath without parallel.'

Die Freiawdr

GRABENZEITUNG DER PANZERGRENADIER-DIVISION "GROSSDEUTSCHLAND"

Nr. 9

Erste Augustfolge

1944

Um unsere Heimat!

Der Schutz Ostpreußens, unserer deutschen Dörfer und Städte, unserer Frauen und Kinder vor dem Vernichtungswillen des bolschewistischen Weltfeindes ist uns unmittelbar anvertraut. Es gilt, diesen Ansturm vor unseren Grenzen endgültig zu brechen.

Die Wochen der Ruhe haben der Ausrüstung mit neuen Waffen und der Ausbildung für den Kampf gedient. Mehr als je fühlen wir uns jedem Feinde überlegen.

Das Leben des Führers ist kürzlich vor dem gemeinen Anschlag einer verbrecherischen Verräterclique wie durch ein Wunder bewahrt geblieben. Wir sehen darin eine neue Bestätigung seitens des Schicksals dafür, daß der Führer und unser Volk diesen Krieg siegreich bestehen werden. Wir wissen, daß wir die derzeitige Krise meistern müssen, bis neuartige Waffen und neue Kräfte zum Einsatz kommen und uns helfen werden, den Kampf zu unseren Gunsten zu entscheiden. Dem Führer muß noch mehr als bisher durch die Tat jedes Einzelnen die Sorge für den Abschnitt, in dem wir kämpfen, abgenommen werden.

Gereu der Ueberlieferung tapfersten deutschen Soldatentums und im unbeirrbaren Glauben an die Berufung des Führers, die Kraft und die Zukunft unseres Volkes und den Sieg werden wir den Feind schlagen, wo wir ihn treffen!

Generalleutnant von Manteuffel

War es umsonst?

EF. Nach drei harten Jahren Ostfeldzug stehen wir heute im erbitterten Kampf gegen den bolschewistischen Feind wieder vor den Grenzen Ostpreußens.

Wir kennen den Ernst der Lage, wir wissen, daß im konzentrischen Ansturm unserer Feinde an allen Fronten die Sowjets kein anderes Ziel haben, als in unsere Heimat einzufallen, und sind uns bewußt, daß es kein Zurück mehr geben kann, wollen wir uns nicht selbst aufgeben. Vielleicht mag sich bei diesem oder jenem bei der Betrachtung der gegebenen Lage der Zweifel einschleichen, ob diese drei Jahre, die uns weit in den Osten hineinführten und nun wieder auf unseren Ausgangspunkt zurückgeworfen haben, nicht unwiederbringlich vertan sind.

Nichts ist so falsch wie dies. Wir haben an dieser Stelle schon einmal in aller notwendigen Offenheit darauf hingewiesen, was gekommen wäre, hätten damals im Juni 1941 die Massen bolschewistischer Horden unsere Grenzen durchbrochen. Es hätte keine Macht der Welt gegeben, die unser Reich vor dem Schicksal eines

Issue No. 9 of August 1944 called for the protection 'Of Our Homeland': the Russians were at the borders of East Prussia and the Western Allies approaching the western frontier of Germany. The accompanying editorial is headed, 'Was it in vain?'

Memel-Brückenkopf 1944

Absendestelle :	Ze Meldg.	Ort	Datum	Zeit
m. Grav. 26 Halbgrey Hffz. Relfeldt	Abgeg.	Szodlikum Janett B. Stelle	21. I 1944	18 ⁰⁰
	Angek.			

An Kp. Truppführ. 8. Kp.

Tagsmeilemey

Stärke: 4 / 19 + 1 Fernspähler
(Nachrichten)

Einsatzweise Waffen:

3 m. Granat. Werfer
10 Gewehre. 2 m. pi.
7 Pistolen

Muni-Bestand: 345 Schuß

Muni-Verschup: 60 "

" Bedarf: 100 "

Rusfälle; Mannschaften: —

W.m.G.

Wenden!

Bestell-Nr. M 5

2008 Lille, 49, Rue de Béthune — Tél. 485.47.

Reihfahrt wff.

A report submitted by the author from the Memel bridgehead, 21 October 1944.

O b e n

1 : 25 000 1 : 50.000 1 : 100.000

0 250 500 750 1000 m 0 500 1000 m 0 1 2 3 4 km

1)	Sperren - Räume wurden überprüft und innehalt festgestellt											
2)	Start erkannt Bewegungen im „Roten Haus“ (A 3 - 2260m) wurde geschossen Ergebnis: Treffer auf Haus, Bewegungen hinter auf.											
	Pfeife off											

Die nicht benutzten Maßstäbe durchstreichen.

In this report the author describes the hits achieved by his mortars.



The author with steel helmet and entrenching tool in Lithuania.





A highly decorated senior cadet (officer applicant) of the *Grossdeutschland* Division during the defensive fighting. On the left pocket, wound badge, Infantry Assault Badge and Iron Cross First Class, in the lapel the ribbon of the Iron Cross Second Class, and on the right arm the Tank Destruction Badge.

Der Kommandeur
der Panzer-Grenadier-Division „Groß-Deutschland“
General von Manteuffel, schreibt an Frau Kremers

Sehr verehrte gnädige Frau!

Die Nachricht vom Heldentode Ihres Mannes, des Leutnants Josef Kremers, hat mich tief erschüttert.

Mit Ihrem Gatten verliert nicht nur mein Panzer-Regiment, sondern auch die Division einen hochbewährten Offizier, der während seiner kurzen Zugehörigkeit zum Panzer-Regiment seinen Männern ein leuchtendes Vorbild gewesen ist.

Ich empfinde mit Ihnen in dem tiefen Schmerz um den Verlust Ihres Mannes, mit dem Sie dem Vaterlande das Höchste geopfert haben, wozu eine deutsche Frau fähig ist. Wir wissen alle, daß er nicht umsonst gefallen ist, sondern sein Leben gelassen hat für den Sieg und die Freiheit unseres Vaterlandes, dem seine ganze Lebensaufgabe in der Erziehung der deutschen Jugend gegolten hat.

Er wird in der Division weiterleben, und wir werden sein Andenken in hohen Ehren halten.

Ich reiche Ihnen in stiller Anteilnahme die Hand.

Heil Hitler!

Ihr sehr ergebener

Hasso von Manteuffel

A personal letter of condolence from General Hasso von Manteuffel to the widow of Lieutenant Kremers on the latter's death in action.

Chapter 19

Operation *Ordensritter*

4–5 March 1945

An attack is to be undertaken. The order has come directly from Army Command (General Müller). This man is neither inside the encirclement nor much admired! We have made all our preparations. Every man has been given an ‘East Prussia postcard’ with the slogan ‘Brave and Loyal’ for sending home. Many people are thinking, ‘A last greeting before my heroic death?’. The aim of Operation *Ordensritter* is to break out south of Konradswalde, pass Zinthen to the west and wipe out the enemy group thrusting northwards. Our new battalion CO is Major Krützmann, who was formerly in 51 Regiment of the dissolved 18 Panzer Grenadier Division.

6 March 1945

The advance began at 0300hrs and we headed for the railway line towards a small linesmen’s house. It started well but then we came under very heavy defensive fire from the railway embankment which stopped us. Our artillery fired at most twelve to fifteen rounds and then ran out of ammunition. A new attack was planned for 1500hrs but the very strong Russian defences triumphed again. The panzer fusiliers went back to their old positions at Maulen and we returned to Wesdahlen to be withdrawn by lorry to a hamlet to make ‘preparations for the attack’. So we checked our weapons, including personal firearms, wiped our mortar bombs lovingly with petrol-soaked rags and in the evening we platoon leaders were summoned to the CO. The venue was a large house occupied by staff officers where a celebration was under way. From where we were waiting in the hall it sounded merry. An end-of-the-world mood? Orderlies were running busily

here and then fetching bottles from the stocks of alcohol. We called one of these orderlies over and requested him to inform the CO of 8 Company that the platoon leaders were present. ‘One of those bottles will remain here, the gentlemen will surely not miss it,’ I told the orderly, relieving him of a Chartreuse which then disappeared into the depths of a large winter uniform pocket.

‘What do you think he wants?’ growled Oberfeldwebel Grosse, a cigarette between his lips.

‘No idea, but we’ll soon find out’. At that a door opened and our CO Oberleutnant Hinnerk appeared. He had a serious demeanour, shook each of us by the hand and led us into an anteroom where we fell into deep clubtype armchairs. With regard to yesterday I gave him a smile appropriate to our misfortune though I said nothing.

‘No need to be so reproachful,’ he said, spreading out a map (which I still have) and explained our next attack intention. Grosse and I were to leave during the hours of darkness with our platoons to seek out and occupy good positions for our mortars and the 7.5cm guns. He indicated some depressions on the map which in his opinion would be favourable.

Next part of the plan: attack to begin at 0300hrs with artillery barrage and panzer support. Then II Battalion would be brought with 6, 7 and 8 Companies in lorries to the main front line, dismount and commence the attack. By then we had to have set up our firing positions and zeroed-in. We were to provide supporting fire for the attack. ‘Then I shall come to join you at the observation post. What we do next depends on how things proceed from there.’ We discussed a few technical matters such as ammunition supply and provisions (always very important). As the lieutenant left I asked with a cold smile, ‘What are the chances of a bottle of target water?’

He grinned and had his valet fetch us a bottle of three-star brandy adding, ‘But please only as much as you need for clear vision at first light!’

‘*Jawohl, Herr Oberleutnant!*’

‘Shit, nothing about a sleep and some rest,’ Grosse said, ‘Early tomorrow it’s going to start.’ We found our route on the map and then parted. The men, some sleeping or still sitting together, were not delighted when I told

them of the early morning attack. ‘In one hour be ready to leave with attack group!’ The drivers gave their engines a brief test before carrying out their hampers and sleeping bags to the lorry. The infantry rolled up and secured blankets, then prepared their weapons and equipment. I settled into a comfortable armchair in the flickering light of a petrol lamp, ate my bread ration and tinned meat washed down by a few slugs of coffee from my field flask. Since our arrival I had not had my boots off and I was hoping for a few hours’ sleep, and so I called to one of the men, ‘Richter! come here and help me take my boots off! ’ (Richter survived the war. I saw him among the wounded aboard the ship that evacuated us from Pillau to Swinemünde. Later he emigrated to Canada.) The rags around my feet, holed and filthy, stuck to my feet. I had been wearing rubber boots since Königsberg. The rags were dried and reapplied.

Günter Lorenz, formerly my faithful messenger, who had been promoted recently to Unteroffizier and wore the Iron Cross First Class, asked me if he could now lead a group. When I told him that I wanted to keep him with me as a ‘zbV’ he was quite disappointed. The reason why I did that was because I knew him to be ambitious and reckless. ‘Günter, better to have a healthy Iron Cross than a Knight’s Cross and then a birchwood cross!’

I finished my food and then checked my stock of cigarettes. I had enough for a few days. A bearded figure entered and reported: ‘Third Group – ready to leave and operational!’ I thanked him and told him to sit down. Now one after another the group leaders entered to report ‘readiness’. We remained together for a short while the three-star brandy passed around and then I gave it to messenger Gefreiter Hähnchen to share out amongst the men.

The hour arrived. I went to our lorries which had just driven up (our home for years where we stored our packs and washbags), the old, well-proven Opel-Blitz 3.5-tonners. Leading was ‘my’ Peugeot, its white camouflage paint peeling in layers. The men were already seated aboard, the leaders in the cabs. I went to each lorry, confirming at the rear flap all present and correct, then I got into my Peugeot and gave the order to move out. I had the Peugeot and two Opel- Blitzes for the mortar teams. The light infantry guns were some distance ahead; we followed behind. The roads

along which we drove were snow-covered and icy: we halted at each crossroads to make sure we were going in the right direction. In the encirclement, Ivan was on either side! Flickering flares, muzzle flashes and the thunder of explosions coming ever nearer reminded me of summer lightning. Upon reaching Konradswalde we halted, the men dismounted and headed with equipment and ammunition cases into an area of gullies and gorges unrecognizable as the main front line. I soon gained the impression that other units were present hereabouts, also wondering where the front line might be. Finally we came upon a gorge in which 14 Company of III Battalion was camped. They had already built some 'bunkers'. I crept into one in order to obtain information when Ivan fired some mortar bombs into the gorge. The explosions resounded very loudly.

I heard some loud shouting from outside and ran out. Günter Lorenz, Unteroffizier of IV Platoon, 8 Company Grenadier Regiment *Grossdeutschland*, lay mortally wounded. He had only recently received his promotion to corporal and had stated his wish to command a mortar group. We were one good loyal comrade-in-arms the less. The first tragedy had struck before the attack had even begun.

We wanted to overlook the Elbing-Königsberg autobahn. Ahead was a small autobahn bridge over a field track. The mortars were sited in a depression while I went to the autobahn with my messenger and two other men. The main Front ran parallel with the autobahn. I set up my observation post to the left of the bridge on the edge of a high embankment. Half left was the small village of Albenort II. Initially we had no indication as to whether this was held by ourselves or the Russians. Ivan, who had got wind of us and now smelt a rat, began firing furiously with his 7.62cm anti-tank guns. This made it very dangerous to approach the autobahn embankment from the gullies or woods. Nevertheless more reinforcements came, including an assault gun which stationed itself behind the embankment, but then sought protection against mortar fire under the bridge. Naturally the Russians saw this and bombarded the area where they presumed the panzer had stopped, then tried to shoot below the autobahn bridge with their 7.62cm anti-tank guns. Despite many rounds fired and much effort, they were unsuccessful, the shells either bursting against the railings or the

concrete edges. Possibly the gun emplacement was too high up – 2m lower and the trajectory would have been favourable. Therefore the panzer crew felt fairly secure against artillery below the bridge although the way out led directly to the Russians. Along the wall to the left were cases of ammunition and hand grenades and a signals detachment. The panzer was on the right side but further to the rear. There was always a group of men below the bridge stamping their feet and talking. They ducked at every 7.62cm hit against the bridge itself, but did not think a shell would hit under the bridge.

The panzer's engine was run briefly now and again to keep it ready to move at a moment's notice. Meanwhile my mortars had zeroed-in and would dearly have loved to take out these 7.62cm guns! I found out that ahead of us was a Russian anti-tank brigade – therefore many anti-tank guns and other anti-tank weapons. I was also told that the Panzer Grenadier Regiment *Hermann Göring* would be attacking with us. The snow reflected the sun dazzlingly. I was ready but very tired. My CO, Oberleutnant Hinnerk, suggested I should sit under the bridge and try to sleep. I found a substitute for the observation post, went down the stone stairway to the road and found myself a spot on the left side along the wall about a third of the way under cover. I sat on a case of hand grenades. After a few minutes this became uncomfortable with the handle pressing against my 'hindquarters' and so I shifted to another case with a smooth top a couple of metres along and soon began to doze. I was aware of a group of six to eight men conversing nearby, and hearing the radio operator of the assault gun speaking, but what he said was unintelligible because the messages were encrypted.

I fell asleep, but for how long I have no idea: I was awoken by a frightful explosion close by. I jumped up, felt something warm and wet sticking to my face, one eye was stuck shut: I went instinctively to 'our side' of the underpass where the smoke was lifting, I remember the vile smell. With my open eye I could see the snow. My messenger stared at me horrified. 'Man, all your brains are stuck outside on your head!' Trembling and dazed, I wiped my eye free, then swept off the cerebral matter and hair – it was someone else's. I noticed that my white camouflage jacket was spattered

with blood. I wondered at how lucky I had been again. I remember the words of the lieutenant in 1942 after I had been listed as dead following the confusion of the surnames Wäschenfeld and Rehfeldt: ‘Those reported dead live longer!’ A man emerged from the underpass crying out loudly, he had a whole arm crushed and torn open. The assault gun started up and pulled back a few metres. Black smoke swirled out from the underpass. At first I thought that the assault gun had been seriously damaged. In fact Ivan had managed to fire an anti-tank round under the bridge: it rebounded from the inner wall and exploded under the bridge dead centre with devastating effect! There were many dead and wounded but I escaped without a scratch. With trembling hands I checked my face with the small metal mirror which I carry in my pocket. My CO came down from the observation post, slapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘You had a massive stroke of luck there! Do you want to stay?’ I could not say no, but from that moment on I had the feeling that every artillery round or mortar bomb which came our way was aimed at me personally by Ivan. Every round fired, every projectile exploding was meant for me.

My CO summoned me to the company command post. I was told that the infantry companies had orders to attack and occupy the village of Albenort. I had to provide them with mortar support. The attackers were very under strength and beaten off several times with many losses. I attempted unsuccessfully to wipe out some of the accursed 7.62cm guns. The Russians were strong in numbers: reduced in numbers, our infantry continued to attack courageously but not effectively: by evening, Ivan still held Albenort. Our position was halfway between the bridge and the village. A single Tiger arrived and headed for the village despite the darkness. We were ordered to give him infantry support and entered Albenort II by the light of some burning houses. We had no infantry with us. My five men and I were abandoned and alone with the Tiger!

Left of the village street anti-tank guns had been placed in the gardens but had only sparse rifle fire to defend them. I emptied a magazine in their direction. The resistance lessened. I sent a messenger back to report the situation: we had to have reinforcements! There were now four of us, either behind the panzer or in cover nearby. We heard a heavy gun with of ‘Black

Pig' calibre (15.2cm) fire four rounds: we had to find a hole somewhere and quick, because the Tiger did not offer sufficient protection against the splinter effect. The shells howled over, aimed at the panzer! We were still on the street when they hit. Directly in front of us four lightning flashes and then four diabolical explosions. The blasts swept us off the street. When I staggered to my feet I found my messenger dead. At that moment another salvo of four shells hit, I was about to throw myself flat when I received a blow to the steel helmet and simply fell, quite literally 'seeing stars' . . . and saw nothing more.

