



## Chapter 14

### *Rheinberg*

Ernst lost track of the number of prisoner of war camps through which he was routed. There was such a tremendous influx of prisoners as the war ended that the camps were constantly being reorganized. Conditions were harsh, but that was to be expected; at least they were not being gunned down.

In April, 1945, he was transferred to a new camp on the Rhine River, only about two hundred kilometers from Wiesbaden. This was Camp Rheinberg, ironically close to the place where Neanderthal Man had been discovered and named. It was surrounded by nine kilometers of barbed wire fencing. There were no guard towers, no tents, no shelter, no water, no cooking facilities and no latrines. It was essentially open countryside. There was not even enough barbed wire to divide the camp into separate enclosures; all the prisoners, men, women and children, were crowded in together. There were, it seemed, about one hundred thousand of them.

Ernst observed this with despair. He had seen the camps in which partisans were confined before they were killed; this was of that nature. This was an Allied death camp.

Trucks brought food, but there was little organization. The prisoners had to fend for themselves, walking up to get what they could, and retreating to allow others their turns. There was little internal strife; they knew that it was pointless. All of them had one mission: to survive.

"But where is our shelter?" a prisoner asked querulously in German.

"There is none," Ernst said.

"But what of the Geneva Convention? Prisoners of war are supposed to have shelter, to receive mail, and be visited by the Red Cross."

"Did we honor the Geneva Convention on the Russian front?" Ernst asked rhetorically.

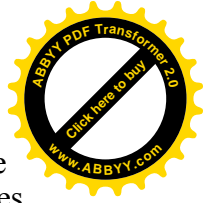
"But they were animals! Jews, partisans, traitors."

"They were captive enemies. Now we are the captives."

The man stared at him, not willing to comprehend the implication. "The Russians--we expected no mercy from them. But the Americans are softhearted. They are merciful to enemies."

"Let's hope so," Ernst said. But his experience in American captivity the past three months gave him little hope. It did not seem to matter what the nationality of the captors was, or the nationality of the partisans; the end was the same. It was in its fashion fitting: he had not helped the Russian partisans, and now no one would help him. He had merely changed sides: from outside the barbed wire to inside. That was the only difference.

At first he had been treated decently, but as increasing numbers of German troops surrendered, the facilities had been overwhelmed. He had been shipped to ever-larger, ever worse camps. The respect of the front-line officers for enemy officers had gradually been replaced by the disrespect of the rear-echelon corporals.



Some prisoners had been treated carefully: the "Wanted." This was not a good status, for those were the war criminals: the officers who had given the orders to extirpate Jews or to commit atrocities. They were being saved out for trial. Ernst was among the unwanted, which had seemed better, at first. He had hoped he would be interrogated and released in due course, but it became apparent that surrendering to the Americans had been a grotesque mistake. He had learned from the remarks of the guards and other prisoners that the American General Eisenhower, though possessed of a German name, hated not only Nazis but all things German. He wanted to destroy the German military machine forever, and the German industrial complex. He wanted a "Carthaginian peace": the settlement the Romans made on their most formidable enemy, the Phoenician city of Carthage. Total destruction. They had plowed salt into the earth so that no crop would grow there. Germany was to be reduced to a peasant economy, as in medieval times. The destruction of its manpower was the second step in this program; the industry had already been demolished.

Ernst sat on the ground and dug into the dirt with his tin cup. He poured cupfuls of dirt to the side and his hole deepened.

"What are you doing?" the nearest man demanded.

"I am digging a hole."

"But you need to drink from that cup!"

"First I need protection from the night."

The man considered. Then he lifted his own cup. "May I join you?"

"If you dig your share. I am Ernst." Prisoners did not bother with their last names, because their acquaintances were likely to be fleeting.

"I am Ludwig."

The man began digging. Soon others, observing them, were doing the same. Holes developed, with mounds of earth between.

A woman came. "May I join you? I see that you are strong men."

Ernst looked at her. She might have been attractive once, but she was in a sad state now. Her hair was matted and her dress was so dirty that its original color could not be told. She was thin, and there was a festering sore on one arm. "You look too weak to do your share of digging."

"I have a cardboard."

