

Concentration Camp Horrors in Europe Related by Native of Riga, Recent Arrival in United States

By MARGARET COUCHER

Milestones on the road that brought Adele Revitch to the United States and the home of her brother in this city were the agonies and horrors of German concentration camps of which Belsen, near Hamburg, with its notorious commandant, Karl Kramer, was the last and worst.

Now with her brother, Captain Eugene Revitch, Fort Missoula psychiatrist, this young Jewish woman tells in English, surprisingly adequate, since she has been in the United States only since April, the saga of her ordeal that began when the Germans invaded Latvia and took over her native city, Riga, and continuing to the day that she was liberated from Belsen by English troops.

Near Death From Typhus

That she was near death from typhus for three months after her liberation, Miss Revitch considers an unimportant circumstance. So great had been her suffering before that her illness seemed nothing by comparison—at least she was in a hospital, cared for by sympathetic nurses; she was clean and well fed for the first time in years.

When she was able to travel, Miss Revitch, with several thousand other Jewish prisoners of Belsen, was taken to Sweden through the Swedish Red Cross.

During the years 1941 to 1945, Dr. Revitch heard nothing from his sister and until the liberation of the Belsen prisoners he did not know that she was living. He had learned that one of his two younger brothers, who had escaped from Riga during the siege and joined the Russians, had died with the defenders of Stalingrad. It was left for his sister to give him the news of the fate of the rest of their family, their parents and another brother, who tried to remain with his father to protect him, an aunt and others, were killed by the Germans.

Not Embittered

Strangely, Miss Revitch does not seem to be embittered. She can find even a sincere word of praise for one or two of her German captors, who were just a little kinder than the others, whose brutalities were, she stresses, indescribable, unspeakable.

Her four-year nightmare began when with Riga's other thirty thousands Jews she was driven from her home and later into ghetto, where most of them were to perish with a few weeks—25,000 of them in one week.

The Germans, Miss Revitch stresses, aided by many Latvians, who she said were even more cruel than the Nazis, warmed up to their grisly task by taking men and women for slave labor, which circumstance spared their lives for it was only those who were doing the most menial tasks for the invaders who escaped death in the scourge of the ghetto.

Dig Own Graves

During the mass slaughter, men and women were herded into the country where thousands upon thousands of them were shot in two days, murdered after they completed the digging of their own graves, she related. Miss Revitch, who was with her mother and an aunt, chosen with 350 women to work as seamstresses, paints a terrible scene that met her sight when she was returned with others to the ghetto. Every few feet the ground was strewn with corpses. The winter snow was very deep and scarlet. Babies sprawled in death from their carriages.

Those being forced along the streets slipped and fell in the greasy human blood that covered the streets. Guards beat their prisoners indiscriminately when they fell to their knees or faces. When they were in the mood, they shot them, laughing as if in a holiday mood, as they killed them and left them lying.

In the ghetto again, where all seemed still and terrible after the awful slaughter that had taken place there, Miss Revitch said that a German guard supplied a little warm water when one of the prisoners gave birth to a baby the night of the return. It is a kindness that she remembers as significant inasmuch as there were so few in the years that followed.

Steal Food From Germans

From the beginning there was starvation. The prisoners eked out their miserable rations by stealing from the Germans who employed them. As they were searched each night upon their return to the prison, many were shot for carrying a contraband potato, small and rotten, or a bit of bread, picked from the garbage.

Loyal Latvians risked their lives and often forfeited them to help the prisoners. Without their help

life would have been even worse and more would have died.

Oddly enough three brothers, ghetto prosioneers, who did slave labor on the railroads that carried supplies to the front, were not taken to task for bringing a few pints of milk daily. They got the milk from cows on the way to the front for slaughter. Only small children got any of the milk, and this the Germans seemed to approve, Miss Revitch said.

In 1943 the Russians were pressing forward and prisoners, by this time a mixed group, were taken to a concentration camp in a forest. Here they worked beyond their strength at such tasks as carrying heavy stones from one side of the road and back again. This cruelty was designed to destroy morale, and it succeeded, Miss Revitch asserted.

Winter, but No Bedding

In this camp prisoners were jammed into crowded barracks. There was no bedding of any sort, and it was winter. All the clothing the prisoners had upon arrival was stripped from them and other garments, some painted with a stripe and if the prisoners were Jews with the yellow Star of David, were passed out. A small dress might be given to a large woman and vice versa. The prisoners exchanged clothes later.

