When the Kings of the Underworld Gather

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Novel

Based on the true story of a German prisoner of war in the Soviet Union, 1945–1953

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For the comrades who never returned, and for all those who shared their bread with a stranger along the way.

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Chapter 1 – February 1945

“The front is everywhere. I do not know where we will eventually end up.”

In February 1945, my divisional commander in Döberitz, near Berlin, dismissed me with two sentences that swept away every last trace of certainty: “The front is everywhere. I do not know where we will eventually end up.” I had just shown him the document that was supposed to exempt me from being deployed against the Red Army again. He read the paper twice, silently pushed it back across his desk, which was covered with maps and reports, and walked over to the window. Outside, lorries were being loaded with ammunition crates. I waited for a decision, but neither permission nor refusal came. When, a little later, I found myself standing outside in the cold February air, I realised that once again my fate lay in the hands of others.

The document I carried with me had a history. In 1944 I had already been taken prisoner by the Russians once before. That first captivity had not lasted long: after a short time I had managed to escape and make my way back to the German lines. According to regulations, a soldier who had returned from Russian captivity was not supposed to be deployed against the Red Army again. It was feared that, if captured a second time, he might be recognised as an escapee and punished all the more severely, or that under pressure he might reveal what he

had seen. I had carefully kept that paper all those months, as a kind of insurance against fate. Now, amid the chaos of February 1945, I began to suspect that it was worth no more than the paper on which it had been written. At the time, I spoke to almost no one about that first period of captivity. It had lasted only a short while, but it had left its mark on me in a way that was difficult to explain. I remembered the long marches towards the rear, the men who collapsed by the side of the road and never got up again, and the interrogations in a farmhouse where a young officer sat with a pistol on the table, waiting for me to say something I did not know. Above all, I remembered the hunger: not the hunger of a missed meal, but the kind of hunger that, after a few days, takes possession of your thoughts until nothing exists except the question of where your next piece of bread will come from. After escaping and wandering for days before reaching the German lines, I had promised myself that I would never experience anything like it again. That promise to myself was perhaps the most important reason why I had guarded that document so carefully.

A few days later, the commander’s adjutant informed me that no decision would be made about my request until it was clear where the newly formed division was to be deployed. He said it in a tone that suggested it ought to reassure me. It did nothing of the kind. Everyone in Döberitz knew that hardly any new divisions were being sent west any longer. The

Americans and British were advancing, but the greatest threat came from the east. There, on the Oder, the Red Army stood less than a hundred kilometres from Berlin. It was not difficult to guess where a new division would be sent in those weeks. What I had experienced during my earlier captivity meant that Goebbels's propaganda could no longer explain anything to me. Radio and newspapers still spoke of a sacred struggle and the possibility of victory, but my own memories told me otherwise. I had witnessed hunger, arbitrary cruelty and indifference to human life on both sides of the front. I no longer listened to grand words. I needed only to remember what I had seen for myself. I knew little about the Allied fronts in the west. In 1940 I had taken part in the campaign in the West, but that had been a different war, a war between soldiers, with rules that were still respected to some extent by both sides. In the east, the war had become little more than slaughter during the previous years. Yet I knew that the west was no longer fighting a clean war either. Whenever I travelled through German cities and saw the consequences of the bombing, the burnt-out streets, the façades with nothing standing behind them, and the lists containing the names of women and children who had died by the thousands beneath the rubble, I found it difficult to imagine that things were very different on the other side. The war had lost its humanity everywhere.

There was nothing left to win; almost everyone around me knew it, although nobody said so openly. Even so, I clung to the belief that, as a soldier, I had to conduct myself decently, even if death became unavoidable. Captivity or desertion was something I could not imagine. Precisely because I already knew what Russian captivity was like, I was determined never to fall into it again. I thought I could decide for myself how my war would end. Only later did I learn how little choice a man has in such matters.

In Döberitz we lived in a strange world suspended between past and future. The vast training grounds, where parades and manoeuvres had been held before the war, had become a collection point for everything the army could still scrape together. Seventeen-year-old boys stood alongside men of fifty. Wounded soldiers who were still recovering, some with their arms in slings, were assigned to units again. There were veterans who had fought on every front since 1939 and boys who had never fired a shot. In the evenings we sat in the dormitories, mending our uniforms, writing letters home or simply staring silently ahead of us. I wrote to my wife that I was well and that she should not worry. I had no idea whether the letter would ever reach her. Nobody spoke about the future. During those evenings my thoughts often returned to life before the war. I had always been a keen sportsman. As a boy I had belonged to the gymnastics club in our town, and I spent more evenings there than at

home: on the rings, the horizontal bar and the mats, where we practised somersaults until our trainer sent us home. Later, after I married and the children came along, I continued training whenever I could. My wife laughed about it and said I would never grow up. On Sunday afternoons I let the children stand on my shoulders in the garden, and they screamed with delight when I threw them into the air and caught them again. At the time, I could not have known that those very skills would save me more than once during my captivity. In Döberitz they were only memories, and I guarded them the way one guards a photograph: carefully, and without looking at it too often, because otherwise it hurt too much.

One Sunday I was granted a few hours' leave and took the train to Berlin. I had known the city in peacetime, with its broad boulevards, cafés and theatres and the lights of the Kurfürstendamm. What I saw now could barely be called a city. Entire districts consisted of façades with nothing left behind them. Women walked across the mountains of rubble carrying buckets and pushing handcarts, stacking bricks as though they could rebuild a city that was being bombed anew almost every night. Outside a bakery there was a queue a hundred metres long. Nobody complained and nobody laughed. Someone had painted on a wall in white letters: "Unsere Mauern brechen, unsere Herzen nicht." Our walls may break, but our hearts will not. An old man stopped beside me, read the words,

spat on the ground and walked on. I took the first train back to Döberitz.

