

The American troops show up

It was the spring of 1945 when a small group of American soldiers came by in a jeep. We had certainly received no war reports, and I never heard my parents, or any of the other grownups, or any of the kids, talking about how the war was going. There were of course the rations, but that was normal. I was eight years old, and it had been that way ever since I could remember, and besides that, we were not going hungry.

We had moved into the coal cellar as a precaution a few weeks before, at least for the nights. I know there were no beds, but I do not remember sleeping on the ground either, or being uncomfortable or cold. It was just a precaution, ours being by far the largest, tallest house in the whole village, and some GI, or plane, might just want to take a potshot. As I would be told much later by one of my Texas neighbors who had been part of the American forces crossing the Rhine from the west, it was normal to have a German sniper in the steeple at every village they came upon, with artillery being invariably called in. He also told me they never came across a village where there was not at least some resistance. So ours was certainly the exception, but so was the whole area around us. We had no church in the village, and of course no steeple.

I do remember my father showing me where he had buried a jar next to the house, and to look for it in case anything happened to them. I do not know what he put into it, or what one would or should put into it under the circumstances. Certainly not any of the worthless money, or the precious ration cards. Perhaps it was a will or the names of some of my unknown relatives. Anyhow the necessity to dig never arose, and I somehow never asked what had been in the jar. When one is young, one is concerned with the present, maybe a little with the future, but certainly not with the past. It is only when one gets older that one looks back into the past and realizes that it is the past that lets us see beyond the present and maybe a little into the future.

I did not see the soldiers come. They certainly did not knock on the door or shoot a few rounds into the air to let us know they were there. My parents must have gone out to meet them at the street. I still wonder how things went so smoothly. But then there seems to have been no shooting or destruction in the nearby town of Gifhorn either, and the troops must have come through there also. Things must have quieted down completely as the Germans learned there was nothing left to fight for or with, and nothing to fight against in the case of the Americans. I do not even know if Germany had surrendered at that time or not, but the war was over, at least in our area.

The American soldiers wanted to set up a command post and wanted the whole house and for us and all the other families living in the house to move out immediately, but my parents talked them into taking only two large upstairs rooms. I guess it helped a lot to have my parents speak English, although the American troops told us they were not to fraternize with us Germans. But at least being able to speak with each nevertheless must have smoothed a lot of things over.

I do remember the troops immediately digging a deep garbage pit in our dear garden and throwing all kinds of things in there, but also telling us where they had left partial loaves of white bread, cans of meat, a few chocolate bars, even soap and toilet paper, all things we did not have. Other than that, the soldiers stayed pretty much to themselves and we had no problems. After a few days they left, but told us that there was another larger group coming. I remember seeing rifles but no heavy weapons, and never heard a shot fired. I had never previously seen a German soldier, a German uniform, or any gun. I of course did not understand a word of any discussion, not knowing a single word of English. I also do not remember being out of elementary school for any length of time, if at all, or the electricity ever going off. And we had no telephone or radio to go out.

I have often heard my parents tell me about the two American soldiers who showed up shortly thereafter looking for wine and "schnapps", the strong German drink made from rye. All societies seem to have their favorite, depending on the raw material available, rum, vodka, etc.

My father did have a place where he kept a few bottles, but I certainly never saw my parents drink. Then again a few prize bottles could have served as a backup to the worthless currency. Nevertheless, the soldiers seemed to know that there was some booze around. One of them was drunk, and was trying to get more bottles than he could carry. He wanted the best, but my father was able to palm off some of the cheap stuff on him, at least so I was later told. It did not really matter, as he broke most of it anyway. And I kept hearing the story of how one of the soldiers kept apologizing for the conduct of the other one, that he could not do anything about it. But then, maybe, he kept anybody from getting shot.

Shortly thereafter the larger group of Americans arrived, but they, just like the first group, had no heavy weapons. My father again tried to talk them into taking a few rooms instead of the whole house, but to no avail. Everybody was ordered out of the house, us and all the other families. There was of course time to take any belongings or furniture, and no place to take them to. Sort of like the troops wanting to move into a furnished apartment.

The soldiers did, however, agree that we would have at least limited access to our belongings, provided that the previous occupants would clean house for them, and that is the way it worked out. We for one somehow managed to find shelter with the mayor of the village, who lived right next to the elementary school. I do not know where the other families moved into, but it must have been somewhere in the village. People had somehow gotten accustomed to helping each other out. That is how the refugees had come to live with us in the first place. Now we were refugees, at least temporarily.