Ludwig laughed, but Ernst did not. "Fetch it."

"It is here." She lifted a section of cardboard about as long as a man and somewhat wider. It had evidently been salvaged from a supply box.

"What is your name?," Ernst asked, by that token accepting her. "I am Ernst."

"Johanna."



"But what good is that?" Ludwig asked.

"It is good insulation," the woman explained. "Like a blanket."

The man nodded, suddenly appreciating its value. "Ludwig."

They dug the hole as deep as was feasible, then tried it. The two men lay down at either side in their clothes, with the woman in the middle. The cardboard covered her and part of each of them. It would have to do.

The trucks brought food in the evening, but not enough. Ernst and Ludwig got some American K rations, but Johanna was not able to forge to the front before it ran out. There was no water.

Ernst measured off a third of his portion and gave it to her. He glanced at Ludwig. The man hesitated, then did likewise.

"I will return this favor when I can," Johanna said. She did not offer anything now; it was obvious that even sex would be no reward for them in her present filthy state.

"How did you, a woman, become prisoner?" Ernst asked.

"My husband was trying to defend our house. He shot an American in the hand. They killed him, and took me." She did not need to say what they had done with her; it was obvious that after raping her they had simply put her in with the prisoners.

Someone started singing as the dusk came. They joined in, singing German folk songs. It was not great music, but it engendered a feeling of camaraderie.

The night got cold. The people walked to one side of the compound, near the barbed wire, before hunkering down in their holes. The three of them followed to the edge, and found a crude trench with a log over it. They took turns on the log, two standing at either side of the trench to hold the third steady in the middle. They did not worry about modesty; the facility was crowded, and the line of people was long. Those who needed only to urinate did so from the sides, without waiting.

They returned to their hole and settled in for the night. The cardboard blanket was a considerable help, as was their closeness; now Ernst understood with new clarity how Quality had survived in Gurs. Body warmth was precious.

He also understood how he had helped her, in that camp. Now he was echoing her experience, and his love of her welled up and gave him strength to carry on. This, too, was fitting.

A wind came up in the night, chilling them despite their limited shelter. Ernst heard the moans of those who had not made holes; they had no protection at all. Those others had to huddle together in human mounds, with the associated discomforts. Ludwig, Johanna and Ernst huddled too, but at least they were out of the wind and had the protection of the walls of their pit and their cardboard blanket.

In the morning they went to wait at the gate, so as to be ready when the food was delivered. Soon long lines formed behind them, as others realized that this was probably the only way to get fed. But the food was slow in coming. Instead a guard signaled Ernst aside. "Speak English?" he asked.



"Yes, sir." The man was a sergeant, but too much respect was a better risk than too little.

"You look strong. You're assigned to body detail."

"Sir?"

"Any dead bodies in there, you haul them out here. You get a bonus for it." The man held out two packages of food.

"Thank you, sir." Ernst tried not to show his extreme eagerness for the food, because he knew it would always be in short supply and would be a terrible tool for discipline. That had been the way of it on the Russian front. "Do you wish me to look now?"

"Get moving."

Ernst tucked one package inside his shirt and opened the other. He set off around the edge of the camp, just inside the barbed wire, eating as he walked. Others would believe that this was his only ration. He did not speak to Ludwig and Johanna, knowing that they had seen, and that it would be better for them if no one else realized that they were associated with a man who had food. The two of them might be denied it by the camp authorities, or other internees might attack them and him for it. Again, Ernst's experience as an observer in Russia prepared him; he had survival information. For that much, perhaps, he should thank Dr. Kaltenbrunner.

"Are there any dead?" he called in German.

To his surprise, he received an answer. He went to the man who had answered and squatted by the indicated body. It was an old man whose eyes stared unblinkingly at the sky. He must have been dying when unloaded here. "I will take him away," Ernst said. "Have you saved his things?"

"We would not rob the dead!" the man protested.

Ernst gave him a level stare. "If we do not save what we can, we will all die sooner. His things are of no further use to him. He would want you to have them."

The man nodded reluctantly. He bent to rifle the pockets of the dead man. There were a few coins. He offered them to Ernst.