At the beginning of March 1945 we experienced several relatively quiet days. We trained, equipment was issued and rumours circulated that we would be moved to Pomerania, or south, or to Hungary, depending on whom you asked. I almost began to hope that my request was still being considered, that somewhere behind a desk an officer had seen my papers and would make a decision. Then, in the middle of the night, shouting suddenly broke out: “Load up!” Everyone awoke with a start. Doors flew open, orderlies ran through the corridors and within minutes orders followed one another in rapid succession. In the half-darkness men scrambled for their boots, belts and rifles. On the railway siding a train of goods wagons was already steaming. There was no time left for my request. Nobody felt responsible for dealing with it, and I understood that trying would be pointless. I simply had to do as I was ordered. Only during the train journey, crowded together inside a cold wagon while the wheels clattered monotonously over the rails, did I have time to think again.

The journey took us northwards, through a Pomerania I barely recognised. Along the roads beside the railway line endless columns of refugees were moving westwards: farm carts loaded with household goods and bedding, old men pulling handcarts, women carrying children in their arms and occasionally a cow tied behind a wagon. They had already been

travelling for weeks, from East Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia, and no one knew where they would eventually end up. We were travelling in the opposite direction. A few children waved at our train. The men in my wagon waved back, but nobody spoke. It was as if we were all thinking the same thing: they were fleeing from the very thing towards which we were being sent.

At a small station somewhere in Pomerania our train stood still for hours to allow a refugee train travelling in the opposite direction to pass. On the platform, Red Cross women had set up a large container from which they served ersatz coffee to anyone who asked for it. An elderly woman wearing a black headscarf walked alongside our wagon and looked at each of us in turn. She asked whether any of us had seen her son, then gave us his name and regiment. Nobody knew him. She nodded, as though she had expected the answer, and walked on to the next wagon to ask the same question. I watched her for a long time as she moved down the train, from wagon to wagon, always asking the same question and always receiving the same answer. When our train eventually departed, she was still standing on the platform. That image has remained with me ever since: a mother searching for her son amongst thousands of soldiers who did not know where they themselves were going. At Stettin we were unloaded quickly. The moment I saw the station, my last doubts disappeared. Military trains

stood everywhere, lorries came and went, groups of soldiers gathered amongst crates and supplies, and in the distance, on the other side of the Oder, artillery rumbled. Nobody here was organising a transfer to the west. Nobody was preparing for rest or regrouping. Everything pointed in the same direction. We were going east again.

We spent the night in the gymnasium of a school on the outskirts of the city. The windows had been boarded up, the rings and climbing ropes still hung from the walls, and in one corner lay a pile of gym mats on which we stretched ourselves out. It felt strange to be lying there of all places. I looked at the rings above me and thought about the gymnasium of my youth, the smell of chalk and sweat and the voice of our trainer. A few eighteen-year-old boys, despite their exhaustion, started climbing the ropes and challenging each other. For a moment laughter echoed through the hall. Then an NCO entered and shouted at everyone to go to sleep. The hall fell silent. Outside, artillery rumbled along the Oder throughout the night, like a thunderstorm that refused to pass.

I tried once more to speak to the battalion commander about my situation. I waited until he had a free moment and showed him my papers. He barely looked at them. His attention was constantly being demanded by orderlies, reports and questions, and my problem was clearly the least important matter he faced that day. “You should have thought about that earlier,” he said

curtly. “Now you are going into action.” When he saw that I was about to say something else, he stared at me and added that as long as a man was not a coward, it made little difference where he died. That ended the discussion. I saluted according to regulations and said nothing. Deep inside, however, I resolved that one day I would determine which of us truly possessed the greater courage. I was no hero. I never had been, nor had I ever aspired to become one. But I knew that Germany’s collapse was approaching, and when it came, I intended to sell my life as dearly as possible. Whether the battalion commander himself survived those final weeks, I do not know. I never saw him again after that day.

On the night before the crossing, I lay beside an older Obergefreiter from Thuringia, a carpenter who had been fighting in the east since 1941. Neither of us could sleep, so we talked quietly in the darkness. He told me about his workshop, about the smell of freshly planed wood and about his daughter, who had turned sixteen that winter without him being there. When I asked him what he thought of the miracle weapons everyone was talking about, he laughed softly. “The only miracle,” he said, “would be if the two of us got out of here alive.” Then he turned around and went to sleep. After the first day of fighting, I never saw him again.

On a grey morning in March, several newly formed divisions crossed the Oder near Greifenhagen. The river lay broad and grey

beneath a low sky, with sheets of ice along its banks. Everywhere there was talk of miracle weapons that would turn the tide of the war. Nobody, however, knew where they were. The infantry claimed that the engineers had been equipped with them. Amongst us engineers, the story was that the infantry had secret weapons. The longer I listened to the stories, the clearer it became that nobody had ever seen such a weapon with his own eyes. The crossing itself took place in the half-light, over an emergency pontoon bridge that the engineers had constructed during the night. The planks were slippery with ice and beneath us the water churned, black and swift. We walked in a long line, several metres apart so that a single shell could not hit too many men at once. Nobody spoke. All I could hear was the crunch of boots on wood, water slapping against the pontoons and the heavy breathing of the man behind me. Halfway across the bridge, a shell exploded in the river somewhere upstream. The pontoons rocked, several men grabbed hold of one another and someone swore quietly. Then we continued walking as though nothing had happened. When my foot finally touched the opposite bank, I realised that I had been holding my breath. Behind me lay the river. Ahead lay a landscape of mist, bare trees and abandoned farms, somewhere within which the enemy was waiting for us.