And just like the first group of soldiers, the first these did was to dig another pit into our garden, only bigger. We kept working in the garden. There was, however, little mixing with the soldiers, and they kept pretty much to themselves. There was apparently a universal policy for the American soldiers not to fraternize with us Germans, although we again wound up with leftover food and especially chocolate. Chocolate, raisins, soap, real coffee, and real toilet paper, all things we did not have.

And we did find out that Germany was to be divided into "zones", and that the Russian zone was to go through here somewhere. All Germans were of course afraid of the Russians, Hitler having demonized and brutalized everybody to the east, and especially the Russians. Anyhow, we finally would wind up in the British Zone, only about 15 miles from the Russians.

One of the things I remember is the soldiers taking all of our rabbits that we had in separate cages and putting them all together to see them fight or mate. I guess there is no limit to the foolishness of young soldiers somehow suddenly finding themselves with no one more to fight, and no entertainment except GI novels and lots of rabbits. Who knows, they may have been betting on rabbit fights. But then again, at least no one got shot.

But there was one thing the GI's had that probably had more lasting impact on me than anything else, and that was some of the discarded GI novels that they left behind. My parents at that time had decided that it was time for me to learn a little English, and the novels would have to do, since there was nothing in English around, not after years of Hitler. So without me knowing it, my father must have tiptoed around some of the more seamy scenes in the books. Anyhow, I learned a little English. Strange that I remember some of the titles, "Wild is the River", a love novel set on the Mississippi in the civil war days, and a murder mystery "The House of Cobwebs", with long descriptions of a car ride. I had of course never seen a great river, or hardly a car for that matter. Strange how some things out of our youth keep popping up in our brains as we learn to shelter ourselves from the torrent of important, but subsequently inconsequential stuff that keeps flooding our senses. It was not until a year or so later, in middle school starting at the fifth grade, that I would be taking my first class in English. Instruction, as was everything else, was of course in German.

It was about this time that the young woman who had been living with us as a helper for as long as I could remember, was going to get married. As I found out much later from my mother, Martha had been an illegitimate child, and those things were not supposed to be happening, at least not in Germany at that time. Anyhow, she had been raised by her grandmother, but she had at some age moved in with us as a "house daughter", as my mother liked to look at it. There is surely something strange at how we look at a standard of living, if one has no car or phone or radio, but can still have a maid, most of all in the middle of Germany in the middle of a war. Anyhow, Martha was going to get married, and it was to be in the adjacent village, Platendorf, the "longest straightest village in all of Germany". She was going to marry into one of the farm families where the son had probably come home out of the military. Anyhow, we were invited, and it was going to be my first eating away from home ever.

The problem was that the military had imposed a curfew, and we had to sneak to the wedding by the back trails, and somehow sneak back after that, but we made it. We cut right through the fields, there being no fences out in the country. Things are just there for anybody so long as one does not harm the fields. The wedding was in the barn, somehow cleaned up and nicely decorated. I do not think there was music, for that would surely cause too much attention with the curfew in effect. Anyhow there was lots of food.

Then one day we were told that the American soldiers would be leaving, but that the British would be moving into our house, and to expect that they would have a little harsher attitude toward us Germans, the Brits having suffered more at the hands of the Germans. Also that they would also be moving in on the large landed estate that had been the center of the village since sometime in the early 1800's. Anyhow the Brits moved in, but I do not remember having any problems with them either. When they left after a month or so, we all moved back in, but I do not remember any ado about it. When one does not take anything with one when one is kicked out of the house in the first place, it is easy to move back in. Luckily nothing was stolen or destroyed.

It was not until much later in Texas, via the wonders of the internet, that I found out that the large modern structure locally known as the "bauernschule" (Bauer=farmer, Schule=school) that everybody sort of stayed away from had in the past been part of the large "Gut", and that the owner of the "Gut" had not only been a well known poet, but best known for poems praising Hitler as the one sent by God as the one to save all of Germany. I find it amazing that we did not know about such things at the time, for my parents would certainly have talked about it later in life if they had known. I do, however, remember him giving us an autographed copy of one of his books at a time when books, and paper, were almost impossible to get. Also via the internet I later learned that he had been one of the instigators of the massive book burnings during the rise of the Nazis.

But what I now find most noteworthy about the whole matter is that my parents, in America from 1924 to 1938, during the rise of Hitler, did not hear about Nazis from the American side, and in Germany from 1938 on, when Hitler had consolidated his power, did not come to know anything, the free press having been totally suppressed. Consequently, everything of a political nature regarding Germany I have learned is as an American, though American schools, though supplemented by my personal experience, particularly that nothing bad of any kind happened to us while in Germany in our little village, nor anyone else there, during the entire great war.