Two hours later I recovered consciousness. I felt the helmet for damage, there was nothing serious and my head was still inside it. As for what caused my 'downfall', I think it must have been a frozen-solid lump of earth or similar which struck the side of my helmet with enormous force. I was not wounded, but shivering with cold. It had fallen quiet except for somebody groaning. I could not see the Tiger. Somebody was lying dead in the gutter. Slowly regaining my bearings, I headed back towards the autobahn. I could find no-one there, and the assault gun had left. Listening out I heard vehicle noises and an MG42 shooting in Albenort II. Within a few minutes I was back there. The Russians were absent and our infantry had the situation under control. I passed the two 7.62cm guns, now both mangled wrecks, and found my company. The men of my platoon stared at me unbelievably and bombarded me with questions. 'Where are the others who were with you?' Once daylight came they were found. All were dead, victims of the 'Black Pig'. 'Shit war!'

Examining my helmet I saw that the camouflage paint on the left side looked as if it had been rubbed off with sandpaper. The metal was bright and silvery. No dents, no sharp-edged scratches. This could not have been caused by a shell splinter from the 'Black Pig'. It can only have been a frozen clod of earth. Once again I had had the most extraordinary luck!

7 March 1945

Next morning the main battle line looked different. We had pushed it back a little and forced Ivan to retire to a semi-circular wooded area.

I received orders to set up an advanced observation post with 6 Company. As a result of the shortage of ammunition for the field guns, more importance is being placed on the ‘gypsy artillery’ which still has a good stock.

I surveyed the terrain for an optimal spot through field glasses. Between here and the woods occupied by the Russians is a flat plain, but half right from Albenort II I recognized an elevation. Halfway there a Tiger stood security. It was not receiving fire, a sign that Ivan’s anti-tank guns had all been knocked out yesterday. It was another 250m from the Tiger to the elevation where I intended to site my observation post. Since we presented an easy target on the snowy plain, my messenger and I crept up to the Tiger cautiously. While in conversation with the crew of the steel colossus and eyeing up the terrain, the panzer came under fire from the wood ahead to the left, three rounds of light artillery fire which fell 25m short. Ducking low we ran away from the panzer, drawing fire down on itself, and reached the foxholes gasping and panting. This was a former Russian position with a small ‘bunker’. Unfortunately the entrance faced the enemy and Ivan would have seen us enter. The ‘bunker’ housed several men of 6 Company. First of all I decided to have a closer look at it, and now I ceased to be quite so impressed. The protection consisted of a double layer of birch trunks the thickness of an arm topped by a half-metre of snow for camouflage. A sack which helped keep the bunker warm and prevented the enemy seeing in hung down over the entrance. Scarcely had we paused for breath and begun fitting our scissors-binoculars than we came under fire. The infantry in this bunker made their displeasure known. The shooting came from the same weapons as had fired at the Tiger, not anti-tank but the multi-purpose 7.62cm.

We crouched low, six men in a small bunker not a metre deep in the ground whose entrance was protected against direct shellfire by a sack.

‘Oh ha!’ The first salvo fell short of the bunker, the sack taking the weight of the flying clods of earth. The next salvo fell long but passed close overhead. Any artilleryman or mortar gunner knows from his training that we had been bracketed and the third salvo would be a direct hit. We heard the third salvo of three fired: the faces of the men were drained white,

nobody spoke. The third salvo passed overhead, too long again. I lit a cigarette. The fourth salvo came from the wood. My hand with the cigarette trembled slightly. I was sitting well forward, near the sack curtain holding my breath. The fourth salvo fell short. And so it went on. We sat almost immobile, listening, waiting – waiting for the direct hit – reconciled to death, one might say. The earth trembled, the shrapnel whizzed around but nothing got past the sack. I had become a chain-smoker.

‘That Ivan, he’s useless at shooting, it was just the same at the autobahn bridge,’ said one of the infantry.

I shuddered, remembering my bloody face, smeared with somebody’s brains, hearing the cry of the man whose arm had been almost torn off. Ivan would have been delighted to see the tree trunks and clods of earth flying into the air here with a direct hit but it didn’t work out that way. We could hardly believe it . . . the firing stopped and it fell quiet.

We let half an hour pass for safety’s sake and then put up the scissorsbinoculars again. Ivan had been waiting for this, and scarcely was the instrument up and I risked a peep than a single shell came over and landed right on the doorstep. I threw myself to the ground. Was this really an ideal observation post? One where Ivan already knew where it was? Under cover of darkness we returned to the autobahn. I had Unteroffizier Sprengala (from Cosel/Upper Silesia) relieve me and then I went down into the gorge where the mortars were positioned. Here the men had built huts of fir branches for protection against wind and cold. There was much activity in the gorge. Ammunition was arriving, and it was here that the wounded received first aid and where the rations were brought under cover of darkness. I stretched out on some fir branches, wrapped myself in a blanket and fell asleep at once.

8 March 1945

While I was inspecting my mortars, our old Feldwebel Ernst Baerwald (who had been shot through the cheek in January) came by. He had meanwhile received the rank of leutnant (War Officer). We talked for a while. He is now commander of 14 Company (III Battalion): they also have a mortar platoon, same mortars as ours. After a joyful reunion we

proceeded together to my observation post at the autobahn bridge but the shape of the battlefield had changed again and I had to find and establish a new position. Ivan was settled in a railway linesman's house on the Perwüthen-Zinthen line: I settled for an observation post in the safe-looking coal cellar of a shell-damaged house on the outskirts of Albenort II. Soon we all looked like chimney sweeps. From a small cellar window we had a good view of the railway tracks and linesmen's house through our scissors-binoculars. The small device is much superior to my 10 x 50 binoculars. A Tiger positioned near our house was firing at the linesmen's house, Ivan was returning fire quite accurately with his heavy mortars.

We could only light the small stove to heat the cellar at night, since during the day the smoke would have given us away. About 200m away was a wrecked T-34. We needed to check to make sure that it had no Russian observer inside. Two of my people who went there during the night found no Ivan but returned with tinned food. Since the labels read 'Finest Danish standard butter' and 'asparagus with heads', these clearly were Russian booty. The asparagus coated with butter heated in a mess tin tasted wonderful, a welcome change in our diet.

9 March 1945

Now and again the Tiger fired at the linesmen's house and then Ivan's heavy mortars would reply. One of these hit the ruins of our house and only the cellar ceiling remained intact, the rest was rubble lying metres-thick on the roof. Initially I thought that was an advantage because the 'protective layer' would break the flight of the arriving mortar bombs, but this one went through the roof of the adjacent cellar, creating a hole in the wall one square metre in size through which a huge amount of dust was blown through. Now seeing that our cellar ceiling was made of hollow brickwork I doubted its safety, and whenever Ivan fired in our direction we cowered in the corners of the cellar. I sent another spotter forward to 6 Company and remained *in situ* myself because the ground before us held no mysteries for me. Ivan was overconfident and also careless. On the railway line I counted six to eight guns moderately well camouflaged with white sheeting. Some of the gun shields had been painted white but on others the sheeting

fluttered in the wind. There were often up to fifteen Russians standing around in a long depression parallel to the railway line. During the day I used the ‘work mortar’ to find the range as unobtrusively as possible, firing intentionally about 50m to the right, and then all four mortars would be aligned correspondingly by the use of the elevating gear. Then I laid out the ammunition and waited for night. A good 100m to our rear an assault gun was also attempting to destroy the linesmen’s house. I never got up close to this panzer.

The early morning I spent at my scissors-binoculars. I could see clearly as they changed the anti-tank gun crews, and this presented us with a favourable opportunity, for then there were two crews together at the position. I ordered three rounds from each mortar after the mortar captains verified the elevation settings. Then twelve 8cm rounds were sent on their way. When the smoke cleared I saw that chaos reigned. There were dead and wounded, a gun had received two direct hits, the white sheeting was in ribbons and probably more. Then I ranged fire over all the known anti-tank gun positions on the railway embankment. Once I hit some ammunition which exploded behind and at the side of the guns. Seven guns were put out of action and their crews decimated: that was a good result. The thanks of our panzer comrades was made known. The night passed quietly.

10 March 1945

Next day we transferred our position to a gully. From the open field and cold we went to a village where our lorries were parked. A taste of home! We found quarters in a school, upstairs under the roof. Many wounded and soldiers from other units occupied the ground floor. We all fell into a deep sleep! In the night some of Ivan’s ‘sewing machines’ bombed close to our empty house, causing half the roof to collapse inwards. We saw and heard nothing of this. In the morning the lorries conveyed us to a familiar area. My mortars were taken along a path through a flat gully and set up. The possibility of cover for the crews was very poor. The company command post was the Morken farmstead and we were now back at the Wesdehlen estate. Just as before. I could not yet establish the course of the Front, but I soon noticed that it ‘stank’ here!

11 March 1945

My feelings were confirmed the following morning when Ivan advanced from the area of Seepothen and Jäskeim. We also heard the noise of heavy fighting from the floodplain at Kobbeldude and Katharinlauck although the Front there seemed to be holding. We scarcely got a moment's sleep over the next few nights. We know that Ivan intends to make a clean sweep here. And we want to sell ourselves as dearly as possible.

12–13 March 1945

The major Russian offensive to liquidate the Heiligenbeil pocket has begun. Ivan is subjecting us to a heavy bombardment such as we have not experienced for some time. When the Russians attacked, they were met by the chatter of our MG42s, by our mortar fire and Do-rockets. 14 Company (Leutnant Baerwald), III Battalion was occupying the Sand Hill and positions around it. From there one could hear heavy fighting. Ivan was attacking with all the forces he could muster: his shelling even rained down on the Wangnicken farmstead and the Wesdahlen estate. I just happened to be at the company command post, the Morken farmstead, when the Russians succeeded in breaking through from the north from Waldpothen Neu Colbnicken to Kamnicken and later as far as Pokarben. This was not good news!

Chapter 20

The Russians Break Through

13 March 1945

In their advance towards the Sand Hill from the north the Russians had armour in support. Alarm or emergency units had been positioned to intercept but were not offering much opposition. The situation was fairly unclear. We did not know whether Honigbaum and Pokarben were still in our hands and from Morken we kept a worried eye out towards the north! We watched the positions there being overrun, saw our troops running back and setting up a new front line against the enemy but also many who raised their hands and surrendered.

Suddenly the Russians were on a low hill north-west of Morken. Their T-34 tanks were there but we could see only their turrets and gun projecting over the crest. Unfortunately I no longer had contact with my mortars from Morken and the troop and platoon leaders had to act on their own initiative. And they did well! In my rage, watching our people being extracted from their holes and taken prisoner, I took up my 98 long rifle and fired at the Russians on the hill. This alone was sufficient to get them to lie flat and gave our young men the chance to breathe again. We ascertained that the Russians had abandoned their advance and were digging defensive positions in the lower portion of the hill. This was a stroke of luck!

There was great disquiet in the Morken command post. Messengers were running here and there. We discovered that the Sand Hill was still being held by Leutnant Baerwald's 14 Company and had even made a counter-attack on a mill towards the Waldpothen brickworks. That was the old warhorse Ernst Baerwald.

From Maulen to the east of us we heard heavy fighting. Ivan was folding up the perimeter of the encirclement preparatory to wiping us out. Towards dusk we heard the roaring motors of numerous Wehrmacht armoured personnel carriers (SPWs) throwing up a ‘bow-wave’ of snow as they rolled towards the advancing Russians. Rather like battleships in line ahead, they were shooting with all weapons and finally set up a kind of main battle line. It was the *Grossdeutschland* panzer reconnaissance unit which saved the situation for us this time. The T-34s picked up the gauntlet. The SPWs zig-zagged this way and that to avoid the tank fire and shot back frenziedly, with 2cm cannon and also mortars which they had mounted aboard. Night fell and was without any major combat activity.

14 March 1945

We could not hold the enemy, however, for we were too weak, and Ivan resumed his advance, forcing us to pull out. During the night we abandoned our positions silently and were conveyed by lorry to Brandenburg and then on to Pörschken. Here we had no contact with the enemy and from our enquiries we found several infantry of another unit dossing in a barn. They had had enough of the war. Stragglers? Deserters? We informed them that they should make themselves scarce as quickly as they could otherwise Ivan would nab them.

Our position was south of Pörschken along the Perwilten–Ludwigsort railway line. This was a small flood plain from the Frisching and other minor waters. I found myself an observation point at a farm where our infantry guns had their own observation post. The farm lay north of the railway line, but there was not much of a view to the south over the railway embankment. We slept the whole night.

15 March 1945

In the morning I was ordered to find a place south of the railway line for an observation post. I went with my messenger, Obergefreiter Hühnchen, to 7 Company and found there a young lieutenant, three telephonists and in the cellar of the railway linesmen’s house a three-man tank destruction group each armed with a large Panzerfaust. Facing the enemy directly in front of

the house was a deeply dug-in anti-tank gun. Its crew and even the observer were also in the cellar, the entrance to which was at the rear of the house. About 25m to our left near the railway line was a 2cm Flak positioned behind a small shed. The infantry were in foxholes about 150 to 200m further ahead. The railway line here curved southwards to Pörschken.

The railway house was occupied by a lieutenant, an artillery observer and a radio operator with 'Berta' equipment. He was also the range-finder. I installed my 'Friedrich' radio equipment on the stairway because the signal was best from there. We two observers went upstairs from where it was possible to see along the railway line almost as far as Wargitten. We passed the orders to fire and zeroed-in our weapons. I laid my mortar fire a good 100m ahead of our infantry position. The artillery spotter had to be very sparing with ammunition but in contrast to myself, he had a good connection to the battalion command post. My equipment was absolutely incapable of sending that far. We saw nothing of Ivan during the day, only the noise of his tanks at night. Otherwise it remained blissfully quiet for sleep.

16 March 1945

In the early morning I searched the area towards Legnitten and Wargitten in the east with binoculars to see if Ivan had come closer during the night. My mortars at Poplitten were very well protected by a small overflow lake against enemy encroachments from the east. Half right of us, south near the railway line, was an area of bushes and dense undergrowth favourable for the enemy to sneak closer. Still no sign of Ivan and my connection to the mortar firing position was working well. Then, while standing at the window to observe, suddenly I saw a lightning flash, a shell crashed into the decaying wall just behind my head and then came the sound of the gun being fired. This was dangerous, and from then on we forward spotters moved around upstairs very cautiously in making our observations. Over the next few hours Ivan kept the house under regular fire, sending rubble and brickwork flying. My radio equipment was damaged and I could no longer contact my mortars. Next his artillery began firing, not only at us but at any houses and positions where he guessed 'Fritz' was hiding.

The spectacle began and Ivan attacked. Some distance away near the railway tracks I noticed a peculiar creation which I thought could be a camouflaged Stalin-type tank. Meanwhile my messenger had got the radio set working again, enabling me to report my observation to the company commander so that our own panzers and anti-tank panzers could be forewarned for the time when the thing moved.

'Nonsense, Rehfeldt, that is a set of buffers with a telegraph pole lying along it.' I kept the 'thing' under observation and it became clear very soon that the 'buffers' had caterpillar tracks and 'the fallen telegraph pole' was the barrel of a gun. This crazy tank began firing towards Poplitten and the company command post and soon put the infantry guns' observation post out of action.

Then it was our turn. Our linesmen's house began to tremble more frequently under the shelling by the tank. The upstairs floors caved in. During a short pause in the firing I ventured up to my 'spyhole' and to my horror saw seven or eight enemy tanks moving up and spread in a broad front to within 100m of our infantry trenches. The Stalin tank – that rolling buffers with a telegraph pole – screeched across the railway line, steel on steel, across the embankment, heading directly for us but with its turret pointing towards Poplitten, where we had our firing positions and company command post! I fired at the infantry perched on the hulls and this caused them to zig-zag. An 8cm mortar bomb dropping directly from above could have destroyed the tank if the diesel fuel carried in canisters at the rear had begun to burn. Unfortunately we were not successful here. While standing in the cover of a wall, a large St Bernard dog came to me whimpering, evidently pleading for protection, and sprang up putting his paws on my shoulders. It was difficult to convince the dog to desist. Next a direct hit on the chimney of the house brought large clumps of brickwork flying down to smash my Friedrich radio irreparably. The artillery observer lent me his set so that I could make my report to Battalion for them to forward to my company command post. My mortar group leaders were once again left to their own devices. The young lieutenant, sitting in the cellar with the tank destruction group, never once came out, and when his telephone line was

cut, he sent out a linesman to fix it. This was done quickly, but we had no grounds for rejoicing.

‘Connection severed!’ the telephonist shouted again. When the next signals man was ready to sortie, the tanks opened fire, causing bits of masonry and splinters to whizz around our ears. Why had our Pak not fired? The gun had been damaged by falling masonry and segments of wall. I was thinking to myself, ‘I would never have positioned an anti-tank gun there’ when the senior sergeant of the Flak came running through the bombardment to report that his gun had been damaged. ‘It is no longer operational! Shit!'

Now the situation here was very threatening. I heard a loud argument in the cellar between the lieutenant and the signals NCO, who was refusing to go out looking for a break in the telephone line while under heavy tank fire. Having regard to the situation I had complete understanding for the NCO, but in war one must often risk one’s life, and orders have to be obeyed! Without a telephone connection I could not control my mortars and no messages could reach me. The thing of which I personally disapproved was that while the lieutenant was perfectly capable of issuing his orders from the safety of the cellar, he never once dared come up to ground level. Then we saw the first infantrymen leaving their foxholes under Russian fire to occupy new positions along the railway embankment.

The enemy tanks were slowly pushing towards us, firing all the time. We had only the artillery observer’s radio connecting us to the rear, his own infantry guns. The Russians were now advancing all around us. With much luck and perseverance, the artillery lieutenant managed to contact the battalion command post and after explaining our situation was told that our own Do-rocket launchers would assist. We stood by in the ruins of the little railway house waiting impatiently for the promised salvos. The launchers had to shoot by map coordinates because they could not zero-in from where they were. Finally we heard the howl as the projectiles were fired. ‘Ha ha!’ I gloated, ‘Now I hear the sound of violins!’ I watched the enemy tanks amongst which the salvo would soon wreak havoc. There, first only small white clouds developing in size. No explosions. They were firing smoke

rounds! A thick wall of smoke drifted towards us obliterating everything. This would be ideal for a retreat, but we had to hold out!