There was no sign of the promised miracle weapons on this side of the river either. We had

received only conventional weapons. The only thing that stood out was the new assault rifle. Much was expected of it, and at first sight that seemed justified: it was light, easy to handle and capable of rapid fire. But the first shots already revealed that it was so inaccurate that at a hundred metres you could scarcely hit anything. One of the older NCOs weighed the weapon in his hands, shook his head and said that he would rather have his old rifle back. Armed with this equipment, we advanced against Russian positions that were well constructed and excellently camouflaged.

What happened next occurred so quickly that I only understood it afterwards. Before we had even reached our assigned positions, the Russian artillery opened fire. It seemed to come from every direction at once, as though the enemy had known exactly where we would be. Two companies of our battalion were almost completely wiped out within minutes. I saw men fall who only moments earlier had been walking beside me. I saw a boy no more than eighteen years old, who had asked me for a cigarette that very morning, sink into the mud with a look of astonishment on his face. There was no time to stop. Anyone who stopped died. Then came a Russian counterattack. Infantry emerged from positions we had not even seen, supported by machine guns and mortars. We lay in hastily dug holes and among the remains of a farmhouse, firing back with everything we had. The attack was repelled, but on our left flank an entire

platoon was cut off and taken prisoner. We watched the men disappear into the smoke with their hands raised. Nobody said anything. From that moment onwards, there could be no question of a German offensive. Later we heard that the fighting in the neighbouring sectors had been equally disastrous.

Not long afterwards, the heavy Russian artillery fire began. For days, shells of every calibre crashed into our positions. Anyone who has never experienced a bombardment imagines a series of explosions. The reality is different. The ground moves constantly. The air fills with smoke, dust and flying earth. Each impact merges into the next until time and space lose all meaning, and all that remains is waiting for the shell that has your name on it. Only brief pauses gave us a chance to catch our breath, drag away the wounded and drink a mouthful of water.

During those days I learned something about people that I have never forgotten. Some men became silent and stared ahead with empty eyes. Others talked incessantly, about home, their wives, the meals their mothers used to cook, as though words could build a wall to protect them from the shells. An older soldier beside me prayed aloud, repeating the same prayer for hours. I thought about my children. I tried to picture their faces and hear their voices, and to my horror realised that I could not always do so any longer. I had not seen them for too long.

On the third day, the situation became even more difficult. Supply vehicles could barely reach the forward positions, and food and ammunition had to be dragged forwards under fire. The telephone lines had been destroyed on the first day, so messages had to be carried on foot. I saw a young orderly, barely seventeen, running from hole to hole with a message in his hand. He never reached the command post. Another boy was sent. Then another. A piece of bread and a mug of lukewarm coffee acquired a value during those days that I was never afterwards able to explain to anyone.

During the night between the third and fourth day, the firing suddenly stopped. The silence was so unusual that nobody dared sleep. We lay in our holes and listened. Then, from the other side of no-man’s-land, we heard a voice. Someone in the Russian positions began to sing, softly at first and then more loudly. It was a slow, melancholy song, carried by a voice that travelled far across the frozen field. After a while, a harmonica joined in. I did not understand a single word, but I knew what the song was about. It was about home, about a woman, about a village beside a river. None of us fired. Nobody shouted anything back. We lay there, Germans in our holes, listening to a Russian singing about the same longing that occupied all our thoughts. When the song ended, silence remained for several more minutes. Then the artillery started again.

After four days, the order came to withdraw. At dusk we abandoned the positions, which by then were hardly recognisable as positions at all, and moved, crouching low, towards the bridge over the Oder. To my own astonishment, I was still alive and had not suffered a single wound. Shell fragments had flown past me. Men beside me had fallen. Yet I was still walking under my own power. The longer I thought about it, the more improbable it seemed.

Engineers were waiting on the bridge with explosive charges, ready to destroy it as soon as the last units had crossed. One of them shouted at us to hurry. We ran across the planks as the first Russian shells struck the river in the distance, throwing enormous fountains of water into the air. On the western bank I dropped into the grass. Behind me I heard a dull explosion. When I looked back, I saw part of the bridge collapsing into the water in a cloud of smoke and dust. Anyone still standing on the other side now had to fend for himself. When we returned, we discovered that we had already been written off. Nobody had expected anyone from our battalion to return. An officer walked along our ranks, shaking his head as he counted the survivors.

Yet our commanders praised us again for our efforts as though something had actually been achieved. We were given food and allowed to rest for a few hours in an inn that had been requisitioned by the army. Soldiers sat everywhere, at tables or leaning against walls.

Nobody spoke much. Most sat with a bowl of soup in front of them and stared into it, as though they still could not believe that the ground beneath their feet had stopped shaking.

Beside me sat a soldier who did not say a word throughout the meal. Only after putting down his spoon did he look up and say that he had been certain he was going to die the day before. He had even written a letter to his mother and placed it in his breast pocket for whoever found his body. Now he took out the letter, looked at it for a while and tore it into small pieces. Nobody reacted. Not because what he said was strange, but because almost everyone in that inn had thought exactly the same thing. A short while later, half the men were asleep, their heads resting on tables or lying on the floor amongst rucksacks and rifles.

The rest did not last long. Soon we had to fall in again. Barely recovered from our exhaustion, we were loaded onto lorries and transferred to another division to replace its losses. Nobody protested. The men were too tired for that. A few days later we were once again in the middle of heavy fighting, this time at Küstrin on the Oder. Everyone knew the importance of the place. Küstrin lay on the main road to Berlin. Whoever held Küstrin held the door to the capital. The new unit to which we were assigned was a mixture of whatever could still be found during those weeks. There were veterans wearing the Iron Cross, Luftwaffe personnel without aeroplanes, sailors without ships, and a

group of boys who only a few weeks earlier had still been at school. Our company commander was a lieutenant no older than twenty-five, with a narrow, serious face and a voice not yet accustomed to giving orders. On the first evening, he walked along our positions and asked each man his name. He wrote them down in a small notebook. When I asked him why, he replied that he wanted to know whom he would have to write to if things went wrong. That evening I came to admire him. He was one of the few officers I saw during those final weeks who still thought of his men as human beings rather than numbers.