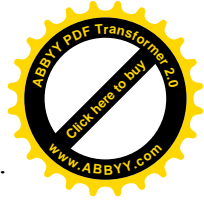
"No. I am paid to do this work." He looked at the man's feet. "Take his shoes, also; they may fit someone. And his shirt." He got the shoes off and handed them to the man.

"This is ghoulish," the man protested.

"This is survival. I saw it on the Russian front. Now it is our turn. We may be here a long time. We can not afford pride or niceties." He turned the dead man over and worked his shirt off. He gave that, too, to the living man. "Share as you see fit; do not stain his memory by hoarding what you can not use. Then get in line for food; they will not bring it to you."

The man nodded, appalled as comprehension came.

Then he took hold of the dead man's ankles and pulled him along the ground toward the edge. The



man's head left a trail in the dirt. Ernst kept hauling, and in due course got the body to the front gate.

"That's the ticket," the sergeant said. Two soldiers came to pick up the body. They tossed it unceremoniously onto the back of a truck.

Ernst went out again, looking for bodies. By noon he had found three. Then he took a break and joined Ludwig and Johanna.

"I got water," she said. She proffered her cup.

"But did you drink?" Ernst asked.

"Yes. I refilled it while I could."

Gratefully, he drank. The water tasted of dirt, but his thirst was formidable.

Then he brought out his package and shared it with the others. It was a generous ration. "It pays to have a job," he said. They had eaten in the morning, but had been given only single packages.

He looked for bodies again in the afternoon, and found two. He was rewarded by another extra package. He realized that the sergeant wanted to keep him healthy enough to continue this work, so that no American would have to do it. It was a fair deal.

So the pattern was set. They deepened their hole, and it offered protection against the heat of the day. But then it rained. The cardboard became sodden, and the icy water soaked through their clothing. The bottom of the hole formed a pool. They had to sit up to avoid the worst of it, but there was no escape. The walls of their hole collapsed. They heard exclamations as the same thing happened to others.

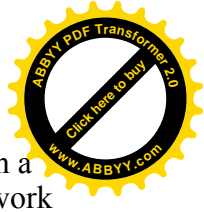
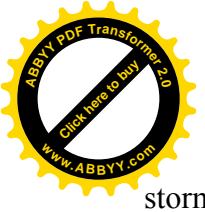
The woman was shivering violently. "We must get closer, before we freeze," Ernst said. "Joanna, we will embrace you from front and back."

They did so, with Ludwig behind and Ernst in front, lying on their sides with the wet cardboard on top. Slowly Johanna's body warmed, and they slept. Ernst dreamed of Quality, and that was his only comfort for the night. She had been through this, and had survived; he must do the same.

The next day more were dead from exposure. More men had to be recruited for hauling. In this manner Ludwig also got a job, because of Ernst's recommendation; he did not speak English, but Ernst gave him instructions, and the guards were satisfied. Johanna went alone for food and water, with better fortune than before.

Then the rations were cut. They weren't sure when it happened; the camp was timeless in its fashion, because there were no calendars and only a few prisoners retained watches.

Ernst learned why the hungry became apathetic: protest required energy. An increasing number of people simply sat in their holes doing nothing. Johanna was one of them. She had diarrhea, and it vitiated her. She had to almost carry her to the latrine trench, and then she lacked the strength to get her clothing down. They had to do it for her. It was the same with others. The smell intensified throughout the camp, and there was the sound of weak coughing. Disease was rampant because the resistance of the prisoners was low. The death count rose.



They dug their trench deeper, and made a cunette, a ditch within the trench, to help drainage in a storm. Even so, the sides tended to collapse. Others were also digging, and now the camp was a network of holes with narrow paths threading between them. Sometimes people slipped on the muddy surface, and fell into the holes. The holes were so deep, and the people so weak, that this could be a serious matter; they had to have help to get back out.

One night during a heavy rain they heard screams nearby: the walls of a deep trench had collapsed on its occupants, burying them, and the neighboring prisoners were too weak to dig the victims out before they suffocated. Soon the commotion faded; it wasn't as if death were uncommon, here.