Ivan saw his chance. His tanks started up, we heard their engines and then the shouts of ‘Urraaah!’ Ivan was coming and we had no anti-tank weapons apart from what the tank destruction group had with them in the cellar. And then from the mists like some prehistoric monster but with screeching, rattling tracks came the Russian tank rolling towards us from across the railway embankment. Fifty metres away, its gun was still directed to the right at the Poplitten farmstead.

‘He’s no threat to us,’ said the artillery lieutenant, but then suddenly another tank appeared no more than 10m in front of us, not a T-34 but a heavy American tank. The artillery lieutenant and I stood close together as it approached the corner of our linesmen’s house, his gun also aimed towards Poplitten. It fired twice and we felt the pressure wave. In the cellar below there was great excitement. I shouted down, ‘Tank destroyers out!’ Nobody appeared, instead two Panzerfaust were handed up. My messenger Hühnchen knelt at the top of the cellar steps to fetch them.

The artillery lieutenant took the first and took the tank in its sights. I advised him, ‘Aim at the turret neck!’ He fired. The rocket flew a few centimetres above the turret and hit the ground well beyond the target. Now I had the second weapon. I raised the sight – aimed – fired. The rocket hit the base of the turret. There was a sound like a metal can hitting a wall and no explosion. Ivan must have seen the smoke from the discharge and the turret turned towards us. The two of us grabbed for the third Panzerfaust, I got there first, leapt to the corner of the house and almost looked down the barrel of the cannon! Eyes closed, pressed the trigger, then a tremendous explosion. ‘He’s burning, let’s go!’ shouted the lieutenant and made off to the rear, along the railway tracks, in long leaps. I saw men running in all directions and shouted down into the cellar, ‘Out! Out! Ivan is here!’ Then I took off after the lieutenant as fast as I could. My messenger Hühnchen set off for Poplitten to the firing position pursued by the big St Bernard. I never saw either of them again. The enemy tanks continued to fire at Poplitten and Pörschken. When I caught up to the lieutenant he said to me, ‘I credit you with destroying the tank, give me your name and unit!’

I had more urgent things to do just then, like finding cover and then getting to my platoon as quickly as possible. I could already see them. As for the lieutenant, I have no further information. After 200m we took a breather by a small railway telephone cabinet, then heard the rattle of tank tracks and took cover along a narrow road below the railway where some infantry were in position. Their major was keen for us to join them. The lieutenant and I explained our situation as artillery and mortar spotters and that we were needed back immediately at our firing positions. We resumed our run, I was hampered by my rubber boots with their strapping around my ankles which helped stiffen the footwear. The lieutenant suggested I should accompany him to his own artillery position in order to obtain an update of the situation and then proceed to my own platoon. But we separated, and I went a way along the railway line and bore right (north-east) to get to Pörschken. When I reached the first houses I was speechless! The *Tross* people were sitting around peacefully as though the war was over, repairing a radio! Great was their shock when I recounted what we had just experienced!

In the village suburbs I saw an 8.8cm Flak battery dug in for ground combat. It was almost dusk when I arrived at Pörschken. The Russians had not closed in and the whole area was still in German hands. I wanted to go to the north-east sector of the suburbs to find out if we still held Poplitten. I needed to get to my platoon! Once there I saw some horse-drawn wagons bringing up provisions and our own wagon in a courtyard. Unteroffizier Willi Hermesmann from my home town of Hagen was its driver. I told him the situation, adding that I had no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the individual platoons. First the essentials! I filled my field flask with hot tea laced with rum, and then my mess tin. In order to eat in peace I went with Gefreiter Felbermeyer to a house on the village street. Its windows had been shot away and the front door hung at an angle by one hinge. I took off my steel helmet and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

I was just ladling my meat and rice when there came a whistling sound, like a bombing raid, and then tremendous explosions. The house shook, fires flared up outside, burning dwellings collapsed against each other. The enormous blast blew the door off like a map sheet. I took cover below the

window frame on the wall, Felbermeyer was in a corner. I got my steel helmet off the windowsill, held my hand protectively over the mess tin because there was much dirt and mortar in the air and put on my steel helmet. This gave me a certain feeling of security. (Much later I found out that the Russians had a mortar, BM-31-12, calibre 30cm, weight 94.6kg, similar to our ‘Stuka zu Fuss’ which they had used against us at Jäskeim.) The huge explosions continued to shake us. I thought at first that the rounds were captured German 50cm shells.¹ Then suddenly it fell quiet. The firing stopped. From the burning and collapsing houses we heard the cries of the wounded; wagons drawn by panic-stricken horses raced down the street. If a wagon tipped over the horses kept running! Individual soldiers ran from house to house with the aim of getting out of the town. Felbermeyer and I spooned our mess tins dry and then left this inhospitable place. I pricked my ears at every noise, ready to leap to the nearest cover. My intention being to return to my mortar platoon and our company commander Oberleutnant Hinnerk, I headed along the road to Poplitten and there came across the first of my men who described how they had had a somewhat lucky escape withdrawing from Poplitten without heavy losses when the Russian tanks came. Then I was reunited with more men of my mortar platoon who were glad to have me back, and I was glad to *be* back. Obergefreiter Hühnchen had not arrived, however, and I feared the worst. I had the platoon assemble. Unfortunately we no longer had enough ammunition. While the troop and group leaders looked for secure positions in the ruins for the men, I went along the road a good 100m towards the enemy, my sub-machine gun in my hands ready to shoot. It was dark and I made my way forward from tree to tree shouting, ‘Hallo, 8 Company.’ I saw a few men in trenches in the street with light MGs and further on our commander. He was standing behind a tree, sub-machine gun at the ready, listening out towards Poplitten, now occupied by the Russians. From Poplitten we heard tanks rolling, vehicle engines running, horses being whipped onward and other loud commands. The sound of these tanks, and there seemed to be many of them, appeared to us to augur nothing good. It was necessary to spend the night setting up a defensive line to run 100m ahead of the eastern edge of the village. If necessary it seemed possible to reach the protection of the

houses by following a line of bushes. Since the Russian major offensive had begun, this had to be reckoned with. I instructed my group leaders where to site our firing positions and established contact with our neighbours in 7 Company and rejoiced at every additional man and MG available to us.

One could not really call it a Front, it was a very thinly-occupied line. Nobody knew anything for certain. Where was our battalion command post? Then our quartermaster, Unteroffizier Hermesmann, got through to us with hot food. As midnight approached, Ivan fell silent and so did we. It was a night of high tension but in the quiet I dared to have a short sleep.

Note

1. There was no German 50cm shell in either of the world wars. As they wore down, the 60cm barrels of the 120-tonne ‘Karl Gerät’ heavy mortars were replaced by the 54cm L/13 which fired a 1,700kg HE or a 2,180kg anti-concrete shell, rate of fire one round each eight minutes, maximum range (HE) 6.5km. The Karl mortars were used by the German army at Brest-Litovsk (1941), Sevastopol (1942) and Warsaw (1944). Alexander Lüdecke, *Deutsche Artillerie Geschütze*, Motorbuch Verlag, 2010, pp. 126–7. (TN)

Chapter 21

My Second Wound

17 March 1945

Past midnight and in one of the few houses still standing, such as the village chemists' shop, we looked for a room facing away from the enemy. We found a bedroom with thick eiderdowns and had a short 'test lying down'. Wonderful! We agreed that one of us must be on watch so that the other could stretch out. We lay with 'boots and spurs', buckled up and wearing the steel helmet in bed, the sub-machine gun slung from the bedpost. There was no possibility of sleep, in the early morning the village houses and street came under tank fire.

The company commander ordered me: 'Unteroffizier Rehfeldt, gather together the mortar platoon and get to the edge of the woods behind Pörschken as quickly as possible. You will find ammunition there. Set up your firing positions and lay down a barrage if the Russians attempt to advance.'

Meanwhile it had grown lighter and Ivan's first tanks were on the move. While we were trying to reach the wood before it was fully light, Ivan attacked with infantry and tanks. We had to run across meadows without any cover and then surmount barbed-wire entanglements at the edge of the wood. When Ivan saw us, he made sure we ran! My only thought was: 'Don't get hit! Reach the wood.' A few shells exploded amongst us but we got there unscathed. My observation post had to be at the edge of the wood, but before that we had to find a good position for the mortars. I went into the wood for 100 to 150m and came to a small house. Our light infantry guns and Flak were already there, however. At last we had some 'heavy weapons'. My mortars were in a poor situation for ammunition. I went to

the edge of the wood with Oberleutnant Hinnerk where we found several deep, well-consolidated earth bunkers. Probably the *Tross* had been here previously, for we came across several large, shallow holes in the ground about 5 x 10m with fuel barrels and ammunition; unfortunately this was only for the artillery. I was with the Group Unteroffizier B. Sprengala in one of the big, deep bunkers. We had not set up our mortars: no ammunition! My men were converted to infantry, the mortar crews armed only with their pistols. Meanwhile I had ‘organized’ one of the new assault rifles.

Ivan opened an artillery barrage with the 15.2cm ‘Black Pig’. At the bunker entrance we had a man posted to report if the Russians looked likely to attack. Some metres to the left was a small earth bunker where I went with my messenger and two other men during a pause in the firing. Another few metres on was Oberleutnant Hinnerk, also with some men. With our pistols, carbines and the assault rifle we were the ‘counter-attack reserve’! About 100m further on the commander of an infantry company must have fallen or been wounded, for a messenger whom I had sent there to make contact came back with the officer’s map board. I passed it to Hinnerk. The village of Pörschken was now in Russian hands from where they would continue their advance.

First they dropped 12cm mortars on the edge of the woods, which made the splinters fly about our ears. The bombs which burst against trees were the worst. After lengthening the range into the midst of the woods they attacked with their notorious ‘Urrraah!’ cry. We emerged from the bunker ready to engage but they were not to be seen directly in front of us: they were entering the wood to our left and right. Our own defences were unfortunately not very good. Within the wood the attackers came under heavy fire but we still felt threatened on both flanks. Keeping watch for more of them arriving, we felt deep disquiet at hearing the sounds of battle in the wood. Then things changed quickly. Tank shells swept past us into the wood and whole salvos of mortars came our way. I sent the men to take shelter in the bunker. One of my men had one of these new assault rifles: I was armed with my sub-machine gun. Cowering together in a foxhole we waited; and suddenly the Russians ceased fire with their heavy

weapons. Silence! I couldn't believe what I saw. Our people came out of the earth bunkers and foxholes but scarcely 100m from us a dense group of Russians, their long three-edged bayonets fixed, came running over the meadow towards us shouting 'Urрааah!' I looked around and saw that my men had taken cover and were firing at the attackers. Almost half my mortar crews had only a pistol and at this distance the Russian troops were still out of range. Near me, my messenger fired several magazines into the attackers with his assault rifle. I had got behind a thick tree trunk and fired at the leading Russians from a standing position. This was enough to force the Russians to ground. They threw themselves down and stayed there, a success for us! We kept firing and wanted to believe that we had beaten off the attack but then came a sudden rustling sound, a short hiss and the enemy mortar bombs exploded between us and against the trees. What with all the shooting we had not heard them being fired. As I was looking round for cover two explosions occurred, very close to me and dreadfully loud. It felt as though my legs had been knocked out from under me with a cudgel and a hot, burning sensation developed in both. I collapsed and pulled myself behind the thick tree. My right leg was paralysed from the knee down. At first I felt no pain. I was *hors de combat* and felt dazed. I looked around for help and saw my commander wave to the men to follow him into the wood. I wanted to seek the shelter of the wood too, but my legs failed me.

Looking ahead to the meadow I saw that the Russians had advanced to within 50m of me and I couldn't move. Damn shit! I raised my sub-machine gun and fired the magazine into the oncoming Russians until it was empty. This gained me a little time. Suddenly two of my men came running up. 'What's wrong, Unteroffizier? Should we get out of here?' One of them was Paul Schmitz from Wolbeck/Westphalia, I cannot remember the name of the other. Both quickly assessed my problem, picked me up under the arms and dragged me into the protection of the wood, pursued by the rifle fire of the advancing Russians.

Scarcely had we put that danger behind us than the 'Black Pig' resumed shelling the wood. Those shells which hit the trees were very dangerous for their harvest of splinters. We found some protection in a shallow pit excavated for fuel cans and all three of us paused there for breath. There

were actually a few fuel cans still lying around: it gave one an uncomfortable feeling to imagine what would happen to us if they took a direct hit. When the worst of the bombardment was over, we gathered ourselves together and with teeth clenched I dragged myself forward, supported by my two comrades, on my almost numb, powerless legs, using my sub-machine gun as a walking stick. Now various parts of my legs had begun to burn like hot steel with every step. From the rubber boots I had been wearing since Königsberg, blood seeped and sprayed from many leaks. It looked bad. Behind us we could hear the racket being made by the Russians in the wood and this was the impetus to make us 'go faster'. After about 150m we reached a clearing and a path where we stopped for a breather and to 'assess the situation'. We were stragglers hoping to rejoin our unit. Suddenly an SPW pulled up and an excited officer roared down that we should get forward at once to our positions. I reported my condition, at which he left one of the men with me and took the other in the vehicle. I gave him my 10 x 50 binoculars to take to Oberleutnant Hinnerk, and asked him to explain to the Oberleutnant that I was wounded and that he would have to find a replacement for me as commander of the mortar platoon. Then the SPW drove off, engine howling. Our soldiers were running everywhere through the wood in order to reassemble.

There were some vehicles stationary on the woodland path. A lieutenant, going back on a motorcycle and sidecar took me with him. I took my leave of my helper and asked him to pass my salutations to our captain and my platoon. The wood was still under mortar and artillery fire but the Russians were not advancing. Apparently we had done enough to hold them up. Beyond the wood was a road where I dismounted from the sidecar in favour of a fully loaded field ambulance. There was a space for me accessible through a side door behind the driving cab. There was a narrow bench to sit on, but my knees rested against the folded stretchers and I could not move or stretch my legs. After a while this became torment. The ambulance did not move off: it was 1700hrs and work was in progress everywhere to establish the new battle front. All stragglers assembled here. How glad I was when the ambulance finally got away and took its wounded to a dressing station, but the station was in the process of being abandoned. The

wounded were no longer being attended to there. Meanwhile night had fallen, flares were going up in all directions and we heard the accursed Russian ‘sewing machines’. We saw more than we heard on account of the noisy engine of the ambulance: the frequent flashes of explosions, some uncomfortably near! Our ambulance drove on a little and then stopped, out of fuel. The co-driver said he would try to find some. After a long, anxious wait I made my way to the rear of the vehicle. I could not stand sitting on that bench in pain any longer. I had to occupy a place by the door, not so wedged in as before, but whenever would we get under way again? The co-driver had not come back. I was now so damned helpless, totally reliant on others! A horse-drawn unit passed. I shouted, two men came over to me and I had the luck to be accepted. I was loaded into a strangely-shaped wagon like a long narrow trunk already occupied by two other wounded men. I had to lie on top of the other two, and the man at the bottom was doing a lot of complaining, no wonder with two soldiers on top of him. We proceeded at a slow pace. Whenever the convoy halted I lifted the lid of the trunk to ‘assess the situation’. The skies were lit by many flares and star shells, the accursed ‘sewing machines’ were very active and circled above us. Whenever one cut its engine there would be a rustling sound and then two or three bombs going off. Often I saw the exhaust flame of these crows. Every time they came for us, the coachmen and other soldiers leapt out for cover. Now I was lying a metre too high without any splinter protection, and the worst was that we were not far from the main battle front. I could distinctly see and hear bursts of MG fire with tracer. Finally we got under way again, rattling and rolling mightily. Though exhausted it was impossible to doze. My cumbersome sub-machine gun was an uncomfortable travelling companion in such a tight box but I did not want to be parted from it: since I had no knowledge of how things lay and how they would proceed, there was no knowing whether I might need it again.

18 March 1945

We came to a village – Wolitta –towards daybreak and stopped. I was cold and frozen stiff. A ‘Hiwi’ and a *Sanitäter* carried us into the main dressing station. The operating theatre (OP) was in a farmhouse. In front of it were

lying, sitting or standing more or less half or three-quarters dead the poor seriously wounded. All rooms in the village houses were full of them. Many groaning softly but most lying quiet with eyes closed. I was in luck again! I was carried to the door of the OP and set down there, otherwise I would not have been attended to for half a day. Probably my black-silver *Grossdeutschland* cuff insignia helped. I had only an hour to wait, and even that seemed very long, for we could hear clearly the noises from the Front, now just the other side of the wood. At last I was on the table. The surgeon with a blood-spattered apron had just amputated a leg; I could see it in a large bucket under the table. The room itself stank of a mixture of blood, pus, narcotics and sweat. The leg in the bucket fascinated me, filled me with unrestrained anxiety.

‘Don’t amputate my leg! Just not that!’

The surgeon lit a cigarette and with an expressionless face went into an anteroom to wake up another doctor. Who knew how many hours he had been working amongst all this carnage. With men whose number was already up but still hoped for help and salvation now that they had finally got here. A *Sanitäter* took off my rubber boots, then cut away my bloodied, sticky uniform trousers and underpants with plaster-cast scissors. After that the surgeon returned, surveyed the splinter wounds, cleaned them roughly with small tweezers, removed pieces of material and incrustation and finally made a comment. I looked at him questioningly. Then he said to the other doctor, who had merely glanced at my injuries, ‘He’s got so many small splinters, we can’t spend time taking them all out here. His legs and the bones are still intact. So Rivanol dressing, Kramer splint, have you had a tetanus? *Ach ja*, it says so in your *Soldbuch*, September 1942. You have been very lucky!’ Then the *Sanitäter* spread a gauze bandage dripping with the yellow-coloured Rivanol on my wounds and applied a splint to my legs from the thigh to the heels and then to the toes, the whole thing being bound with paper strapping: they no longer had material or gauze. Poor Germany! While I was still lying on the table, Ivan’s Il-2 fighter-bombers droned above us, dropping small-calibre bombs in large numbers in the vicinity, then on a second run firing rockets and on the third run strafing with their cannon and MGs. Everybody who could move was by now under cover. I

had my wounded card and my next stop was ‘House 4’. Two *Sanitäter* lifted me on a stretcher and we set off. Between the houses a Russian tank shell swept past us, ‘ran out of puff’ somewhere and came to rest without exploding. Many men had been wounded or killed by stray shells such as this. It frightened the life out of my two stretcher bearers who let me fall and ran for cover. I felt far from happy, for the last thing I wanted was to be wounded again here. Finally the heroes returned and took me into the nearest house, though not number 4! Nevertheless I was glad to be in the warm and have a roof over my head. I lay for some time reflecting on the events of the last few hours. As for my unit, I thought it likely it would be near the Stalin organs whose salvos could be heard from here: they made the earth tremble. The skies seemed filled with Russian fighter-bombers.