Küstrin during those weeks was a place I would wish on no one. The old fortress town stood on a spit of land between the Oder and the Warthe and had already been almost completely surrounded for weeks. What had once been a town of churches, warehouses and a castle had turned into a landscape of rubble, smoke and craters. Everything was burning. The Russians shelled the town day and night, and anyone who ventured onto the streets ran from doorway to doorway. We occupied positions on the western side, where we were supposed to prevent the last connecting road to the fortress from being cut. Every day we heard that the road had become several hundred metres narrower.

The retreat towards Berlin had by now become inevitable. Village after village was still defended, but everywhere we were slowly moving backwards. Positions still in German

hands in the morning were abandoned by evening. Along the roads stood burnt-out vehicles, abandoned artillery pieces and refugees with handcarts who no longer knew where to go. In an abandoned village we found a half-eaten meal still standing on a kitchen table, as though the people who had lived there had merely stepped outside for a moment. That image affected me more deeply than many a battle. In one of those villages we encountered an old woman who refused to leave her home. She sat on a chair outside her front door with a shawl around her shoulders and a cow tied beside her, while shells exploded only a few hundred metres away. Our lieutenant tried to persuade her to leave with the last refugees. She shook her head. She had been born in that house, she said. Her husband had died there and her son had grown up there. She would not leave it for the Russians or for anyone else. When we withdrew that evening, she was still sitting there. I have often wondered what happened to her. Perhaps she survived. Perhaps she did not. But I remember her face more clearly than those of many soldiers beside whom I fought during those weeks.

During one of those retreating battles, I was hit. There were only a few shell fragments in my right forearm. At the time it felt no worse than a hard blow. I bandaged the wound as well as I could with my field dressing and continued fighting. At the front there was always a tendency to ignore a wound for as long as

possible. Nobody wanted to abandon his comrades, and nobody wanted to be the man who withdrew while the others remained.

A medic who came past our position examined my arm and told me I had to return to the dressing station. I refused. The dressing station was two kilometres behind us, across open ground that was under constant fire, and I had seen how many men with minor wounds were killed on the way there. Besides, so few of us remained that every man who left created a gap that nobody could fill. I let him tighten the bandage and stayed where I was. In retrospect, that may have been the worst decision I made during the war.

I lost a great deal of blood. The bandage turned red and then dark, and my arm grew heavier and heavier. At first I felt only slightly dizzy. Then sounds seemed to come from far away, and it became difficult to judge distances. I remember trying to remain upright while the world around me began to move strangely. Suddenly everything went black and I collapsed. When I regained consciousness, someone was roughly pulling me upright by my hair. The voices around me were speaking Russian. With difficulty, I opened my eyes. Two Russian officers stood in front of me: a senior lieutenant who spoke some German and a sergeant who was leafing through my papers. The front had passed over me while I lay unconscious. I immediately understood what had happened, and for a moment I felt a fear worse than

anything I had experienced during the preceding weeks. The very thing I had feared so much had happened. The senior lieutenant began asking questions. He wanted to know which unit I belonged to, where my unit was positioned, how many men we had and how many guns. My head felt heavy and my thoughts came slowly. I referred him to my military pay book, which he already held in his hand. Everything I could tell him was written there. That answer immediately earned me the first blows.

Weakened by loss of blood, I could barely remain standing. The blows themselves were not particularly hard, but in my condition they were enough. A short while later I was lying on the ground again. When I became somewhat aware of my surroundings once more, I saw that several German prisoners of war had been brought over. They wrapped me in a tarpaulin and dragged me away, over the muddy roads behind the front, in the direction of Seelow. I looked at the grey sky above me and thought about the document in my breast pocket.

The men carrying me were exhausted themselves. They stumbled over holes and roots, occasionally placing me on the ground to catch their breath before lifting me again. I heard their panting and the voices of the Russian soldiers driving them onwards. During one rest stop, one of the men bent over me. He had a grey, unshaven face and eyes red with exhaustion. “Halt durch, Kamerad,” he

whispered. “Wir sind bald da.” Hold on, comrade. We’re nearly there. I never learned his name. But I remembered those words, and the kindness with which he spoke them, at a moment when he himself had no idea what lay ahead of him. In Seelow I was left in an improvised field hospital, a half-ruined building filled with wounded men. To my surprise, the Russians treated my wound. Someone cleaned it, bandaged it again and held a cup of water to my lips. Outside, the battle moved onwards towards Berlin. Inside, I lay on a straw mattress and stared at the ceiling. My war as a soldier was over. My struggle to stay alive as a prisoner of war began there.

That first night I lay awake for a long time. I thought back to 1944, to my first captivity and my escape. What would happen if the Russians discovered that I had already been their prisoner once before and had escaped? I had heard stories about what happened to such men. The document in my breast pocket, which had been intended to protect me, had now become the most dangerous possession I owned. In the middle of the night, when everyone around me was asleep, I took out the paper. With my left hand, I tore it into small pieces and pushed them deep into the straw mattress on which I lay. It was the last thing I did as a German soldier. From the following morning onwards, I was nothing but a prisoner of war. How long that captivity would last, and where it

would take me, I could not possibly have known then.

Chapter 2 – The Doctor of Seelow and the Second Captivity

I remember the first days in the field hospital at Seelow only in fragments. The loss of blood, the exhaustion of the previous weeks and the shock of my capture caused reality and dreams to merge constantly. Sometimes I woke to Russian voices, the groans of wounded men or the clinking of metal instruments. Then I would drift back into an uneasy sleep, in which the thunder of the artillery on the Oder mingled with fragments of conversations I could not understand. The hospital had been set up in a half-ruined building on the outskirts of the town. Cold spring air blew in through the broken windows. Wounded men lay on straw mattresses, blankets or simply on the floor, Germans and Russians side by side, for in a hospital war makes less distinction than it does on the battlefield.