Ernst and Ludwig considered, then reworked their trench so that the sides sloped. The ones that had collapsed had had almost vertical walls and were deep. That was too dangerous. But their own trench had to be made shallower, because there was no room to broaden it without overlapping the neighbors' holes. Thus the protection against the wind and sun was less.

Ludwig came down with a terrible fever. He could barely stand or walk. Light red froth showed at his mouth when he coughed. "I'm done for," he gasped. "I must get away from here, so I don't spoil our trench with my body."

"The hospital," Ernst said. "Maybe they'll take you, now." The guards had been adamant that only those on the verge of expiration be allowed access to the camp hospital.

He helped the man to walk to the gate. "This man is very sick," he told the guard in English. "His disease may spread. He needs to go to the hospital."

The guard eyed Ludwig, noting the phlegm and blood on his chin and shirt. "Okay. Bring him out."

Amazed at this fortune, Ernst walked Ludwig through the gate and helped him into the truck. "You go along," the guard told Ernst. "We don't want to touch him."

So Ernst rode too, as the truck bumped along. Soon it stopped. "Get him out," the driver called back.

Ernst looked out. "But this is just another open field!" It wasn't even that; part of it was freshly turned dirt with bulldozer tracks on it.

"Yeah. Unload him."

Appalled, Ernst hesitated. "Do it," Ludwig said. "I will die anyway. You will have more room in the apartment." He tried to laugh, but only choked.

"Move it," the driver said.

Ernst got down and lifted Ludwig down. The man lay on the dirt. Now Ernst understood about the freshly turned earth; evidently all prior visitors had been promptly buried. "Farewell, my friend," Ludwig gasped.

"Farewell," Ernst whispered. Then he climbed back onto the truck.



Back at the camp, he was uncertain what to say. Men had gone to the "hospital" before and not returned, but it was assumed that they were taking time to recover. Now he knew that they were dead. It was a dying place, a burial ground, nothing more. The same place they took the bodies which were already dead. Was there any point in telling?

He walked back to his trench. Johanna looked up. "I thought I would be the first of us to go," she said.

"Don't go there," Ernst replied.

She nodded, understanding.

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The days passed. The prisoners were assuming the likeness of walking skeletons, except for their swollen bellies. Johanna herself looked pregnant, but Ernst knew that this was a grotesque parody. It was the edema of starvation that filled her belly. She was no longer able to go for her food. But Ernst was still strong enough to haul bodies out, slowly, so he still got extra rations, which he shared with her.

"I promised to repay you, Ernst," she said. "But I think I will default."

"Just survive," he said. "That is all you need to do."

Someone must have done something to annoy the guards, because abruptly the water was cut off. Thirst became a monster. Then it rained, and throughout the camp men lay with their faces up, mouths open, their cups out to catch more. It wasn't enough, but there was no better choice. The deaths increased.

Then Ernst himself got the diarrhea. At first he went to the latrine trench, but soon that became too great an expenditure of energy, and he had to do it in his trench, and cover it up. Then he became too weak to get his pants down in time, and had to foul himself.

"I am sorry I gave you this," Johanna said.

"It is throughout the camp," he demurred. "We are so crowded, there is no way to avoid it."

She nodded. It was true.

Next day Ernst managed to drag himself up, shake out his filthy trousers, and go for food. But there was a change. Bulldozers were coming in. "Move over!" the guards shouted, forcing the prisoners to crowd to one side.

Then the bulldozers started leveling the ground, erasing the mounds and trenches.

"But Johanna is in there!" Ernst cried, trying to return.

A guard swung around, rifle ready. Other hands caught Ernst and pulled him back. "Nothing can be done," a man said. "They don't care."

Numbed, Ernst watched as the section of the camp was leveled. Johanna, and all others too weak



to leave their trenches, had been buried alive.

If the Americans were now openly killing prisoners, instead of hiding it with the fiction of a separate hospital, what hope remained for the rest of them?

Indeed, there was activity outside the compound. Trucks were moving, and personnel were gathering around them. Were they going to bring out the machine guns? Was the camp being closed down the easy way? He had seen it on the Russian front.

"British," someone said. Now Ernst recognized the markings on incoming trucks. What were the British doing here?