I found a cigarette and lit it, then looked around me. It was a small room, perhaps once the comfortable living room of an East Prussian farmer but now entirely without furniture except for a large sweeping of straw against one wall where ten wounded soldiers lay. I looked from one to another. They were all amputees, nearly all of them unconscious, or sleeping exhausted. All had thick white dressings, now and again one moved an arm or leg then groaned. It made me shudder. One man lying near me had his whole head swathed in bandages, soaked with blood in places. Only his weak breathing confirmed that he was still alive. I could not get an answer from any of them. I heard the fighterbombers again, the infantry outside running for the protection of the houses. I pressed up close under the window for cover. The attack was soon over and it struck me that the Russians were much nearer now.

The room had a tiled stove, still fairly warm. I crept closer to it. Outside I heard excited shouting, running about and haste. I had the impression things were moving. Horses were being harnessed up, wagons loaded. From the window I saw fighting troops carrying a Panzerfaust, MGs and mortars. A selfpropelled Flak gun got into position. Artillery fire increased. I was seized with panic. Were they just going to leave us here? The door opened and a *Sanitärer* entered, went from one man to the next shaking them, calling to them. He felt the pulse, put pressure on the eyes to test. Dead – dead – dead. I was the only one here alive. From each corpse the *Sanitärer*

took the Soldbuch and broke off half of the ID disc. Then he searched the pockets for personal belongings, here a pipe, something confirming identity, a notebook and other things. In the haversack of one of the dead was a half-full butter tin and some bread. Also a pack with some cigarettes. The *Sanitäter* asked me if I wanted them. Initially it seemed like robbing the dead but then I said yes, for one never knew where the next meal or cigarette would be coming from.

I asked him why there was alarm outside. He told me that the dressing station had to be moved, Ivan had just broken through somewhere forward. Then he left quickly. The dead lying in that room were panzer soldiers who had suffered serious burns. I was determined not to be forgotten here and crept to the door. The medical company was ready to move out. Many soldiers were aboard the horse-drawn wagons, but nobody came for me. When I shouted and waved my sub-machine gun threateningly, two men came and carried me to one of the wagons. A surgeon was remaining behind to hand over the nontransportable cases to the Russians if necessary. The wagons were piled high with washbags, rucksacks and medical boxes. There was great nervousness, the artillery bombardment was increasing. Finally we pulled out. The roads were overcrowded, many vehicles both motorized and horse-drawn making their way back slowly. The Il-2 fighter-bombers were the worst threat again, circling above us unseen, dropping bombs, firing rockets and then strafing the columns on the road, hitting horses and soldiers. The once proud, successful German Luftwaffe had no reply. The 8.8cm Flak on the banks of the Haff did what they could, but also had to protect themselves! Smoking, burning vehicles stood on the roads, paths and also in the fields, to where their drivers had repaired to save themselves. Whenever the fighter-bombers attacked our column, all the soldiers who could jumped down from the vehicles into the gutters or nearby holes for cover. We wounded on the vehicles watched, saw the attacking aircraft and waited helplessly until they either wiped us out or gave up the attack. In the afternoon the columns halted. A lorry heading for Balga took the wounded, I was one of the last to get aboard. Now things would go quicker, I thought. Night came. Towards morning our lorry

stopped. Out of fuel. The co-driver went off carrying two canisters. After two hours he had still not returned.

Chapter 22

And God Remained Silent

19 March 1945

In the freezing cold we lay in the lorry. When a horse-drawn convoy passed, I left the lorry with several other wounded and we went on with the convoy to Balga, to the old castle of the Teutonic Knights. We were accommodated in the old chapel of the Order nearby. All the pews had been removed and straw laid on the floor which was then crammed with the wounded. My God, what suffering! I searched for some time but found nobody I knew. I lay quietly for several hours with eyes closed then decided to eat. From my map case I prepared a crust of bread and butter then looked at the altar lit by the beams of the sun. Above it was a statue of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child surrounded by a flight of angels. Everything gilded glittered. Probably I had never been closer to heaven than I was now! (I was so impressed that I photographed the scene with my Agfa box camera but was never able to develop it.)

I drank what was left in my field flask. The wounded were being brought in unceasingly. I saw no surgeons but plenty of *Sanitäter*. Something now occurred which is worth describing because I can probably say that it perhaps saved my life. The unrequited need to urinate can become intolerable and painful. For the purpose I had requested a *Sanitäter* to bring me a receptacle but what he brought me had ugly, jagged edges. My fellow patients made such an object of mirth of me that I had a *Sani* bring me crutches. Scarcely had I gone a few metres behind a large stone memorial near the chapel than the Russians opened fire on Balga with their 15.2cm ‘Black Pig’ gun. Huge black clouds of smoke marked the points of impact. Before I could make it back to the chapel, the next rounds landed in the

cemetery. I had the impression that Ivan was using the chapel, visible from a great distance, as his aiming point to zero-in the gun. That marked the end of the peace and quiet here. I laid myself down against the thick stone wall of the chapel, close to the portal, where my gaze fell once more on the pulpit and altar. The cross, the Christ figure and the gilded angels shone in the rays of the sun. I reflected on all the misery I had seen and the thought came to me involuntarily, ‘Lord God, hast thou deserted us?’ This was also the title of a book I had read about the First World War.

More shells thundered down and, looking for better cover, I found it behind a headstone. Suddenly a horse-drawn cart appeared. The driver, a Hiwi, jumped down from the seat and looked around. When he saw me and my black-and-silver ‘Grossdeutschland’ cuff insignia, he beckoned to me. Seeing my crutches he came over to me. He told me that he had been sent in order to bring the wounded of the Lion Battalion *Grossdeutschland* from here to Rosenberg. This was a small port from where ships would take the wounded to Pillau. At that same moment Russian shelling began and he ran to the horses to quieten them. Then he returned to help me to the cart and climb up to the seat beside him. This cost me a great effort and my wounds throbbed and hammered and I felt pain again.

There came the only too familiar engine noise of low-level Il-2 fighterbombers with red stars on the wings and flying so low that I could see the pilots in the cockpits. Soon Balga came in for more bombs, rockets and machinegunning. I was not so happy with my position on a high perch. If danger threatened the Hiwi could simply jump down, but that was out of the question for me. The Hiwi knew his job, however. When he spotted enemy aircraft he would head for a tree as cover and when it was all clear leave the spot at speed. This happened several times. After barely a kilometre more the road led down a slope to the shore. Here many vehicles were dug in and I also noticed earth bunkers. We came to a halt by a Red Cross flag. A medical officer appeared and asked where we were headed. When he heard the word Rosenberg, he requested that we take with us a man with a serious stomach wound. Halfdead, he was carried out by three men and laid carefully on the other side of the tailboard of the cart. ‘Give

him nothing to eat or drink!' Then the officer asked who had given me the order to go to Rosenberg.

I told him, 'The Lion Battalion sent the Hiwi to Balga in order to evacuate *Grossdeutschland* men and bring them to Rosenberg.' The Hiwi then set the horses in motion since the skies were clear. Now we followed the sandy coastal path of the Haff lined with guns of all calibres, rocket launchers, light and heavy Flak guns and huge quantities of empty shell casings and shell-baskets. The ammunition vehicles were close under the precipitous coast and dug in. Near the guns their crews had deep foxholes. Soon we ran out of steep cliffs and it was clear that the Russians worked the sandy stretch over with their aircraft. This was the last bastion, with our backs to the Haff!

It was a bright and sunny, almost cloudless March day. We could hear aircraft. I hung on to my seat and scoured the sky. Ahead of us, American Boston bombers were bombing Rosenberg. We felt the pressure of the blasts. Black mushroom-shaped clouds arose from the impact points of the sticks of bombs. Behind us we could also hear Balga being bombed. I thought of the chapel with its many wounded. But it seemed I had got out of the frying pan and into the fire! The cart trundled over hedge and ditch: the two horses seemed to be deaf, for they never reacted to the turmoil and racket around them.

I could see only a few boats on the Frischer Haff. These also came under air attack. My Hiwi and I looked around and there they were coming from Rosenberg, heading straight for us at low level, in formation. They would arrive overhead following the shoreline and our coastal path, and not even a tree for cover! From their wings I saw the muzzle flashes of their cannon and MGs, then the release of the rockets leaving a small white cloud behind them under the wings. As the dirt and sand sprayed up, my Hiwi dived into a foxhole. I could see the enemy pilots as they flew overhead, one of them left the formation to attack a special target, the artillery emplacements and those of the 8.8cm Flak guns. I saw men and horses collapse in the hail of bombs, saw the bombs explode in the centre of the emplacements. No sooner had these machines continued on their way than the next flights arrived from Balga. I raised my collar and drew my head in as though that

would help! All around I saw mutilated people, horses in shreds and blood everywhere. It was a place of murder. Dunkirk was nothing like this.

My Hiwi coachman clambered back aboard and urged the horses onwards to Foliendorf. Everywhere the same picture. Wherever one looked the bombers had struck. A small bridge over a water course had been destroyed, towing machines and lorries were stuck fast and so we had to detour. Our batteries were firing from the shore, but they were no match for the bombers. *Tross* vehicles under cover, their men crouching as they burned papers, the infantry availing themselves of everything they thought might be useful. The signs of imminent defeat! Everywhere deep foxholes to which the infantry ran whenever they heard the fighter-bombers coming. My major worry was that the horses would sooner or later take fright at the noise and turmoil but these two nags which saved my life were big-hearted – or deaf. Foliendorf was behind us, halfway between Balga and Rosenberg. On house walls, lorries and other surfaces were painted in white the words '*Tapfer und Treu*' – Brave and Loyal. I did not have much time to contemplate this, but the German soldiers in East Prussia, Samland, Pillau and Königsberg had gone down fighting to the last to save as many of the East Prussian population as possible from the vengeance of the Red Army hordes. The Il-2 fighter-bombers came again, from Foliendorf to our rear, and never before had I experienced such cannon fire and a rain of small bombs at one target. The cart was peppered like a sieve many times over and how the wounded man at the back survived unscathed it is impossible to explain. Elsewhere bombs fell amongst a group of six to eight soldiers who lay bloodied, mutilated, limbs torn off, heads crushed, a dreadful sight. And everywhere the numerous small craters of the small-calibre bombs dropped in masses by Russian warplanes. I thought I smelt blood as I passed by. What I saw were scenes of annihilation, leaving an indelible impression. Here in this small sector, the remnants of Fourth Army were encircled with their backs to the Haff – *Tapfer und Treu!*

Onwards! Onwards! Whenever we were forced to stop I saw how the horses trembled and steamed but they held out magnificently. Comrade horse, you have my thanks. Poor, loyal creatures! Without them I could never have got out of here. Now we could see our goal, Rosenberg, ahead,

but I could see neither ship nor people at the landing stage which projected some distance out into the Haff. Around it in the sunlight I could see the fountains of water from the near-misses spraying up high. Shortly before the town was height 21 (i.e. 21m above sea level), an elevation to the left of the road several hundred metres in length and falling more or less steeply down to the Haff. On its back slope were countless foxholes, earth bunkers and trenches so close together as to be almost touching, and a bustling crowd of soldiers seeking shelter there. Obviously the Russians knew from the map that this back slope, offering protection against their fire, offered rewarding targets, and therefore the ground between the Haff and height 21 remained under almost constant fire, some of it from the 15.2cm 'Black Pig'. So close to our destination and then this! We stopped to assess our situation. We could hear the enemy batteries fire, the sound of a salvo of four approaching and then the explosions as they hit. Most landed on height 21, but the odd one or two fell behind the hill or in the coastal sands or waters of the Haff. The horses, sweating and steaming in the sun, anxious to be on the move again, snorted and tugged at the harness. I heard the howl of approaching Stalin organs but they all fell into the Haff with great fountains, inflicting no damage. In the water were many capsized and half-sunken minor vessels.

The landing stage was no more than 1.5km away and we went forward 150 metres into the rain of splinters from the next 'Black Pig' salvo. Dust, dirt and smoke drifted on the wind. Looking beyond Rosenberg and the landing stage I made out a number of small boats, barges and rowing boats in a half-circle offshore and the frequent plumes of water thrown up by shelling.

I had become very fearful at all this. By some miracle we had got this far but how much longer could our luck hold out? Even if only one of the two horses was hit, I could not walk with the long splint on my right leg. When the cart jolted and the man with the serious stomach wound in the back groaned and cried out in pain for us to go slower and more carefully, I lost my temper and shouted back, 'Man, keep your trap shut, we've got far worse things to worry about here!'

Then the infantry on the steep slope of height 21 shouted and cursed, ‘Hey, you idiot, get on with it, your cart is bringing down fire on us. The Russians can see everything down here from their observation balloons. Clear off!’

The problem was that the shelling was landing a bare 100m ahead on the road and we hesitated to continue because we could always hear the next salvo coming from the distance. I no longer believed that it would be possible for us to make it to Rosenberg in one piece, but we had to try! Now or never. I gave the Hiwi a nudge. ‘Now! Go for it!’ The two horses and cart and the three occupants headed into the inferno of lightning flashes, dirt, dust and whizzing shrapnel. My Hiwi sat deathly pale, one hand grasping the edge of his seat, the other holding the reins. I tore them from his hand and shouted at the two horses. The Hiwi grabbed his whip. ‘Via! Via!’ he called and cracked it. We drove into a thick cloud of enveloping dust and smoke and after some time we saw the weak disc of the sun gradually reappear. We were through: the shells from the ‘Black Pig’ fell 25 to 30m to our rear. The horses had had their fill of it and set off at a gallop. I held on for dear life. I was quite happy for a brisk dash into Rosenberg but we had to pull up and take cover against being seen from the air. The fighter-bombers came flying slowly and brazenly at low level to attack the artillery emplacements along the shore. They were met by furious Flak fire but strafed the targets unconcerned because they had an armoured underbelly and were almost impossible to shoot down from the ground. Finally their cannon and rocket fire ceased and they turned away.

We hurried onwards into the horror that called itself Rosenberg. The bombing had ploughed up almost everything. In the streets burning ruins, giant bomb craters, houses collapsed into each other by blast. The houses in the town had all been small. In a large tree damaged by bombing I saw an ambulance hanging in the branches 4 to 5m up. The lifeless bodies of the driver and co-driver hung dead in the open doors. The rear doors were wide open. We continued our search for the landing stage. I noticed wounded men in the open with no protection against bombing and shelling except for the cover provided by damaged walls and houses, often groups of ten to twenty of them lying together. There was hardly a house that had not been

seriously damaged. A strange atmosphere – burning houses, the cracking and rumbling of collapsing masonry. Probably many wounded men laid for shelter in the cover of these walls were crushed to death by them when they fell. Dead and wounded lay strewn everywhere. In the intact houses I supposed that men lay and waited for ships to come over the Haff from Pillau to fetch them. The rubble and debris on the roads proved a major obstacle for us. We turned off into a nearby street and found the same scene everywhere. Again we heard the typical sound of the Il-2 and then the accursed fighter-bombers reappeared to fire on the artillery emplacements along the shore. Single heavy calibre shells fell random distances apart upon already ruined houses.

I could not find a single soldier from whom to obtain directions to the landing stage. At a crossroads we found a one-man concrete bunker occupied by a Feldgendarmerie, identified by the chain and inverted metal gorget on his chest. These military police were generally much feared but were responsible for keeping order in difficult times. This one did not like to emerge from his concrete house. We stopped and above all the noise and shooting I asked for the shortest way to the landing stage. He came out briefly, pointed the way and then retired to the interior of his post. As he had explained, at the next corner the landing stage was visible just 100m away. We rolled towards it and then I applied the brake so that we approached the end of the broad landing stage very slowly. It was deserted. The rolling of the cartwheels over the wooden beams brought up some infantry from cover under the timberwork. They looked speechless at our horse-and-cart for a moment and then said, ‘You must be crazy! Ivan can see everything here. You are inviting him to shoot!’ I could understand their anxieties, but first I had to get down from the driving seat and unload the man with the stomach wound. I had suddenly become very energetic! Now they recognized our situation. Helping hands reached out to lift me down and our wounded passenger, still alive, was then lowered carefully to the flooring of beams. Finally the horses were unharnessed and allowed to run free ashore. My Hiwi went below with the other soldiers under the pier. I would have liked to wish him all the best, for it was he who had scooped

me up at Balga into his cart and had driven it courageously through thick and thin to Rosenberg. But I never saw him again.

I sat at the end of the landing stage wearing my long Kramer splint. The men waiting for a ship here were from the *Hermann Göring* Division and all were in possession of special identity documents – all had some special training or other or were panzer crews without a panzer. They were of the opinion that a ship would be coming soon. When an anti-tank shell passed over the landing stage and hit the water, they swiftly disappeared ‘below deck’.

I saw a number of wounded men mount the landing stage and come towards me, some hobbling, some even crawling. Looking out over the Haff I saw what appeared to be some kind of small naval vessel approaching the landing stage and throwing up a high bow-wave. It made a turn and slammed into the stage while coming alongside. Several ratings jumped off, moored the vessels with thick hawsers and then it was all ‘Quick, quick! Hurry up, quick, on the boat!’ Two sailors helped me on deck, also the man with the serious stomach wound. He groaned loudly when almost dropped in the haste. Next many cases and boxes were unloaded including ammunition, and medical cases marked with the Red Cross. ‘Quick, quick, speed up, hurry!’ Everybody was taken aboard, even those who had crawled up laboriously. Then – cast off! The motors roared full out, the craft trembled in completing a half-turn away from the wooden jetty and then at the fastest speed it could manage headed for the middle the lagoon. We made off with foaming wake: Russian ‘Rata’ aircraft circling above went into near vertical dives to fire their on-board antitank guns, the rounds falling harmlessly in the water astern.