Among the medical orderlies, I noticed an older Russian attendant, a small man with a grey moustache and a scar across his cheek. He did not speak a word of German, but his manner needed no language. When he made his rounds at night, he paused briefly beside every bed, straightened a blanket or held a cup of water to the lips of someone who could no longer drink unaided. One evening, without saying anything, he placed a piece of black bread and a pinch of

machorka beside my straw mattress. When I looked at him in surprise, he shrugged and nodded towards the east, as though to say that somewhere he too had a home to which he wanted to return. For several days a young Russian soldier lay beside me with a bullet wound in his shoulder. He could not have been more than nineteen and came from a village somewhere on the Volga. At first he regarded me with suspicion, and I did the same to him. Only a few weeks earlier we had still been shooting at one another. But pain and boredom are stronger than hostility. On the second evening he took out a battered cigarette case, rolled two cigarettes from newspaper and machorka and silently offered one to me. We smoked without speaking. Afterwards he began talking in Russian, of which I understood only a few words, and showed me a crumpled photograph of a girl with plaits. I showed him the photograph of my wife and children. He studied it for a long time and nodded. When he was transferred a few days later, he raised his hand to me as he left. I never knew his name.

At first my wounds appeared to be healing well. The dressing was changed regularly and the fever subsided. After a while, however, I began to realise that something was wrong. My right arm continued to swell. The skin became tight and shiny, changing first to red and then to a bluish colour, while the pain worsened with each passing day. At night the arm throbbed so violently that I could not sleep. One morning a

doctor appeared and examined it for a long time. He pressed the swelling, asked me to move my fingers and studied the wound with a frown. Eventually, through an interpreter, I was told that a nerve had probably been damaged and that an amputation would be necessary. I decided that I would not allow them to amputate my arm. A soldier learns to accept risks: injury, captivity and even death. But the prospect of losing my arm was different. I had been active in sport throughout my life and had always been able to rely on my body. With only one arm, moreover, I would have little chance of finding work at home with which to support my family. During my brief stays at Russian medical posts I had gained the impression that they resorted rather quickly to amputation. Whether that impression was justified, I did not know, but it was strong enough to make me refuse. The doctor tried for a while to persuade me, but I stood by my decision. To my surprise, he did not insist. He shrugged, said something to the orderly that I could not understand and moved on to the next bed. I had expected a fierce argument, perhaps even coercion. Instead, my refusal was simply accepted. Only later did I understand why: a prisoner who wanted to keep his arm was responsible for his own decision. If things went wrong, that was his problem. In retrospect, my refusal would prove to have sent my life in an entirely different direction.

Beside me lay a young German soldier from the Rhineland whose left leg had been amputated a

few days earlier. For hours he stared at the ceiling. When he heard that I had refused, he turned his head towards me. “You’re right,” he said quietly. “They ask you once. After that, it’s gone.” He said it without bitterness, merely as a statement of fact. At night I sometimes heard him crying, so softly that it could hardly be heard. When I left the hospital he was still there. I do not know what became of him.

Not long afterwards I was discharged from the hospital and transferred to a labour detachment in Seelow. Everywhere the town bore the scars of the fighting that had so recently raged there. On the hills east of the town, the last great battles before Berlin had been fought, and the landscape was strewn with wrecked tanks, churned-up trenches and burnt trees. The streets were filled with rubble, many houses had nothing left standing but their walls, and at the crossroads Russian women traffic controllers with flags directed columns moving westwards.

In later years I often thought that this had been the moment when I should have escaped. Security was weak. The Russians had their hands full with the advance on Berlin, and the entire area was swarming with people moving in every direction: refugees, displaced farmers and lost soldiers. In that chaos an escape might have been possible. But I was too ill and exhausted to make such an attempt. My arm hurt constantly, I had a fever and any serious exertion demanded more strength than I possessed. The thought returned frequently, but it remained only a

thought. The young female guard who escorted me to the labour detachment was a striking contrast to most of the guards I had encountered until then. She was young, perhaps twenty years old, had a round, freckled face and carried a rifle over her shoulder that seemed almost too large for her. She was friendly and unusually informal. I soon noticed that she had a soft spot for German soldiers and seemed to give little thought to her own safety. On the way she sometimes walked beside me rather than behind me, and when she saw how I held my injured arm tightly against my body, she took my bundle from me without saying a word. I did not quite know what to make of her.

When she handed me over to the commander of the labour detachment, I immediately pointed out the condition of my arm. The commander shrugged. Everyone had to work. But the young woman had been listening. Before she left, she looked at me and promised that she would return the following day to see how I was getting on. I placed little value on that promise. The war had taught me that promises were quickly forgotten, especially when they were made to a prisoner of war.

The labour detachment consisted of about forty German prisoners of war, housed in the barn of an abandoned farm on the outskirts of the town. We slept on straw, pressed close together for warmth, and twice a day we received a bowl of watery soup and a piece of bread. There were soldiers from all kinds of units among us,

several Volkssturm men over fifty and even a fifteen-year-old boy from the Hitler Youth, who in the final days of the war had been given a Panzerfaust and sent out to fight. During his first nights he cried for his mother. The older men pretended not to hear him and in the mornings, without saying anything, pushed part of their bread towards him. Life in the labour detachment followed a fixed routine. At five o'clock we were awakened by a guard banging a stick against the barn door. Then came roll call in the yard, where we had to form rows of five and were counted again and again until the numbers finally matched, which sometimes took an hour. After a bowl of lukewarm soup we marched to work. In the evenings, when we returned, we sat in the straw and told one another stories. The older Volkssturm men talked about the First World War, about Verdun and the Somme, as though it had belonged to another world. The younger ones talked about girls and football. And everyone, without exception, talked about food: their mother's Sunday roast, the sausages from the butcher on the corner, fresh bread and butter. It was a strange form of torture that we inflicted upon ourselves every evening. Yet none of us could resist it.