This was the Kaiserwald prison and the assistant commandant was a handsome Polish convict, a condemned murderer. He had women assistants, all convicts, and the Germans had praise for the terrible brutalities that these depraved guards could think up, said Miss Revitch.

From this camp the prisoners were scattered. Miss Revitch was sent to Estonia, one of a group of slave laborers. Transportation was in cattle cars and in a five-day trip there was no food. As a mark of their consideration and chivalry, she said, the Germans gave a little water to the women. The men had none. Tiny windows in the tops of the cars provided the only ventilation. It was cold. Many died en route and others arrived at the Vaivara prison, the next stop, with hands and feet frozen.

The commander of this camp was more humane. There was coffee and bread for the exhausted prisoners, straw for them to sleep on and military blankets.

Work in Oil Fields

Vaivara prisoners worked at an Estonian oil works and many died from poisonous fumes while at their labors. Miss Revitch was assigned to a small dispensary for the Jews. The dispensary, she said, was not maintained for humanitarian reasons, but because the workers were valuable. The only medicine was aspirin. Bandages were of paper. There were good Jewish doctors, and at least an opportunity to give a kind word, which was worth more than anything else, she believes.

At this prison men had a wide stripe shingled through the center of their hair. Women were shorn of their hair. Russians were coming nearer and this was a step to make it easier to spot those who attempted escape.

Soon there was another move. This time Miss Revitch found herself aboard a barge at Danzig with three thousand others. Decks were so crowded that none could put both feet on them.

Now the prison was Stutthoff, where the new batch of prisoners were thrown in with 50,000 others. All were dirty and lousy and even though it was night and very cold, the new arrivals were forced to take cold showers without soap and with no towels upon which to dry as a delousing effort. Again there was the indiscriminate passing out of clothing.

Workers Get More Food

Their very weakness soon brought a slight measure of relief to the prisoners, assigned to hard labor. It became evident that without more food they could not work, so grudgingly a little was added to their rations. Guards were so disgruntled by this laxity that they occasionally beat the prisoners over the head or, snatching a bowl of the wretched soup from one or another, would dash it into his face, laughing uproariously the while.

Need for munitions workers took a selected group of prisoners to a camp near Hamburg. And it was here that Miss Revitch saw a terrible sight that filled her with happiness. Taken to Hamburg for delousing, she and her fellow prisoners saw the bombed and ruined city and witnessed the fear of the Germans during the air raids—they themselves were long past fear—and the prisoners all felt happier.

Guard Against Sabotage

Munitions workers during the day were given the rare privilege of going to air raid shelters when a raid was on. This was not consideration, but caution, for the Germans feared, and with reason, that their slave laborers would sabotage the machinery if the slightest chance offered. Later it could all be blamed on the bombs. At night in the prison there were no trips to the cellars during raids, and the prisoners watched the terrified Germans scurrying into them with contempt for their cowardice. Miss Revitch said that the raids were always enjoyed thoroughly.

The English were nearing, and prisoners were taken to Belsen. Miss Revitch will say of this prison only, "It was too horrible." Here there

were, to greet the eyes of the new arrivals, thousands upon thousands of cadavers, strewn everywhere, thirty to forty thousand awaiting burial. In the cots there were dead and living, the later distinguishable only by the flicker of an eye, the lift of a withered arm. Typhus was raging and many poor wretches, crazed by thirst, crawled around looking for water. Reaching and clawing, they would fall among the dead.

Although they had not learned that the English were coming, Miss Revitch said the prisoners felt it in the air. The Germans equipped themselves with white armbands of surrender and their captives watched their craven fear with a contempt too deep for words.

Too Weak for Food

As an anticlimax, many of the prisoners were to die from the first kindness shown them in years. When the English came they passed their rations out in pity to the eager hands of the prisoners. Many died in agony from eating the food which their systems could not assimilate. Americans were more careful, and fed the liberated men and women more cautiously.

At last Miss Revitch could communicate with her brother. He had been a citizen of the United States since 1938, an officer in the army since 1943. But it was to be many months before she could come to this country.

After her arrival in New York, Miss Revitch spent about two months in Washington, D. C. She neither denies nor confirms the speculation that she may have given the war department information concerning her prison experiences.

Asked if she is going to write a book, Miss Revitch smiled, says that many have advised her to do so, and added, "I hate to write."