One of the ratings explained that this was a Siebel ferry,¹ named after its designer, Luftwaffe Oberst Siebel. It was armed with a 3.7cm Flak gun, the very accurate fire of which kept the ‘Ratas’ at bay. The ferry followed the coast towards Pillau well offshore. From the middle of the Haff I could see the East Prussian mainland where Fourth Army went under. The Russian encirclement with the Haff forming half of it stretched from Deutsch-Bahnau not far from Rosenberg on the Haff coast to not far west of Balga with its old Teutonic Knights’ castle and chapel from where I began this

journey – and perhaps at Wolitnik the other wing reaches the water of the Frisches Haff.² I believe the pocket was not even 3km deep. In this semi-circle clouds of smoke rose up everywhere as the Stalin organs and ‘Black Pig’ gun, tanks and anti-tank guns battered it. Our own batteries were firing from the shoreline. I saw tethered balloons at three locations, one at each end of the encirclement and the third at its centre! Above all this flew squadrons of the Russian air force, met by the small black clouds of our Flak explosions. All this was being played out before me on a stage, there being an almost cloudless sky and bright March sunlight. At many places the smoke from burning houses, vehicles and tanks rose to a few hundred metres – but where were the inhabitants? MGs chattered, single rounds of rifle fire could be heard – here they were, the last of them, ‘*Tapfer und Treu*’ holding their positions against an overwhelming enemy force, cut off from the German eastern front line up to 75km away near Danzig.

I was no longer exposed to direct danger in the battle area – but Pillau lay ahead.

These are the casualties sustained by German forces in this period:

Losses from 15 January 1945 to 29 March 1945:

14,586 men, of which 390 were officers, dead or wounded, undifferentiated:

From 13 March 1945 to 29 March 1945:

5,653 men, of which 120 were officers, dead or wounded, undifferentiated. And God remained silent.

Several small ships and boats plied the Haff between Pillau, the spit of land and the shore where Fourth Army was encircled. We reached Pillau without further incident. Activity in the port was hectic for fear of air attacks. I was taken with many other wounded to a barracks in the harbour area. On the way I saw two freighters at the quayside with long queues of people beside them. They were mostly East Prussians who had now abandoned their horse-drawn vehicles and all personal belongings in favour of getting aboard a ship. In the barracks one slept where one could. A sergeant came, took name, rank and field-post number. Thus we were

recorded, and he said that food would be made available. Thus we lay there, hoping for no Russian air attacks, totally unprotected in a wooden barracks. Suddenly some naval men appeared from a ship lying at the quay to ask, ‘Who wants to go to Sweden?’ Those who volunteered would be brought to the ship – but only wounded men. I did not hesitate!

Notes

1. The Siebel ferry was a shallow-draught catamaran landing craft developed for Operation *Sealion* in 1940. The hulls were two bridging pontoons connected by a large wide platform, with a high superstructure amidships. An improved version appeared in 1941 and more variants with different engine arrangements followed. Dimensions (1941 variant): length 24.3m, beam 13.9m, draught 1.2m, carrying capacity 60 tonnes payload or 250 passengers and eleven to fourteen crew, maximum speed 12–14km/hr. One of the later variants was armed with 4 x 8.8cm Flak and 1 x 2cm quadruple 38. (TN).
2. Author’s note: For the events leading up to the destruction of the Fourth Army in the East Prussian encirclement on 29 March 1945 see Reinhard Hauschild, *Plus Minus Null?* – later published under the title *Flammendes Haff*, Verlag Schneekluth, 1952. The situation depicted corresponds to what the author experienced and remembers.





Unteroffizier Josef Dörfler was transferred to 15 Panzer Division in the spring of 1945 . . .

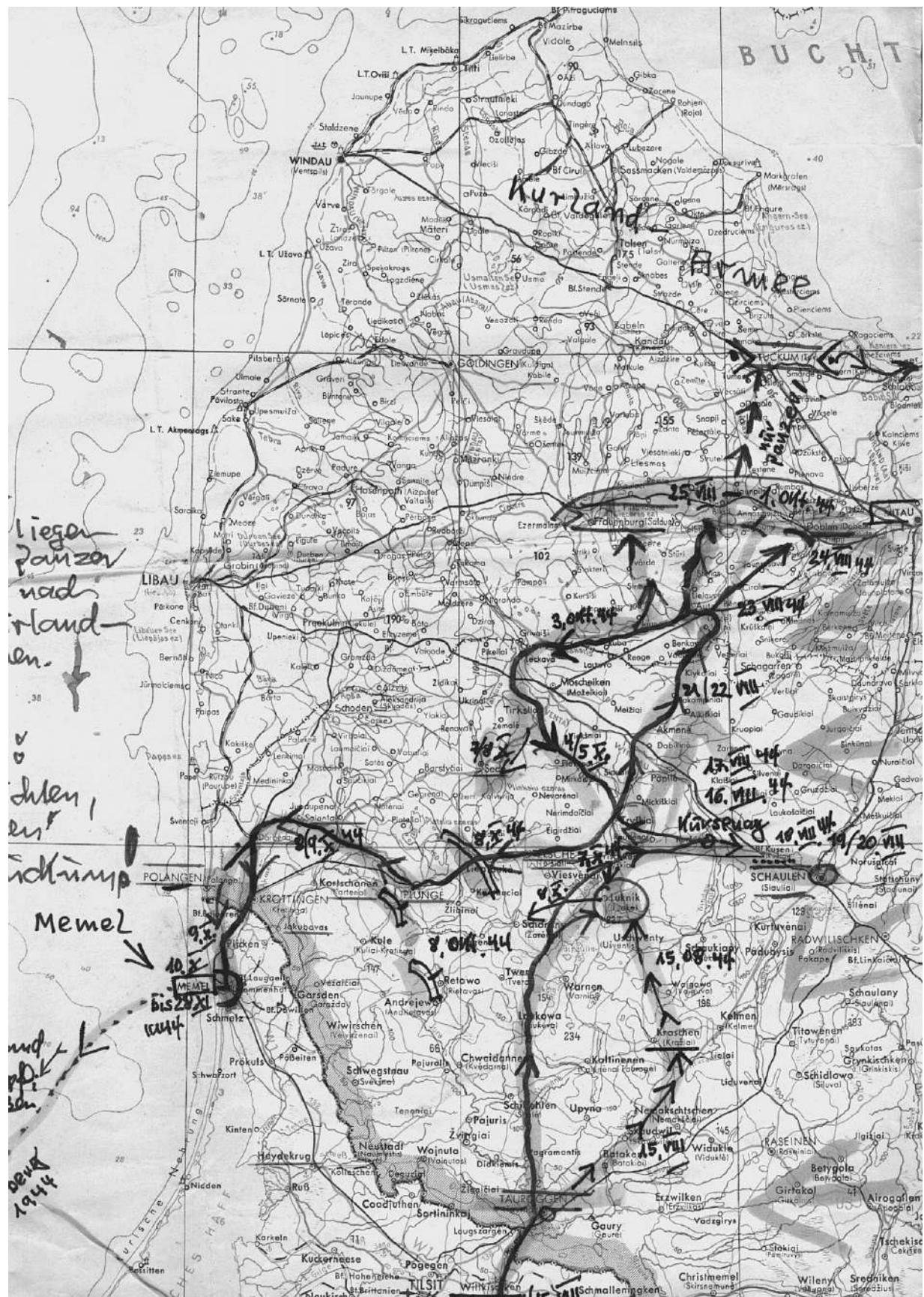




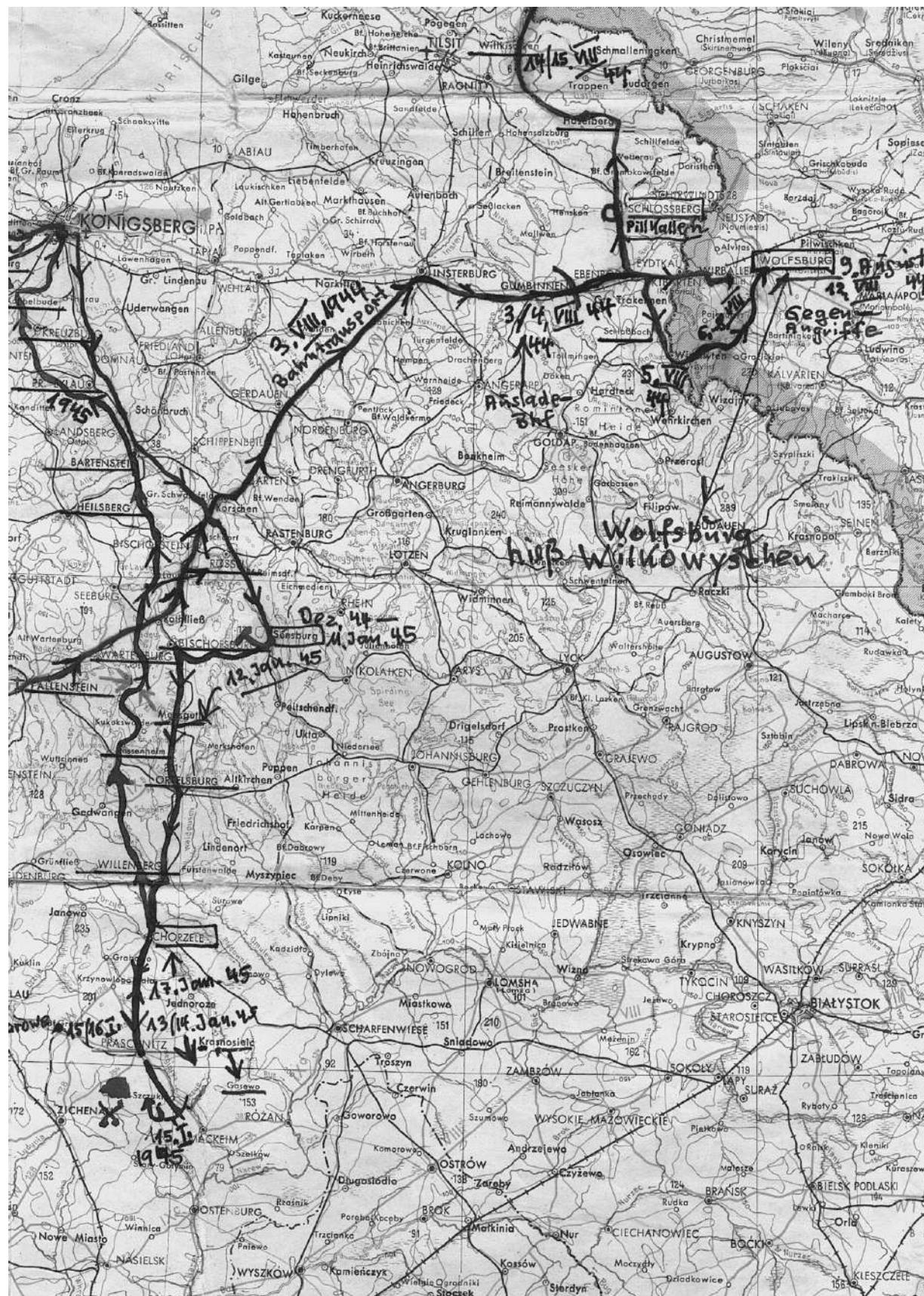
. . . and continued to wear the *Grossdeutschland* cuff insignia on his uniform.



New Year's greetings card from the author to his family: 'Success, good luck and everything good. 1945. Your Hans'.



The upper part of the map of the author's operational area with *Grossdeutschland* Division, 1944–45.



The lower part of the map of the author's operational area with Grossdeutschland Division, 1944–45.



To support the fighting services, the East Prussian field post gave them preferential handling.

Inn geföde den 22. II. 45

lieber Eltern!

Schnell einen Duogen
Gruß! mir geht es gut, ich
hoffe dasselbe auch von Euch.
Post ist nun endlich ange-
kommen; mässt Euch
nun mich nun nicht zu-
viel Sorgen; wir werden
dem Herrn schon mal
wieder zeigen! Schreibt bitte
bald wieder. Der Winter scheint
nun vorbei zu sein.

Der Schnee ist fastlos verschwunden.

Schönste Euch vielmals
herzlichst

Euer Hans!

Guarded optimism in difficult times. The son attempted to ameliorate the constant concerns of his family for his life and well-being. The text reads:

'In the field, 22.II.45

Dear Parents!

Quickly a [illegible] greeting! I am well, I hope the same also for you. Post has now finally arrived, do not worry yourselves so much about me: we will once again show *Ivan*. Please write back soon. Our winter seems to be over now. The snow has all disappeared. I send you my heartiest greetings many times over:

Your Hans.'



Jupp Dörfler and his wife-to-be at Flensburg, May 1945.



A couple of *Grossdeutschland* members had great good fortune in May 1945.

Flensburger Nachrichten

Bezugspreis: mtl. Stadt 2.15. Ausw. d. Bot. 2.35. Post 2.- (einschl. 0.18 Postgeb.) zuz. 0.36 Bestelle.
Anzeigenpreis lt. Liste 5. Postscheck Hamb. 41721. Geschäftsst. Flensb., Nikolaistr. 7. Ruf 2999
Verlagsl. Herb. Jensen (Wehrm.) Vertr. Heinr. Krebs. Hauptschriftl. Ernst Schröder (Url.) Stellv.
Hauptschriftl. Gerh. Becker. Druck u. Verlag Flensb. Nadir. Grenzverlag GmbH. Flensb. RPK. L675

Nr. 108 | 81. Jahrgang | Mittwoch, 9. Mai 1945 | II. Vierteljahr | 15 Rpf.

Großadmiral Dönitz an das deutsche Volk

Großadmiral Dönitz richtete am Dienstag, 8. Mai, mittags 12.30 Uhr über den Rundfunk folgende Botschaft an das deutsche Volk:

Deutsche Männer und Frauen!

In meiner Ansprache am 1. Mai, in der ich dem deutschen Volk den Tod des Führers und meine Bestimmung zu seinem Nachfolger mitteilte, habe ich es als meine erste Aufgabe bezeichnetet, das Leben deutscher Menschen zu retten. Um dieses Ziel zu erreichen, habe ich in der Nacht vom 6. zum 7. Mai dem Oberkommando der Wehrmacht den Auftrag gegeben, die bedingungslose Kapitulation für alle kämpfenden Truppen auf allen Kriegsschauplätzen zu erklären. Am 8. Mai 23 Uhr schweigen die Waffen. Die in unzähligen Schlachten bewährten Soldaten der deutschen Wehrmacht treten den bitteren Weg in die Gefangenschaft an und bringen damit das letzte Opfer für das Leben von Frauen und Kindern und für die Zukunft unseres Volkes. Wir verneigen uns vor ihrer tausendfach bewiesenen

rechtigkeit gehen, ohne die wir die Not der kommenden Zeit nicht überwinden können. Wir dürfen ihn in der Hoffnung gehen, daß unsere Kinder einmal in einem befriedeten Europa ein freies und gesichertes Dasein haben werden. Ich will auf diesem dornenreichen Weg nicht hinter euch zurückbleiben. Gebietet mir die Pflicht, in meinem Amt zu bleiben, dann werde ich versuchen, euch zu helfen, soweit ich irgend kann. Gebietet mir die Pflicht zu gehen, so soll auch dieser Schritt ein Dienst an Volk und Reich sein.

Der OKW-Bericht

Aus dem Hauptquartier des Großadmirals, 8. Mai. Das Oberkommando der Wehrmacht gibt bekannt:

Artillerie und Atlantikfestungen bekämpfte feindliche Batterien und Truppenbewegungen, Schwächere Aufklärungsvorstöße des Gegners wurden abgewiesen.

In Norwegen verlief der Tag ruhig.

In Kroatien haben unsere Truppen die Linie Coprivnica — Slunj nach Westen überschritten.

Während die Sowjets im Südabschnitt der Ostfront weiterhin verhalten, sind amerikanische Verbände aus dem Raum Linz im Vorgehen nach Osten. In Mähren nahmen die heftigen Abwehrkämpfe südöstlich Brünn und im Großraum Olmütz ihren Fortgang. Die Städte Olmütz und Sternberg gingen verloren. Amerikanische Abteilungen erreichten Beraun.

Auf der Frischen Nehrung hat sich die Lage trotz anhaltender starker Angriffe des Feindes nicht verändert.

In Kurland beschränkten sich die

Die Einstellung der Feindseligkeiten

Das Oberkommando der Wehrmacht gibt bekannt:

Am 9. Mai 1945 00.00 Uhr sind auf allen Kriegsschauplätzen von allen Wehrmachteinheiten und von allen bewaffneten Organisationen oder Einzelpersonen die Feindseligkeiten gegen alle bisherigen Gegner einzustellen.

Jede Zerstörung oder Beschädigung von Waffen und Munition, Flugzeugen, Ausrüstung, Gerät jeder Art, sowie jede

Beschädigung oder Versenkung von Schiffen widerspricht den vom Oberkommando der Wehrmacht angenommenen und unterzeichneten Bedingungen und ist im Gesamtinteresse des deutschen Volkes mit allen Mitteln zu verhindern. Diese Bekanntmachung gilt für jedermann als Befehl, der auf dem militärischen Dienstwege einen solchen nicht erhalten haben sollte.

Vom 9. Mai 1945 00.00 Uhr ab ist ferner auf sämtlichen Funklinien aller Wehrmachtteile nur mehr offen zu funknen.

Im Auftrage des Großadmirals
gez. Jodl
Generaloberst.

Sowjets auch gestern auf örtliche Vorstöße.