On our first working day we had to dig pits for the countless animal carcasses still lying everywhere. Around Seelow lay hundreds of dead horses, cows and other livestock, killed during the fighting and swollen beneath the

spring sun. The stench was so overpowering that some men vomited continuously. Our task was to bury the animals before disease broke out. The work was heavy and filthy. The ground was still half frozen, the spades were blunt and the carcasses had to be dragged into the pits with ropes and our bare hands.

With my injured arm it was almost impossible to hold a spade. Every time I drove it into the ground, pain shot through my arm as though a red-hot wire were being pulled through it. Nevertheless, I was forced to continue. Whenever I stopped for even a moment, an order or a curse followed immediately. Some of the guards even seemed to take pleasure in making my situation more difficult. They assigned me the heaviest tasks and laughed when I clenched my teeth against the pain. By midday the pain had become almost unbearable. My arm was so swollen that the sleeve of my jacket stretched tightly across the skin. An older prisoner from Brandenburg, a farmer with hands like coal shovels, watched for some time without saying anything. When the guards moved away to smoke, he came over, took my spade without a word and gave me his, which was lighter. Then he continued digging my pit as though it were his own. When I tried to thank him, he shook his head. “You need to look after that arm,” he said. “You’ll need it later.” He did the same throughout the afternoon whenever the guards were not looking. I never spoke to him again afterwards. A few days later he was

taken away with another work detail. But during the years that followed, I often thought of him whenever I saw a weaker comrade struggling. In those days small acts of kindness were sometimes worth more than grand words.

Then, unexpectedly, my young guard returned. She had kept her promise. This time, however, she did not come alone. Beside her walked a female officer with the rank of senior lieutenant, a slender woman with dark hair beneath her cap and a face that did not invite contradiction. She turned out to be a doctor and spoke excellent German. At first the guards objected. There was work to be done, they said; the examination could wait. The doctor barely reacted. In a few short sentences she made it clear that she, and she alone, would decide when medical treatment was necessary. I was surprised by how quickly the argument ended. Eventually the women were given permission to examine me. In the middle of Seelow’s market square, my bandage was removed. I sat on the edge of a damaged fountain while the everyday life of an occupied town continued around us: Russian soldiers walking past, a few German women carrying buckets, children watching from a distance. The doctor examined the wound carefully and without saying a word. She asked several questions about the original injury and the treatment I had received at the hospital. Then she stood up and disappeared. I thought the examination was over. A short while later, however, she returned carrying a small bag

filled with instruments and dressings. To my astonishment, she performed a minor operation there and then. Without a hospital, without an operating table and without anaesthetic, she reopened my arm in the middle of the street. The young guard held my shoulder. The pain was so intense that I clenched my jaw until my teeth hurt. I stared at the sky, at a church tower whose spire had been shot away, and in my mind counted the stones that were still standing. The people around us slowly moved closer. Even in those extraordinary days, a doctor operating on a prisoner in the middle of a market square was not an everyday sight.

After some time the doctor suddenly stopped and showed me something she had removed from the wound with a pair of forceps. It was a shell fragment, larger than a pea, with sharp, jagged edges. Almost immediately I felt relief. The pain did not disappear completely, but the constricting, throbbing sensation that had dominated my arm for weeks grew less severe. The doctor cleaned the wound, applied a fresh dressing and gave me clear instructions in German about caring for it each day. Then she left, as suddenly as she had appeared. For the first time since I had been wounded, I dared to hope that I might keep my arm.

That hope proved premature. For several days the recovery seemed to be going well, but then the problems returned. My arm swelled again, the skin became tight and hot, and the pain worsened with every day. With considerable

difficulty I managed to send another message to the doctor through the young guard. I did not really expect her to come. A Russian officer surely had better things to do than concern herself with the arm of a German prisoner of war. Nevertheless, she returned. This time she brought all the instruments she needed and carried out the treatment in the barn where we slept. While examining the wound, I could tell from her face that she had discovered something. For a long time she searched deep inside the wound. The treatment seemed endless. The pain became so severe that I clamped a towel between my teeth to stop myself from crying out. The other prisoners watched in silence. One of them held my hand, and I squeezed it so hard that afterwards he laughingly claimed I had almost broken his fingers. Eventually she found the cause. A second piece of metal, hidden deeper than the first, emerged from the wound. She placed it on a piece of uniform cloth beside me so that I could see it, and for the first time I saw her smile. Now, she said, my arm would probably make a full recovery. I kept those two pieces of shrapnel for a long time, wrapped in that scrap of cloth, until they disappeared during one of the many searches in the years that followed. She promised to return the next day. Her young companion would not be able to come with her then because she was on duty.

The next morning everything changed. The young woman appeared at the work site again,

but this time she was not allowed to enter. I saw her standing by the gate with her rifle over her shoulder while an older sergeant spoke to her and then pointed behind her with his thumb. Apparently others had also noticed the amount of attention the young Russian guard was giving to a German prisoner of war. She looked in my direction one last time. Then she turned and walked away.

My feelings were mixed. On the one hand I was relieved, because the situation was becoming increasingly complicated, perhaps even more for her than for me. On the other hand, I felt ungrateful towards someone who had only tried to help me. I never saw her again. I never even learned her name. In later years I often wondered what happened to her, and whether she was punished for showing kindness to a German prisoner. In those years, that was not an insignificant question.