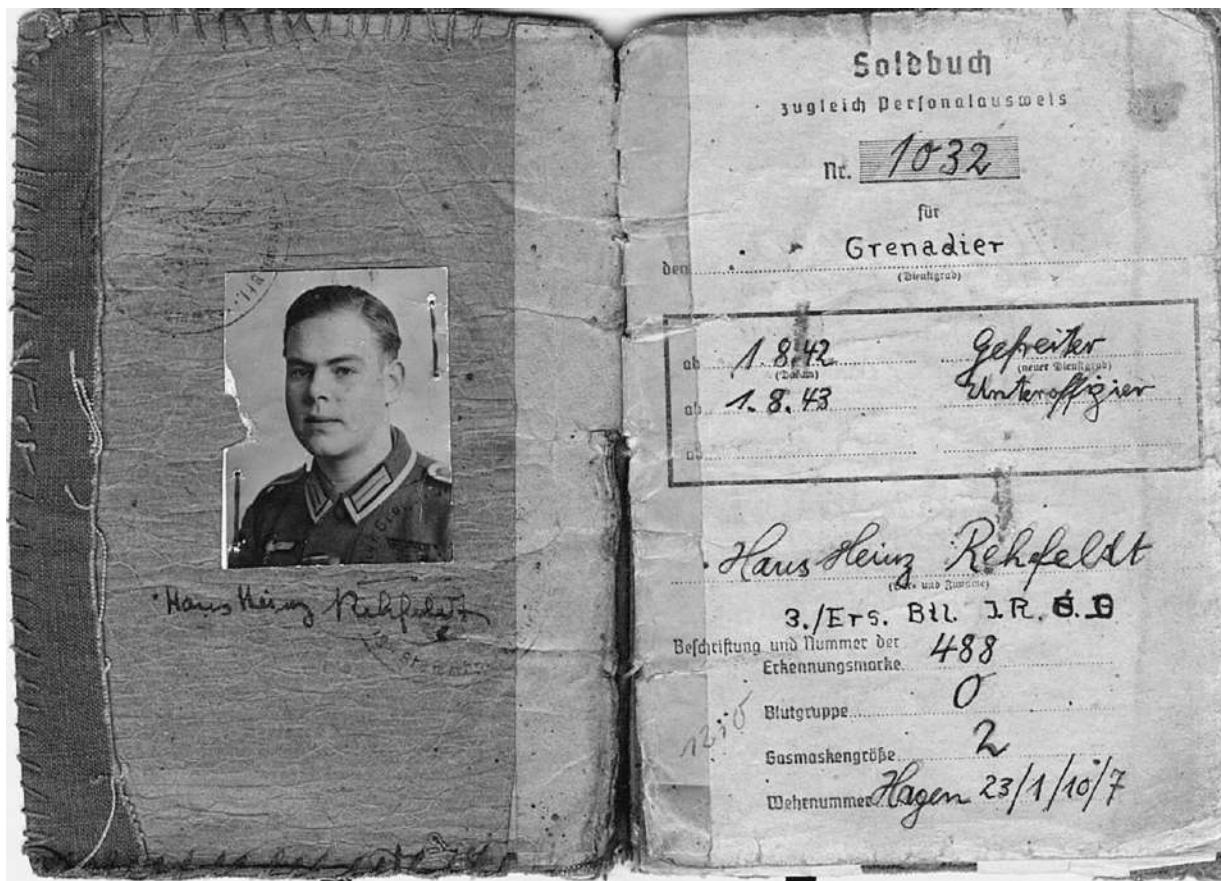
Der militärische Gruß

Das Oberkommando der Wehrmacht gibt ferner bekannt: Die Engländer haben an verschiedenen Stellen den deutschen Gruß verboten und den früheren militärischen Gruß für die deutsche Wehrmacht angeordnet. Die Disziplin der Truppe erfordert eine einheitliche Regelung. Daher wird für die gesamte deutsche Wehrmacht die sofortige Anwendung des militärischen Grusses befehlen.

Die Kämpfe

Starke bolschewistische Angriffe in Mähren

The statement of Grossadmiral Dönitz in the *Flensburger Nachrichten* on 9 May 1945 announcing the capitulation of the German fighting forces.



(Over the next seven pages) The author's Soldbuch (full identity document)

geb. am 21. 4. 23 in Fliegen
(V. Kreis, Germ.-Segt.)

Religion ... ev. Stand, Beruf Schreiber
Stud. med. vet.

Personalbeschreibung:

Größe 1,76 Gestalt kräftig
Gesicht oval Haar blond
Bart / Augen blau

Besondere Kennzeichen (z. B. Brillenträger): Narkotikum reicht. Beim
Narcolepsie - linke Pupille

Schuhzeuglänge 29 Schuhzeugweite

Schuhzeuglänge 21 Schuhzeugweite

Klaus Weing, Miller

Die Richtigkeit der nicht umrandeten Angaben auf Seiten 1 und 2 und
der eigenhändigen Unterschrift des Inhabers bescheinigt

Dear [Name], I am writing to you today to express my deepest apologies for any inconvenience or distress caused by my recent behavior. I have been reflecting deeply on my actions and their impact on those around me.

(Ausstellender Truppenteil, Dienststelle)

Wur

Wegenhandige unterstützte Wissensgrüne Erstellung von Begriffen

Beschleinerungen

Sicher die Buchstaben

A. Zuletzt zuständige Wehrersatzdienststelle:

W. W. A. Hagen

B. Zum Feldheer abgesandt von:¹⁾

	Ersatztruppenteil	Kompanie	Nr. der Truppenkennrolle
a	3 (7) Fz. S. 1	5	1581
b	J. R. "Dresdner"	5	1581
c	Grenzpol. 2	5	1581

C.	Feldtruppenteil ²⁾	Kompanie	Nr. der Kriegsstammrolle
a	11. Gepflichtfeld 8	475	1581
b	11. Gepflichtfeld 1	475	1581
c	11. Gepflichtfeld 9	9	1581

D.	Zuletzt zuständiger Ersatztruppenteil ²⁾	Standort
	11. Pkf. d. P. G. J.	Prinzenstr.
	11. Pkf. d. P. G. J.	11
	11. Pkf. d. P. G. J.	11
	11. Pkf. d. P. G. J.	11

(Meldung dort selbst nach Rückkehr vom Feldheer oder Lazarett, zuständig für Erfüllung
an Bekleidung und Ausrüstung)

- 1) Vom Ersatztruppenteil einzutragen, von dem der Soldbuchinhaber zum Feldheer
abgesandt wird.
2) Vom Feldtruppenteil einzutragen und bei Verlegungen von einem zum anderen
Feldtruppenteil darum abzuändern, daß die alten Angaben nur durchstreichen werden,
alle lebensfähig bleiben.

Weiterer Raum für Eintragungen auf Seite 17.

Anschriften der nächsten lebenden Angehörigen

des *Hans Heinrich Rehfeldt*
(Vor- und Zuname)

1. Ehefrau: Vor- und Mädchennname *ledig*
(ggf. Verner „ledig“)

Wohnort (Kreis)

Straße, Haus-Nr.

2. Eltern: des Vaters, Vor- und Zuname *Hans Rehfeldt*

Stand oder Gewerbe *Kalkulationsbeamter*
der Mutter, Vor- u. Mädchenname *Klara*
geb. Schlueter

Wohnort (Kreis) *Hagen/W. (21)*
Straße, Haus-Nr. *Markensensestr. 8*

3. Verwandte oder Bezug.*)

Vor- und Zuname *Adolf Rehfeldt*
Stand oder Gewerbe *Ob. Zahlmeister*
Wohnort (Kreis) *Schwerin i/M*
Straße, Haus-Nr. *Riedland Wagner Str. 7*

* Ausfüllung nur, wenn weder 1. noch 2. ausgefüllt sind.

Mitgegebene Bekleidungs-

(nur ! Abgängen vom Gefechtseer zum Feldheer, sowie Abgängen vom

Grund (z.B. Klaub, Erfolg ins Feld, Ende, Versiegung usw.)	Zeit			Stahlhelm	Feldmütze	Bluse oder Feld- jacke (förm.)	Untertrage	Tuch-, Rute- oder Schalholz (förm.)	Schnür- Reitstiefel	Schuhschuhe
	Tag	Monat	Jahr							
S. F. S. (Lip. Et.) - Bf. "Großherzoglich"	9.	8.	41	11	2	3	4			
"	13.	10.	41	2	1	2	1	1	1	1
Reserve - Lazarett VIII Warschau, Pasteur 12	16.	10.	41	+	1	1	1	1	1	1
	14.	11.	41							
Is. Lazarett I - Posen 27. 1. 42	5.	12.	41	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Ablösung	14.	1.	42	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
G. Reg. Gran. Reg. G. D.	15.	4.	43	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
G. Reg. Gran. Reg. G. D.	31.	12.	43	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Rif. Laz. m. Lehrerinnen	12.	4.	45	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

und Ausrüstungsstücke

Feldheer - ausgenommen Bewandlung u. plötzliche Erkrankung - ausfüllen).

Monat	Übermantel	Kerftücher	Rückgrätscheit	Schlagschläfung	Koppel mit Zubehör	Brotbeutel mit Binde	Sab. (Colle-) Stulpe	Wetterschutz	Dreiholzgag		
										8	8
										8	8
										2	2
										3	3
										2	5
										3	3
										2	3
										2	2
										1	4
										1	1

Anmerkungen: Einzelne
auch berücksichtigt werden, s. V.

Besondere Bekleidungsvermerke

(z. B. Antrag der Soldinheit auf Umtausch von Sachen usw.)

Nach Erledigung vorseitige Eintragungen in rot ändern.

Gummische 38 bis 6.1.43 P.
Vieh Fäkalien 2 19.1.43 V
Hautentzündl. 2
Gummi 38 bis 10.1.43 P.
Leitungsleitung 10.6.43
Gummis 16.1.43 K
Fäkalien
1 geb. ein Dachbrett erhalten
8.11.44 Alles gut
gut - W.

Impfungen

gegen

am ...	23.7.41				
a) Pocken Erfolg					
am ...	23.7.41	31.7.41	7.8.41	4.9.	18.9.
b) Typhus Paratyphus ccm	1,0	1,0	1,0	T.A.B.	1,0 1,0
am ...	9.11.	22.11.	28.11.	16.12.	
c) Ruhr ccm	0,5	1,0	1,0	1,0	
am ...	11.6	30.6	24.6.	11.7.	21.
d) Cholera ccm	1,0	0,5	1,0	1,0	P.A.B.
am ...	12.11.44	0,25	15.12.		
e) Sonstige Schutz- und Heilimpfungen	0,25	0,25	15.12.		

der Brillenbestimmung

1 - 2 Brillen *)

Höhe der Nasenwurzel über dem Hornhautscheitel mm

Gestell-Nr.

Abstand der Schloßmitte (beim Blick in die Ferne)

rechts mm

links mm

		Augelförmig geschlossen (Spärlich)
rechts	- Glas + Glas	BKE BKE
links	- Glas + Glas	BKE BKE

Langgeschlossen (Zylinderisch)	
Glas	Ringe
BKE	Grad

Truppenarzt

Inf.-Eis.-Rgt. Großdeutschland

Cottbus
29.12.42

KU Taf

Admire

Obwarz u. Wügmann
Ersatz für zerbrochene Gläser, abgenutzte Bänder und verlorene Brillen
ist zu verlangen durch den Truppenarzt unter Vorlage des Soldbuches.

*) Nichtzutreffendes durchstreichen

Nachweisung über etwaige Ausnahme in ein Standort-, Feld-, Kriegs- oder Reservelazarett

Mitgegebene Wertsachen und Papiere siehe folgende Seiten!

In das Lazarett mitgegeben:

Geld, geldwerthabende Papiere, Wertgegenstände u. dergl.

Ihre hier beurtheilte durch Hilt. Niemands,
8/13. f. zw. Agt. 19. auf Grund. dass dies kei-
nem anderen verboten worden ist einer-
malige Aufzwingung Salzarm nicht und
Salzverzehr unzulässig als sozusagen
gegen den sich vor nicht die Todesschafe
und das Überleben einer der Menschenfamilie
keit bestraft werden.

Nielsius h/pz.
F.d. R. der Konsulat.

Hilt. u. Up. - Jutras
Res. Poste bis einschl. 30. Juli 45 ver-
ausgebt. Res. Laz. Km. Schwerin.

In das Lazarett mitgegeben:

Geld, geldwerthabende Papiere, Wertgegenstände u. dergl.



20. III. 1943.
Sollmutter
Königswusterhausen

8/13.-R. Großdeutschland 15. August 1943

Kr. St.R. Nr. 475



Zur Füllung des 1. 9. 44

WV
Handaufdruck v. Beizstaur

Zahnstation:	Fortsetzung zu Seite 4			
Zahnersatz erhalten am:	B. Zum Feldheer abgesandt von: ¹⁾			
+ Fehlende Zähne <input checked="" type="radio"/> Erste Zahne	Ersatztruppenteil	Kompanie	Nr. der Truppenkammerrolle	
8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	a Stamm-Kp. II / G. C. R. G. D.	11739/44		
8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	b			
Unterschrift des Sanitätszuges	c			
Unterschrift des Arztes	C.	Feldtruppenteil ²⁾	Kompanie	Nr. der Kriegsstammrolle
Ausbesserungen am:	a	Vorl. Sanit. Rgt. (m.)	3 Kp.	11744
In der Zahnstation:	b	Arzt, Sanitärabteilung		
Ausbesserungen am:	c	Gz. Grn. Rgt. 9. J.	8	1330
In der Zahnstation:	D.	Jetzt zuständiger Ersatztruppenteil ²⁾	Standort	
Ausbesserungen am:		Lohr. II Heer. Vst. Abtl.	Hannover	
In der Zahnstation:		Gr. Grn. Dr. Reg. 9. J. Cottbus		
Ausbesserungen am:		E/Pz. Gren. E. K. A. Pz. 9. J.	Cottbus/Rendsburg	
In der Zahnstation:				
Bemerkungen:	(Meldung dorthin nach Rückkehr vom Feldheer oder Lazarett, zuständig für E: an Bekleidung und Ausrüstung)			
3. B. trägt seit: eigenes Zahnersatzstück	2) Dem Ersatztruppenteil einzutragen, von dem der Soldbuchinhaber zum Feldheer abgesandt wird.			
mit Zahnen im Kieser.	3) Dem Feldtruppenteil einzutragen und bei Versetzungen von einem zum anderen Feldtruppenteil darauf abzuändern, daß die alten Angaben nur durchstrichen werden, also lesefertig bleiben.			

A. Auszufertigen durch Beamten der zuständigen Zahlmeisterei mit dessen Unterschrift, Dienststellung, Dienststelle, Datum und Beidecken des Dienststempels über zu stehende Gebührenliste.		Gültig ab	erhält die Gebührenliste der	Bescheinigung der Zahlmeisterei
Gültig ab	erhält die Gebührenliste der	Befestigung der Zahlmeisterei		
11.7.41	Wehrmacht Stellengruppe 10	1941	Stellengruppe	
		Moskau Arbeitsverwaltungskontrolle		
	Stellengruppe		Stellengruppe	
1.8.41	Stellengruppe 10	Zugemeldet 5.1.7.41. G. 1	Stellengruppe	eingelagert Belohnung nicht feste 14.
		Moskau op. Zugmeister		
	Stellengruppe		Stellengruppe	
1.8.42	Stellengruppe 11	Zugemeldet 5.1.8.42. G. 1	Stellengruppe	eingelagert Belohnung nicht feste 14.
		Moskau Oberzugmeister		
	Stellengruppe		Stellengruppe	

8. Auszufertigen durch Beamten fremder Zahlmeister mit Unterschrift über ausgezahlte Gebührenbeträge.

Zugleich Mitteilung (Dordruck) an zuständige Zahlmeisterei nach A.

am	für (Zeit)	Erläuterungen	RUB.	Mpf.
11.10.92	11.-20.10.92 1.-10.10.	Gehosold Gehosold	15,- 10,-	-
29.10.1.11	{ 21.10. -			
11.11.21.11	30.11.92	Wehorsold	144,-	21
1.-21.3.45	5.3.45	Kr.-Verw.-Int.	20,-	-

Auszeichnungen

Niederschriften

No. 7 Festungsberitten

Frankfurter

20.9.42. Name aufgenommen abgesetzt. schwer
4.1.43. Oberstabsarzt



Hauptmann u. Kompanie-Chef

Leutnant u. Kompanie-Chef

Bronze - Aufnäher
u. Kompanie-Chef

Schmetter

Ein Drittel in Kg. Ede

22. Gleichenbrück

Auszeichnung ur. Fertigung v. d. A.

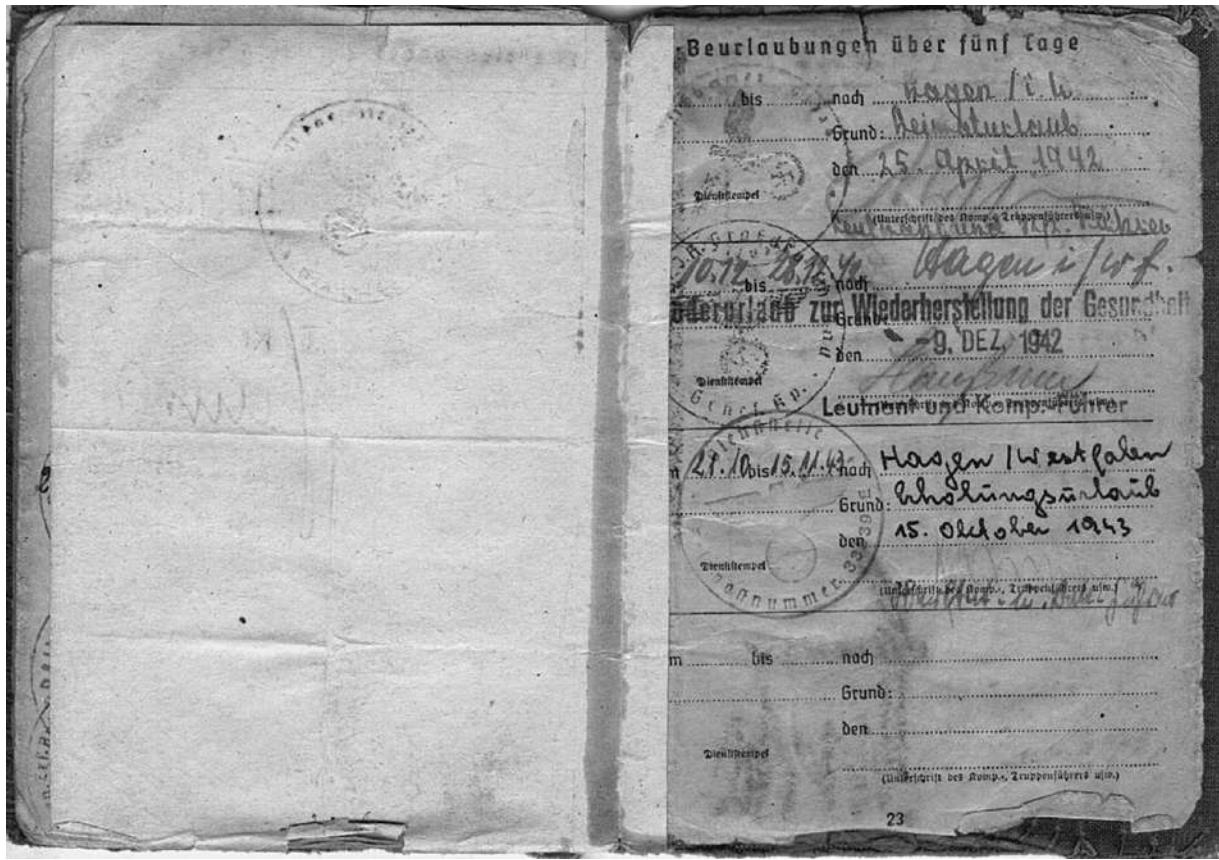
3. II. 44. Krankenpflege I. Klasse



8. II. 45. E.K. I. Klasse



Oberleutnant u. Kp. Führer
schwarze Kampfuniform





From 1937 to 1946, the author kept up a diary regularly and this now serves as the basis for his notes in this book. In the foreground his Soldbuch.



The author obtained this new replacement uniform jacket from the cellar of a Stettin hospital in 1945.



The *Grossdeutschland* cuff insignia worn by the author when undergoing basic training. This is the earlier variant with Fraktur script.



Großmünzfirma

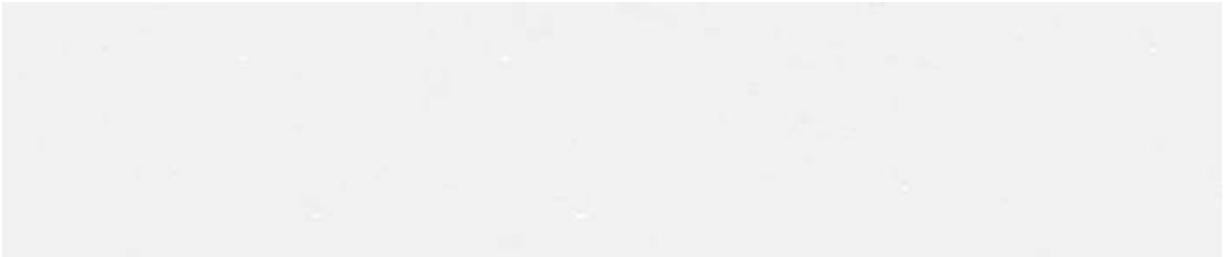
Brandenburg





Elements of the 'Brandenburgers' were absorbed into *Grossdeutschland* from the autumn of 1944. Shown here are the insignias of both units.





The entwined initials GD were worn with pride on the shoulder straps of every member of the *Grossdeutschland* unit.



Reunions of former members of the *Grossdeutschland* unit continued after the war. This photograph was taken in Montabaur/Westerwald in June 1965.



In 1958 General (retired) Walter Hörnlein [third from left] visited the memorial to the *Grossdeutschland* units at Kassel-Karlsaue.



The memorial at Kassel records the units attached to Panzerkorps *Grossdeutschland*.

Chapter 23

My Escape from the Pocket

20 March 1945

I had got from Balga and Rosenberg to Pillau relatively ‘easily’, and the chance to go to neutral Sweden by ship from Pillau was attractive. I volunteered, two naval men took hold of me and so I was brought to the side of the ship, a French 10,000-tonne freighter, to be lifted aboard with the other volunteers by crane while occupying a 4 x 4m platform normally used for cargo. Once aboard, those capable of walking went down a broad companionway into the hold. Those unable to walk were carried below. I stayed on deck for fear of what would happen if a torpedo hit. The ship was soon overloaded. Meanwhile I had made a tour of inspection and found a corner out of the wind near a ventilation shaft with a rusty grating which discharged warm air (more accurately, a warm fug). It was still March, and blowing a bitterly cold wind. After about an hour the ship vibrated, the engines started up and we left harbour unnoticed: a darkened ship almost silent in the darkness of night heading into the free Baltic. We had not gone far when I saw a lamp flashing a message in Morse. Our ship lost speed and the engines stopped. Sailors on my side let down a gangway. After a while a pinnace came alongside, a rope ladder was dropped and when the boarding party was aboard a loud and excited discussion ensued.

I heard an energetic voice say, ‘You are altering your course! Sail directly along the swept channel into Danzig Bay and join the convoy going to Swinemünde. And you are going with it!’ Was our ship sailing to Sweden without permission? Now we were caught, and also the ship, and we were sailing ‘under new management’ to Danzig Bay. The engines started up and we set off again. The wind of passage and from the sea was damned cold

and in the night I turned several times to obtain the benefit of the discharge of warm air. Towards morning we ran into the broad bay before Danzig where I saw many ships, mostly freighters, at anchor. An endless stream of smaller boats brought out refugees and also the wounded. I had no idea that the Russians had fought their way so far westwards, and noticed Ivan bombarding the anchored ships from the mainland with heavy-calibre artillery. Each of these ships was fitted with a twin- or quadruple Flak in turrets but swinging around their anchor chains they were sitting ducks, and the Russians got several hits. One of the freighters was burning, billowing smoke: shells fell into the water near our ship too. The small boats maintained the connection between the mainland and the ships at anchor. ‘Is Danzig also being lost?’ Would we be able to hold the Russians? Some soldiers came up the companionway from the cargo hold for a breath of fresh air and to ‘assess the situation’.

I heard my name being called. It was Gefreiter Richter from my mortar platoon, also wounded. We were unable to talk because some naval ratings ushered everybody below deck although I remained on the upper deck. (Richter arrived safely in Germany and later emigrated to the USA.) I did not like the way we were now coming under fire. A large freighter close by had become a definite target and the shelling resulted in fountains of water rising up metres high between that ship and ours. Then a number of U-boats appeared. They had a bright yellow stripe painted around the turret. They left the harbour for the bay, and at a short blast of a siren all the anchored ships weighed anchor, formed into line ahead and moved off westwards. We were under way, and the U-boats were our escort. They formed up around our ships, which then proceeded relatively slowly close to the coast of Pomerania and Mecklenburg. I recognized the steep coasts by their yellow-brown colour below and the dark pines on top, now and again a small lighthouse or other coast guard building.

The convoy used the so-called Shallow Water Channel which led to Swinemünde; the so-called Deep Channel led to Denmark. We knew that two passenger liners, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and *Steuben*, had been sunk by Russian submarines with heavy loss of life. Now and again a siren would howl on one or other of the ships or a whistle would blow. This meant

‘Aircraft alarm’ or ‘Danger of submarines’. I had an uneasy feeling. According to the words of the popular song, a sea voyage was pleasant, but now I would definitely have been much happier ashore. I wondered if I could have swum or floated with the long splint wrapped around my right leg, and how long could one survive anyway in the cold waters of the Baltic in March? I applied another paper bandage (with the consistency of toilet paper) to tighten the splint. The jacket of my winter uniform was very warm to wear, but the *Sanitäters* had cut open my trousers to the upper thigh of my right leg and I had had to remove my long underpants too. Luckily I still had access to the warm air from the ventilation shaft. Whenever we had a submarine or aircraft alert I remained watchful, but only once did a Russian aircraft venture near and the combined defensive fire of all the ships together saw him off. Otherwise there were no incidents and we proceeded at the speed of the slowest ship along the coast of Pomerania to Swinemünde.

2 March 1945

At daybreak we ran into a harbour pretty much wrecked by bombing. A few days previously the US Air Force and RAF had bombed the town and port. I was amongst the first to be unloaded by the cargo crane. Everything was done very smartly, for all were reckoning on having to endure another air raid. Not far away were some railway trucks painted with the Red Cross to which we wounded were directed. Inside the trucks long, tough, brown paper sacks were provided into which we had to insert ourselves and when the lace at the top was tied we ‘stewed in our own juice’. Then the air-raid sirens went off. Everybody capable of running ran to whatever cover could be found. We in our cocoons in the railway wagon lay a metre and a half above ground level. No aircraft came and the Flak remained silent. After what seemed an eternity all the passengers from our ship had been disembarked and our train moved off. It was late afternoon. In the evening the train went through Pasewalk station. On a wall was inscribed: ‘Our Führer Adolf Hitler lay in the military hospital here in the First World War after being gassed. Here he decided to become a politician.’

I thought to myself grimly, ‘If only he had not decided to do that. Perhaps things would look much better nowadays?’

The train was heading for Bad Kleinen but making poor progress. Suddenly an aircraft appeared from behind it and swept along the train firing with its cannon and MGs. The wagons clattered together as the train stopped. There was an explosion: the locomotive had been hit. After an endless wait the wrecked locomotive was tipped over clear of the railway line and a fresh one coupled. Then the buffers of the ambulance train wagons clashed, the locomotive whistled briefly and we set off once more. Thank God! But we had not reckoned with the Americans. According to their way of thinking the locomotive of an ambulance train did not form part of the ambulance train and now a single aircraft attacked from ahead, made a turn, flew up from the rear and shot up the locomotive. The wagons clashed together brutally. After a two-hour wait a third locomotive appeared and brought the train into Bad Kleinen, where we waited another two hours. Nobody knew where we were bound next. My legs, particularly the right leg, were very painful, throbbing and burning from the many splinter wounds. Finally I could not stand it any longer, crawled free of my paper sack and left the wagon slowly and cautiously. My right leg could take no weight but I was determined to leave. Under no circumstances did I wish to be taken to Denmark. Taking my crutches, my face distorted with pain, I went to another platform where a train for Schwerin was waiting. I found a seat in a third-class compartment and stretched out my painful leg. The train began to fill. A voice in the loudspeaker ordered: ‘Achtung! All refugees for Schwerin and Ludwigslust get into the train at platform “X”’. I saw harmless old people with almost no personal belongings. An old East Prussian seated himself opposite me – his origins were easy to detect by the typical broad accent – with his wife and luggage. After a while he asked me, ‘Are you a Russian?’

‘Do I look that bad, that he takes me for a Russian?’ I thought. At that time I hadn’t seen my face recently. My white camouflage jacket was filthy and speckled with blood. My right leg was naked except for the paper bandage around my ‘Kramer splint’. So I opened my jacket and he recognized the Wehrmacht uniform, the black-white-red ribbon of the Iron

Cross Second Class, the bloodred ribbon of the ‘Frozen Meat Order’ (*Ostmedaille*) and around my left pocket near the Iron Cross First Class, the Close Combat Clasp, the Infantry Assault Badge and the Wound Badge! At that the old man apologized and asked where I was bound. I asked for the name of his home town. I forget his answer but it was from the Tilsit area. He was going to Schwerin, to a refugee camp, while I would be paying a call on my father’s brother, on Aunt Trudi, and cousins Ursel and Jürgen. From Bad Kleinen, Schwerin was only thirty minutes away.

Chapter 24

Always One Step Ahead of the Russians

22 March–30 April 1945

After exchanging mutual wishes for good luck in the future with my travelling companions, I hobbled to the station exit. At the barrier was a ‘chained dog’ (Feldgendarme) with a soldier, both of them senior citizens and reservists. There was a lively traffic through the barrier, in the concourse many people passing to and fro. The Feldgendarme stopped me. ‘Unteroffizier, where are you going? Do you have written orders? Where are you coming from?’

I replied, ‘From the ambulance train at Bad Kleinen. I could not stand the pain any longer. I want to report to a military hospital.’ Since I had neither written orders nor a wounded letter, he told me loudly, ‘You must not leave the station. The matter must be clarified at once!’

I insisted on going to a military hospital here at Schwerin, he on the other hand wanted to show his power. Our voices grew louder and in a trice we were surrounded by civilians, all of whom had taken my side. There was a loud battle of words.

I rested my hand on my pistol holster. ‘Let me through so that I can get to a military hospital, or . . .’

At this point two Red Cross nurses came to my aid. ‘Can’t you see that this man is seriously wounded, and that he has a head injury? We shall take him across the station to our Red Cross House after looking him over here.’

I was shocked. ‘A head injury?’ It was found that I had a splinter the size of a lentil on the hairline above my forehead and another smaller one in the upper lip. Until now I had not noticed either of them. What looked worse was the trickle of dried blood between my forehead and chin.

The crowd had taken up a threatening attitude towards the Feldgendarme. He was an elderly reservist and like his assistant he wore no war decorations. The two nurses took me to their clinic where I was given a seat, food and drink, after which they went into another room. I wanted to get away from here before the Feldgendarme reappeared. From the toilet I assessed the situation and left the tiny clinic, hobbling painfully towards Richard Wagner Strasse 7. Some of the bloodied paper dressing had come loose and I was trailing about a metre and half of it behind me. Finally I stood before the familiar house. I rang the bell and Aunt Trudi opened the door. She had last seen me in February 1944, but now she didn't recognize me.

'I would like to have quarters in this house for one night,' I told her. She stared at me in confusion then called, 'Ursi, come here! There's a soldier who wants to have quarters here overnight!' Cousin Ursel looked at me flabbergasted. Almost laughing, I told her, 'I want to sleep in the room where the cuckoo clock is hanging.'

Suddenly Ursel exclaimed, 'Mother! This is Hans!' Meanwhile my cousin Jürgen had come to the door and he too did not recognize me! 'No I don't know you, looking as you do – but come in!' When I stared into the mirror in the corridor I saw a foreign face looking back at me. Unshaven for weeks, dried blood on my forehead, mouth and chin. Unwashed, exhausted, suffering from the injuries to my legs. Yet it was me. It was a quite joyful reunion. I had to answer many questions before I could strip off and get into the tub. That felt good. But then the many splinter wounds began to burn and pain me awfully. Uncle Adolf gave me new underwear and my legs were redressed with fresh bandaging. My old underwear and pullover were 'got rid of' but I retained my khaki shirt, free of lice for months. I felt newborn!

After supper I had to tell my story – my entire military career – and then we spoke about the current war situation. Could the war still be won? How far will the Russians advance across Europe? What will become of Germany if we lose, and right now it looks like anything but *Endsieg*!

I had not received mail from my parents for weeks. The Americans were at the Elbe! Naturally I could not phone home to Hagen. Uncle Adolf was

an officer of the reserve and had a managerial position at the army provisions office. We had a very long discussion and afterwards I slept as though in a heavenly bed. Next morning he arranged for a Wehrmacht horse-drawn cart and told the driver to take me to the military hospital. I sat up on the driving seat beside the coachman wearing white bandaging around my right leg. Whenever we passed an officer I could not salute since I had no headgear but came stiffly to attention seated with head up as per regulations. I had to give this kind of salute many times, for Schwerin was a garrison town with officers everywhere. The first hospital to which we came sent me to another, but there only sick soldiers were treated. I was refused admittance and sent to the Pfaffenteich (a 12-hectare pond in the Schelfstadt suburb) where the Humanities College took me in. This had been my father's high school!

After an initial examination two days later I was taken to the school in Grenadier Strasse where I remained until 1 May 1945. The Rehfeldts of Schwerin used to live directly opposite until Uncle Adolf built his house in Richard Wagner Strasse. My wounds gradually healed with specialist care, and I was even visited by Ursel and Jürgen. Finally the doctor signed me off 'capable of walking'. Until then I had used a crutch to visit my relatives. One day I went to Schwerin castle and while looking out over the lake towards Kaninchenwerder a Russian fighter flew up from the direction of Zippendorf, banked over the town and then flew off without shooting. I had automatically taken cover behind one of the allegorical figures hewn in stone – this meant that the Russians couldn't be far off!

Although Schwerin had been declared an 'open' hospital town, in an emergency a bomber once jettisoned its load on a tram. It was then shot down by German fighters. The racket was very loud and near! I lay on my bed for a while then went down to the cellar with the others. Nothing else happened in Schwerin.

We followed the news reports on the radio religiously. At that time the British and Americans were at Boizenburg east of the Elbe and the Russians were only a few kilometres east of the town. With a comrade from the *Feldherrnhalle* Division I decided not to await the arrival of the Russians in

Schwerin but instead head north-west towards the Americans, hoping for better treatment at their hands.

1 May 1945

The overall situation is as follows: The British and Americans are at, and across, the Elbe at Lauenburg. The Russians are holding the line Stralsund–Neubrandenburg–Neuruppin (where I was trained in 1941). The British radio states: ‘The narrowing of the North German area of resistance is proceeding as planned.’ My companion and I wanted to head for Lübeck and then join elements of our reserve troops at Rendsburg. My parents have been in the enemy-occupied territories for weeks. They do not even know that I escaped from the East Prussian Pocket, and I do not know if my parents are still alive and what state the house is in. My last letter from home was in January!

Accompanied by the worst fears for our immediate future, we set out together at 2200hrs, and on the way north-west hitched a lift as far as Gadebusch on a horse-drawn wagon of the ‘Vlasov Army’ [Russian defectors fighting for the Germans] marching in that direction. In the town we found lodgings with very friendly people who let us sleep in their beds: the lady of the house awoke me at 1400hrs asking ‘Do you know the latest? The Americans are here!’ I went to the window and saw columns of American troops and tanks in the town, and my first thought was, ‘The war is over for me!’ I woke my companion Heinz with the news and he murmured, still half asleep, ‘That’s good. Main thing is, it’s not the Russians!’ Then he had a lie-in! What a nerve! Next I heard a loudspeaker ordering: ‘All German soldiers are to assemble on the town square and hand over their weapons, they are now prisoners of war.’ I was not so keen to enter captivity and wanted to put more kilometres west between myself and the Russians. I would feel safer on the other side of the Elbe. Therefore we disobeyed the loudspeaker and set off again later.