One evening at the beginning of May, we suddenly heard gunfire coming from the town, first a few shots and then hundreds. It sounded as though fighting had broken out again. We lay perfectly still in the straw and waited. Then we also heard cheering, singing and the sound of a harmonica. One of the guards thrust his head through the barn door, a bottle in his hand and tears on his cheeks, and shouted something that everyone understood even without knowing Russian: “Voina kaput!” The war was over. Throughout the night the Russians fired into the air, drank and sang. Inside our barn it remained

silent. None of us cheered. We had lost the war, and we did not know whether we would survive the peace.

During the following days we heard fragments of news. Berlin had fallen. Hitler was dead. Germany had surrendered unconditionally. Some men believed that within a few weeks we would be sent home. After all, the war was over, so why should anyone continue holding prisoners of war? Others were more cautious. I belonged to the latter group. I had already come to know the Russians in 1944, and I had learned that promises and rumours in this country had a life of their own. Even so, I found myself lying in the straw at night thinking of home, of the door to our house and of my wife's face when she opened it. The first weeks of peace were hardly different for us from the final weeks of the war. We worked, ate little and slept in the straw. Only the Russians had changed. They were exuberant, often drunk, and collected everything they could take with them. Watches were particularly sought after. I saw soldiers with four or five watches on each arm, proudly showing them to one another and constantly winding them. "Uhri, Uhri," they shouted whenever they encountered a German, and anyone who still possessed a watch had lost it within a minute. Bicycles, radios, sewing machines and even pianos were loaded onto lorries and sent eastwards. One of our guards proudly told us that he had sent a sewing machine to his mother in the Urals. I wondered

what that mother would think when, after months, a German sewing machine arrived in her village.

I saw the doctor only once more after that. She came to check whether the wound was closing properly, nodded with satisfaction and gave me a small bottle of iodine, something almost priceless in those days. When I tried to thank her, she waved it aside. She was a doctor, she said, and an arm was an arm, whether it belonged to a Russian or a German. I often thought about those words in the years that followed, particularly when I encountered people who thought very differently.

My arm recovered slowly. The swelling subsided, the pain became bearable and after a few weeks I could hold a spade again without everything going black before my eyes. As my strength returned, something else returned with it: the thought of escape. I noticed that once again I had begun studying the roads, the position of the sun, the guards and their habits. I did not yet know how or when. But I knew that my body would obey me again, and for the moment that was enough.

Just before our departure, something happened that I still remember with happiness. One morning, during roll call, the boy from the Hitler Youth was called out of the line. At first we thought he was being taken away for questioning, and several of the older men had already stepped in front of him. But through an

interpreter, a Russian officer explained that the boy was too young to be held as a prisoner of war. He was being released and could go home. The boy stood as though paralysed. When he finally understood what had been said, he began to cry, and this time nobody pretended not to hear him. We all gave him something: a piece of bread, several cigarettes to barter with, a slip of paper with an address. I wrote down my wife's address and asked him to let her know that I was still alive. He promised me that he would. I never found out whether he was able to keep that promise. But that morning it felt as though one of us was going home, and that was enough.

Shortly afterwards, together with other prisoners, we were transferred to the camp at Küstrin-Neu Drewitz. Early one morning we were loaded onto lorries. As the vehicles started moving and the ruined streets of Seelow disappeared behind us, I looked back one last time: towards the market square where a Russian doctor had removed a piece of metal from my arm without anaesthetic, and towards the gate where a young woman with an oversized rifle had watched me for the last time. In that town I had not only come close to losing my arm. I had also learned that humanity can sometimes appear in the most unexpected places.

Ahead of me lay another camp, new uncertainty and once again the question that from then onwards would never leave me: would I ever return home? The war was over. What none of

us knew was how many years of captivity still lay between that ending and freedom.

Chapter 3 – Camp Life and the Performers

The camp at Küstrin-Neu Drewitz lay on a bare plain north of the ruined fortress town, in the same region where only a few months earlier I had still been fighting as a soldier. It was a strange sensation to return to that place, no longer carrying a rifle but as a prisoner. The camp consisted of several rows of wooden barracks behind a double barbed-wire fence, with watchtowers of roughly sawn timber at the corners. When we arrived there in the early summer of 1945, several hundred German prisoners of war were already being held there. They watched us in silence as we marched through the gate, the way men look at newcomers who will make their own meagre rations smaller still. We were given places on wooden bunks without mattresses, in a barrack that at night smelled of sweat, wet clothing and machorka. Nobody explained anything to us. The rules of the camp were not learned from regulations, but from the experiences of those first few days.

The most important moment of every day in the camp was roll call. Morning and evening, all the prisoners had to form rows of five, after which the guards counted us, made mistakes and started again. If the numbers did not match, everyone remained standing, in rain, heat or cold, sometimes for fifteen minutes, sometimes for two hours. Anyone who fainted remained

where he had fallen until the counting was finished. At first I saw it merely as incompetence. Later I understood that roll call was also an instrument of power: twice a day we were reminded that our names did not matter, only the number of bodies standing in line. During those weeks my arm continued to recover. The wound closed, the swelling disappeared and strength slowly returned to my hand. Every morning I tried a little more: making a fist, lifting a bucket, pulling myself up on a beam. Behind the barrack, where the guards rarely came, I did exercises in the evenings that I remembered from my youth, when I had trained almost every day. Some of my comrades laughed at me. They thought it was a waste of the little energy our meagre food provided. But I knew why I was doing it. As my body recovered, the thought of escape returned as well, and an escape would demand strength that I did not yet possess. Without consciously deciding to do so, I began watching again: the changing of the guard, the places where the barbed wire sagged and the roads leading westwards from the camp. It was a habit I would never lose during the years that followed.

Much of our work consisted of clearing mines. During the final months of the war, the area between the Oder and Berlin had become one enormous battlefield, and its remains lay everywhere: minefields along the old positions, ammunition in abandoned trenches and shells that had failed to explode. The Russians

followed a simple line of reasoning: those who had laid the mines could remove them again. Because I had served with the engineers, I was soon assigned to those teams. We walked across the fields in long lines, carefully pushing iron rods into the soil at an angle, centimetre by centimetre. Every time a rod struck something hard, the entire line held its breath. Usually it was a stone, a piece of wood or a rusted helmet. We found far fewer mines than the Russians had expected. Nevertheless, everyone learned on the very first day that this work allowed no mistakes. We discovered just how true that was during the third week. We were working in a field beside an old defensive line when I heard a sharp, dry explosion to my left. A cloud of earth and smoke rose into the air. When it cleared, one of our comrades, a quiet man from Hamburg who had worked as a road builder before the war, lay several metres from where he had been standing. He had stepped on a mine that even his probing rod had missed. He remained alive for only a few minutes. We carried him to the edge of the field, but there was nothing we could do for him. That same afternoon we buried him beneath a birch tree beside the road, with a cross made from two branches and his name carved into a piece of wood. Then we had to return to work, onto the same field, carrying the same iron rods. Nobody spoke another word that day.

Far more often than mines, we found something entirely different: food. In the chaos of the final

fighting, soldiers, farmers and refugees had hidden supplies or simply abandoned them. In collapsed cellars we found tins of meat, jars of lard and bags of rusks. Bunkers contained boxes of emergency rations. On one farm we discovered a pit filled with potatoes beneath a layer of straw, carefully protected against the frost, as though the owner had intended to collect them again after the war. Officially, everything had to be handed in. But not everything was seen, and not every guard watched equally closely. We soon learned how to make a tin disappear beneath a jacket or hide a handful of rusks in the top of a boot. We kept some of it for ourselves, as a small reserve for the day when an opportunity to escape might present itself. I buried my own supply beneath a marked stone beside the road we took to work.

Many children wandered through the villages around the camp. Some had lost their parents while fleeing; others had a father who had been killed or taken prisoner and a mother sitting somewhere in a cellar with nothing to eat. Their clothes were either too large or too small, their faces grey and thin, and their eyes possessed a seriousness that did not belong to their age. When we marched to work in the morning, they stood by the roadside watching us. At first they kept their distance, as though they did not know what to make of us. After all, we were both Germans and prisoners, fellow countrymen and at the same time men guarded by foreign soldiers. I saw a boy of about ten wearing shoes

held together with string. I saw a girl carrying a younger brother on her hip, watching us with large, silent eyes. Those looks stayed with me. It began with a single rusk that someone secretly slipped to a child. Others followed his example. Before long, in the evenings we made small parcels in the barrack: a little bread, a few potatoes, sometimes an opened tin of meat, wrapped in a piece of cloth or paper. During the march to work we dropped the parcels by the roadside or pressed them into a child’s hand whenever a guard happened to be looking the other way. They were not large amounts. We were hungry ourselves, and every piece of bread we gave away meant one piece less for us. Yet I never heard a comrade complain that he had given too much. It was as though, through those small parcels, we were giving something back to a country we ourselves had helped to destroy.

News spread quickly through the villages. Every day more children waited beside the road. Some came alone, others in small groups, holding the hands of brothers and sisters. They said little. Often a nod or a brief smile was enough to show us what the small parcels meant to them. The girl carrying her little brother was there almost every morning, always in the same place beside a fallen tree. One day, as I gave her a parcel, she pressed something into my hand: a small hand-carved wooden horse, probably the only toy she owned. I tried to give it back, but she shook her head and walked away. I kept that little horse for a long time, until it was taken

from me during one of the many searches in the years that followed.

We brought the children small parcels almost every day. Most of the guards looked the other way. One older Russian soldier went further. Thinking that nobody could see him, he gave a piece of his own bread to a boy who stood empty-handed beside the road. He noticed me watching, held my gaze for a moment and then shrugged. No further explanation was necessary. Then it all came to an end. In the middle of the night we were awakened, ordered to gather our belongings and marched in a column to Küstrin itself. Almost nothing remained of the old fortress town. Where in March I had still seen streets, churches and warehouses, there were now heaps of rubble over which weeds had begun to grow. Among the ruins the Russians had established a large prisoner-of-war camp containing thousands of men from every branch of what had once been the German armed forces. I thought of the children who would wait in vain beside the road the following morning, and of my buried supply beneath the stone, which I would never see again. In a camp, one seldom had the chance to say goodbye. You were simply taken somewhere else.

The camp in Küstrin was many times larger than anything I had seen until then. Thousands of men lived in wooden barracks, tents and partly collapsed military buildings dating from the days of the fortress. There were kitchens with

enormous cauldrons, a hospital, a workshop and even a kind of market where prisoners traded cigarettes, bread, buttons and needles. New transports arrived every day, and every day groups departed for unknown destinations. It was a town in its own right, with its own laws, its own men of power and its own rumours. During my first days there I walked around like a stranger in a foreign country, searching for familiar faces. I found none. But I did find something else, something I had not seen in the small camp at Neu Drewitz.

What immediately struck me in Küstrin were the many different flags, uniforms and nationalities. Homemade flags flew above some of the barracks: Austrian, Hungarian, Romanian, Dutch, even French and Italian. German insignia had been cut from the jackets of many prisoners and replaced with different colours, a ribbon or an embroidered badge. Men who only a few months earlier had proudly worn German uniforms now suddenly presented themselves as Austrians, Alsatians, Luxembourgers or Poles. Everyone knew why. It was said that prisoners of other nationalities would be sent home sooner than Germans. It was as though, after its defeat, the German army had broken apart into dozens of small countries.

Because I spoke several languages, I found it easy to talk to all those different groups. Something curious soon became apparent. A man who introduced himself as French could barely utter a sentence in French. A supposed