It was not so easy to cross Germany, always climbing over barbed-wire entanglements which was very tiresome. We continued along the highways. At Roggendorf we were stopped by a decimated Waffen-SS unit and had to join in their game, but soon we were able to convince the commander of

these late heroes that what he was intending with his little group was pure madness. We would keep going westwards and he should take his men and surrender to the Americans. ‘But without us, comrades!’ Our walk brought us next to the Zarrentin Lake which unfortunately was not the Elbe.

Chapter 25

Into American Captivity

May 1945

Towards 1800hrs we were resting south of Lassahn when suddenly two jeeps appeared. They stopped and we were searched for weapons. I went hot and cold. Uncle Adolf had given me an old First World War revolver. It was fully loaded and I had another five rounds in the pocket of my motorcycle greatcoat. I was making a show of opening a tin of meat with the bayonet, and its handle could be seen. The US soldier, a black guy, had the impression that it was a very thick stick grenade, stuck the muzzle of his sub-machine gun into my stomach and said, ‘Hands up, boy! Put it away!’ After he saw what kind of ‘stick grenade’ it was he laughed and said, ‘Get rid of it . . . and now hands up!’ We were now disarmed. In the subsequent search I had the unpleasant feeling that I was about to be robbed. I opened the greatcoat with both hands to be patted down. Fearing that my orders and decorations would fall into enemy hands, I had wound them around my left upper arm in a bandage together with my Soldbuch, bloodied the material and drew attention to my wounded label with the request, ‘Please, don’t touch my arm, I’m wounded there!’ The Americans always respected this. We were then loaded aboard the jeep and taken to a joiners’ workshop at Zarrentin with a huge production line of coffins. In my diary I wrote:

[Italics in original] On 3 May 1945 towards 1800hrs, we two German soldiers of the *Grossdeutschland* and *Feldherrnhalle* Division marched into American captivity, clenching our teeth, our wounded feet inflamed, but proud and upright. For us the war had ended – and we had survived!

Each of us spent the first night in a wooden coffin, the concrete floor being too hard and cold. Next morning we were loaded on Studebaker lorries for transportation westwards across the Elbe. This was what we had hoped for! We had to go back, however, either because the bridge was down or because any number of Allied troops were crossing it eastwards. Finally we finished up in a large meadow at Waschow in Mecklenburg. Most of the prisoners had to run, but as I was wounded and had large blisters on my feet I was carried in a vehicle. A young lieutenant who had formerly been with *Grossdeutschland* asked me to take a Persil box for him. I did not know him from Adam! The camp was situated in a large meadow through which flowed a broad brook. The Americans had gathered about 15,000 prisoners there. We were accommodated in the open air and were fortunate to have fairly good weather. As usual, we found like-minded men and stuck with them. We dug a hole together as we had in the war, laid grass on the bottom and this became our 'home'. The camp was surrounded by lorries with a heavy MG mounted on the roof of the cab. Next day an American officer addressed us through a loudspeaker: 'You will have to stay here for the time being. We cannot give you food. Those who have any must share it out with your comrades. You can drink from the stream, but only perform your necessities in its lower reaches.'

I still had the packet which the '*Grossdeutschland*' lieutenant had entrusted to me because he had had to walk to the camp. I had gone through the camp inmates several times searching for him but without success. After three days the period of grace was over; I opened the carton and found inside it many things that were very useful in our present situation. Several sticks of shaving soap, any quantity of plums, and the best, a box of cigars – Loeser and Wolf brand. Inside in gold script, 'Specially made only for the Herr Gauleiter'. It was just the job for us. We lit one of these beautifully packed and noble cigars and lay back with radiant expressions against the wall of our hole. Every inhalation made our head swim but the enjoyment was unique. Then each man stuffed a plum into his mouth to see who could keep it intact longest before biting into it and sucking. After a while they grew thicker and softer and then somebody gave the order 'Now!' And we bit. It would be some time before we got hungry again.

Things were not so good for the other prisoners. Soon none walked around the camp, they all laid out flat. Soon we also begin to feel giddy whenever we stood up. Now and again one saw a figure wobble down to the far end of the stream. My *Feldherrnhalle* comrade said, ‘I don’t know what he’s got left to shit.’ This was the Waschow starvation camp, and soon I made a decision. It was foreseeable that the men crowded together in such large numbers in this camp were bound to starve to death eventually if the ‘Nil food situation’ did not change soon. My Uncle Adolf at Schwerin had been an officer in a large army provisions store – this could be our salvation! My plan with my friend was to somehow get to Schwerin. We had to get through the rolls of barbed wire and armed American troops and cover the 35 miles to Schwerin. In the last few days some German field kitchens had been set up in a corner of the camp but nothing further done with them. We had also noticed that several times a week, a motor coach went to Schwerin taking sick and seriously wounded prisoners to a military hospital. I sneaked up to the German driver and attempted to bribe him with our noble cigars. He would have nothing to do with it; on every trip an American medical officer sat beside him. But hunger made me bold.

One morning I grabbed an empty sack lying near the field kitchens, went to the bus, and the driver looked away. The American doctor was sitting beside him. I got in as if ‘obviously I’m supposed to be here’ and laid the sack on the floor. the American looked at me rather bemused, then I sat as far from him as I could on the driver’s seat. He said nothing, but just kept looking at me. I pointed to the sack and said, ‘That’s for the field kitchens. I have to get some food from the German military store in Schwerin by order of one of your officers.’ He said nothing and the driver stepped on the gas – we were off to Schwerin! The provisions store was on the outer suburbs. I said to the driver, ‘Stop here and pick me up on your return.’ Then I took the sack, left the bus, saluted the American officer and was outside. The bus pulled away. Walking towards Richard Wagner Strasse I noticed that there were no German soldiers in uniform in the streets. I thought to myself, ‘Keep your eyes peeled!’ I marched proudly past many American sentries, often carrying an MG. Occasionally I even gave them a military salute. At Richard Wagner Strasse as I turned the corner I had an awful shock. The

road was blocked off! Everywhere American vehicles and American soldiers in the houses. In order to make it look my business as normal as possible I went up to an American soldier briskly, saluted and asked him, ‘I beg your pardon, sir, may I go here in the street? The third house on the right side is my uncle’s house. I want to get some food there.’ He gave me a bored look, had a chew on his gum and then said, ‘No, this is now a military quarter – German civilians are elsewhere.’

I cursed into my beard. The sentry gave me a stare and said, ‘You’re a soldier? Why are you not in a camp? All German soldiers have to be in one.’

‘No sir, I am no longer a soldier, my clothes were burned in the last bombing raid.’

He gave me a disbelieving look and demanded, ‘Show me your passport!’

It was time for me to be off, I saluted with two fingers to my cap and said, ‘Sorry, bye-bye!’

At the moment an officer called to the sentry, probably to find out what the problem was with me. The sentry turned towards his officer and I seized the moment to disappear around the corner. At once a house owner called out to me, ‘Get in here quickly, we can’t take in any German soldiers, but where are you from?’ I told them, and then asked where the local inhabitants were to be found. When I mentioned my surname, they told me where I could find the Rehfeldts. When they heard that I was from the Waschow camp, they gave me a loaf of bread and a tin of corned beef. I took my leave of them with many words of thanks and went as fast as I could to the address to which my uncle had been evacuated. They were lodging with Aunt Trudi’s sister Käthe and quite speechless to see me! I remained dressed as I was and ate a hearty meal. Then I told them where I had come from and what I wanted. Uncle Adolf wrote me a note for the manager of the former army provisions store and then gave me a loaf and a tin of food. Then we parted affectionately, their small daughter accompanied me some of the way and whenever we passed an American sentry she called me ‘Papa’ and chattered. I was never stopped. Then I took my leave of my little guide and soon found the food store.

Guarding the door was a German paymaster in uniform and an American soldier armed with a sub-machine gun and typically chewing gum. The paymaster wanted to make difficulties and so I addressed the American, saying that I had to fetch something from here. He gestured with his thumb towards the door of the store and said, ‘Go in!’ I ignored the paymaster. Comrades working in the store gave me bread, butter, cheese, tobacco and also cigarettes. My sack was soon full! Back outside I sank my teeth into a fat sausage. The American looked on with interest. The paymaster gave me a wrathful look. Then the American slapped my shoulder, pointed to his mouth and made typical eating movements. He sat beside me and took out a cigarette from the large package, lit it and blew smoke in satisfaction. I looked at him and said laughingly, ‘You have forgotten something. You have forgotten me.’ It took some while for this to sink in and then he tried to pull free a pack from the package. This was difficult and he gave up, giving me the broken package with the comment, ‘Keep that in your pocket.’ The paymaster had watched all this without speaking. When I lit my first ‘Camel’ he asked if I had a cigarette spare. He had made problems upon my arrival at the store and now he wanted to benefit. When the coach arrived to take me back to camp I tossed him the dog-end I had been smoking with the remark, ‘Accept that for your friendliness.’ I got back the bus for my return to captivity. I was overjoyed at the success of my plan. Finally we arrived, the bar at the camp entrance was raised, I thanked the driver again and then saw my friend Heinz waiting for me. That was a happy reunion. That night we lay in the hole on our backs each smoking a good Gauleiter cigar. Whitsun was coming and chestnuts were in bloom: all around was green. We were alive and it was spring.

June 1945

One June day a long goods train drew in and we were loaded aboard. From Zarrentin it went to Lübeck, then Neustadt in Holstein. In my wagon we loosened some of the floorboards in case they thought of turning us over to the Russians. Between the goods wagons the Americans had installed AA guns with crews on flat wagons. In the fields farmers were planting potatoes. Whenever the American escort saw hares or deer in the fields they

fired at them. This often required the farmers to throw themselves down under cover. The train halted at Neustadt in Holstein. We were informed that there was a large internment camp here for Wehrmacht prisoners. We were sectioned off on the platforms and registered. From there releases to home areas were to be arranged.

Eastern Holstein in spring made a very good impression upon us. We were completely free. As we were no longer fully fit we had a slow walk to Schönwalde. There at a dairy farm we were given curds. This almost came out of our ears! We stayed a night there, then spent the next night at a farm at Kirchnüchel and next morning drank almost a litre of fresh milk. The farther north we went the nearer we came to the Baltic and from there we could be nabbed by the Russians. Therefore not so far. Our last-stop station was the small village of Nessendorf in the so-called demobilization region. The large farmsteads were occupied by a hundred or more soldiers. This was not so good. Since we had lost our 'unit' on the way to Nessendorf, we four remnants had to look for private accommodation and were accepted by a farm worker. There were four of us at first with the Schlünzen family, later three until our release, and we had a great time. We slept upstairs in the roof above Frau Schlünzen's kitchen as 'Mum's big boys'. Obviously we helped out all we could with work, and renovated the entire house outside and in. The paint came by roundabout means from the naval depot. We learned to go around with a sense of accomplishment and even helped out with the harvest. Therefore we had it really good in internment. The great farms were full of soldiers. We even 'reported in' to one, got our rations from there but lived with the Schlünzens. And Mother Schlünzen looked after us well!

The month of June 1945 passed. We heard of men being discharged in the individual government districts, but only farmers and agricultural workers; rightly, because of the shortage of food. Construction workers, bricklayers and technical trades were released later. Since we desired to be part of the first group we altered our Soldbuch or had an emergency papers forged: 'Replacing a Soldbuch lost due to enemy action – Trade agricultural worker.' Little went on without forgery and deception. I altered the name of my unit, believing falsely because of a clerical error that *Grossdeutschland*

men were not to be released. Therefore I had been ‘attached to Volksgrenadier Division, Regiment 1142, Paderborn.’ This alteration was not necessary, for as I discovered later, *Grossdeutschland* soldiers were looked for, not to extract them for some underhand reason, but to form part of a guard unit in the internment region. We were also unaware that the Stockhausen Corps Group (*Grossdeutschland*) at Rendsburg on the Kiel Canal was entrusted by the British and American occupying force with the task of maintaining law and order in the internment zone. These men were almost the last to be released, though, and we wanted to go home!

Chapter 26

Freedom Again

July 1945

After several unsuccessful attempts to be released, at the beginning of July we were transferred to the release camp at Bleckendorf. Here we spent three weeks in the woods and tents in the worst summer weather. It was an ancient oak wood and we directly beneath the tall trees on their bare roots. In a very violent electrical storm, the thunder sounding like 8.8cm Flak firing, we felt none too safe. The waiting wore us down! Finally a call was put in to the government district of Arnsberg. Thereupon to the release camp at Eutin. When we got there we were told, ‘No more agricultural workers are being released from Arnsberg!’ and so, ‘About turn! March!’ Once again a change of fortune – once again new papers. It was an unimaginable battle to finally get away from there with newly-forged papers. With the wolf at the door, we learned how to do things. In these four days we two corporals obtained a week’s rations for eleven men. We simply reported at the various posts where rations were given out: ‘Two corporals and nine men on the route to the discharge centre.’

‘Where are the men?’

‘Over there at the edge of the woods,’ we replied, poker-faced. Now we no longer had to starve. We smuggled ourselves into Release Centre III, surprisingly easily, and next day went to Eutin. I can’t recall the date but there was a partial eclipse of the sun that day [9 July 1945. TN] After being organized by trades and occupations, we entered a hall. There we had to fill out four long questionnaires, be fingerprinted, have a medical, be deloused and go through a control point where our few belongings were given a superficial search, and after handing over our ID discs we received the

coveted yellow-green silk triangle to be worn on our uniforms. We also had the British certificate 'Discharged from the Army'. I was seized by a strange, almost melancholy sensation when the silver lace was stripped from my collar and the shoulder straps removed. Yes, I had imagined that my discharge would be different to this. We were given 40 Reichsmarks discharge money and then we were free.

17 July 1945

We were driven away in a column of lorries in torrential rain. At a rest point we were taken over by a convoy of American lorries. Young British soldiers hit out with 'Volchov-sticks' at those men not going as quickly as they would like. These sticks had been taken from returning soldiers. This infuriated me! I stayed back, and as I was one of the last, an English soldier with a pasty face decided that I needed a lesson with the stick. Shouting the foulest words of English that I knew I snatched it from his hand, broke it over my knee and threw the two pieces behind him. This was a daring move! I saw the reaction developing and at that moment the driver of a Studebaker lorry 15m away, a laughing US soldier, called to me from the cab to join him and lie low so that I couldn't be seen. A stormy debate now ensued between the British and the American drivers of the Studebakers. My driver shouted something at them which sounded insulting but I couldn't understand it: only later did I learn 'American-English'. Finally the excitement all died down, the released prisoners got into the vehicles, the motors started up and the column moved off. After a few hundred metres my American told me to sit up beside him and see the British standing around. 'Ha ha! That was great!' he said and reviled them. Next came an expression of his liking for my new motorcyclist's greatcoat (from the Klepper family) but I explained that my home had been destroyed by bombing and the only clothes I had were what I was standing up in, therefore I had to hold on to the greatcoat. He understood my predicament.

Later we talked about the war. When I mentioned our '88s' he considered them one of the most dangerous anti-tank guns, and he was probably right! The weather improved, from the hatch in the roof of the driving cab I had a good view. I sat on the edge and dangled my legs. The 'comrades of the

other field-post number' as we often called our opponents, drove like the Furies! Driving down a shady lane they would drive as close to the trees as possible so that the men standing at the back of the lorry got their ears whipped by twigs and branches. This caused the drivers much devilish pleasure. They were mostly black US soldiers, but by no means the worst.

The journey continued over the autobahn: Lübeck–Hamburg–Bremen. We stopped at Zeven, came off the autobahn to the right and spent the night around a great camp fire. What made me indignant was that some of the infantry traded their orders or decorations for bread and butter. So what? In the night I had mixed feelings about it. Now we were on the way home – but did I still have a home? Were my parents still alive, was the house still in one piece? The uncertainty weighed heavily. We had been told that once the postal service was back in operation, all family members would be notified about us. For months my parents had heard nothing from me and I nothing from them. And I feared the worst after I heard the radio report: 'In the ruins of the dead town of Hagen the most violent street fighting is raging and the Ruhr Pocket is being squeezed tighter.' When we drove through Hamburg, however, then we saw a really 'dead town'. Hardly anybody on the streets. Only ruins! Next morning we roared the 70km to Bremen at 90km/hr. There it was especially fine weather, many people about. We infantry wondered what the attitude of the local people would be. The people living in the rubble of their city, who had their own dead to mourn, not knowing the whereabouts of their sons and fathers or if they were still alive, waved and cheered us. 'Where have you come from? Where are you going?' They threw bread, flowers and other gifts into the lorries. We received milk and *ersatz*-coffee, the people laughed and rejoiced to see their soldiers coming home. These soldiers were not responsible for the lost war. Many women were crying as they waved to us.

18 July 1945

The journey went on. In the evening we reached Osnabrück. The Reich autobahn was full of British and American convoys, even tanks in large numbers. For that reason the drive took a long time. We slept on a hard, concrete factory floor. But even this night passed.

Chapter 27

Home at Last

19 July 1945

In the morning we continued through Meschede to Arnsberg in the Sauerland. In the towns the traces of war were evident everywhere, many wrecked vehicles, the burned-out shells of panzers and tanks. At Arnsberg we were sorted into groups, given a hot meal from the field kitchen, received a travel warrant and at 1800hrs got on a goods train for Hagen. Just before Hengstey the train made a long halt on the Ruhr bridge. From there I could have made it home on foot! Finally the train moved on, if slowly, the repairs to the railway line being only ‘provisional’. Finally we got to the destination, Hagen, and from the station concourse we could see nothing but rubble and ruins. Whole trams now tangled metal, many areas still smouldering with a foul stench. Paths had been made through the rubble, in the centre of town only a few streets were still recognizable. The path in front of the town hall ran over a great pile of masonry and debris, the municipal hall fronting the market place was burned out, the great dome collapsed. In concern I asked several people if the destruction would be the same at Emst?

‘No, very little, but the Tommies are there now.’ I thought that would be nice, having to share our house with them. I hastened my steps, to Wasserlosen Tal and then Puckel to Emst. A neighbour told me that everybody was still alive and our house still stood. Thank God! At the Hasenlauf Street my father came towards me followed by my mother. What a joy that was! Then back home, revisiting all the rooms, was like a dream. Now I had to tell and keep retelling. Finally all the fear and danger was past. What had we been fighting for? Was it all for nothing?

But we want to thank God!