Soon enough it was known: this Rheinburg camp was in the sector of Germany to be managed by the British, and they were now taking it over. The Americans were departing.

Was this good news or bad news? It had to be good news, because nothing could be worse than the hunger, disease, and callousness they had suffered under the Americans. Perhaps the British would have some slight compassion.

Soon enough the British soldiers entered the compound. "Line up to be counted! Line up to be counted!" a sergeant called in English.

"Line up to be counted," Ernst repeated in German for the benefit of those around him.

A British soldier overheard him. The man approached. "Who speaks English here?" he demanded.

Was this more trouble? Or a chance to get extra rations by being of use to the conquerors? What did it matter? Ernst raised his hand, and then several others who spoke English well did the same.

"Come here."

They followed the soldier to the front gate, where an officer stood.

"This is appalling!" the officer said. "You are starving and filthy, and by the look of you, diseased too."

"We meant no affront, sir," Ernst said.

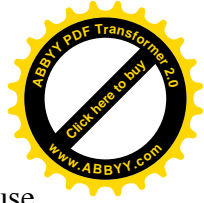
"We must use you to help our survey of the prisoners," the officer continued. "You will translate our questions for the internees, and give our clerks their answers. We want names, ranks, military numbers and home cities. But as soon as you have done this, those of you in worst need will be taken to the hospital in Lintford."

"Sir, we can do what you wish," Ernst protested. "We do not need to be taken to the hospital."

"We shall be the judge of that. Sergeant, give these translators food immediately, then go with them for the survey."

It was done. Ernst had his first decent meal in a month. The British were formal but not callous.





There were repeated countings, as the orderly British got everything straight. Then Ernst, protesting as firmly as he dared, was put on a truck bound for the hospital. He did feel terrible, because the food made his diarrhea worse: now his system had something to work on. But he was not yet ready to die.

Then they came to the town, and to a building. Ernst stared, amazed: it really was a hospital, not a dying field!

The next week was something like heaven. Ernst and his companions were given food and medicine and were allowed to read and listen to the radio. Female nurses attended them. They slept in beds with clean sheets. They themselves were clean.

Some were already too far gone to be saved, but Ernst saw that the doctors were making every effort. Ernst himself recovered; his illness had been relatively new and slight.

He was returned to the camp. It had been transformed. It was larger, and there were tents throughout. The prisoners now had shelter! He saw others staring at him. He realized that he, too, had changed almost beyond recognition. He remained very thin, but he was in a clean uniform and he was reasonably healthy.

Soon he had spread the word: the hospital was real. After that, many more prisoners were willing to go. They had been struggling desperately to conceal their illnesses.

Now prisoners were being mustered out. But the processing was tedious, and Ernst was needed as a translator. It would be some time for him.

He did his work with a positive attitude. He had learned that the British had not realized how badly American and French prisoners were being treated, and were shocked by it. The British prisoners were being cared for and released, as they had assumed was the case throughout.

However, an officer advised Ernst, they had notified his family of his presence here, and it was likely that someone was coming to see him. It might be possible to advance the paperwork in his case, so that he could be released sooner.

"Sir, I sincerely appreciate this," Ernst replied. "But there are many here I can still help. I prefer to remain until I am not needed." This was not wholly generosity; he still distrusted the fate of those who departed without returning. The British seemed different from the Americans, like day after night--but were they really?

The officer nodded. Ernst was dismissed.

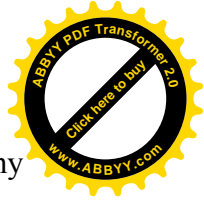
The following day he was summoned again. This time there was a British airman in the office.

"Ernst Best," the airman said.

"Present, sir."

"Don't you know me?"

Ernst looked at the man more closely. A familiarity dawned, then widened. "Lane Dowling!"



Then they were embracing. But almost immediately Ernst pulled back. "Lane, before we go any farther, there is something I must tell you."

Lane frowned. "That you took my girl."

Taken aback, Ernst nodded. "It was not my intention. I--we--"

"And I took yours. So we're even."

Ernst was set back again. "Krista?"

"Krista and Quality explained everything. I've got to tell you, Ernst, that in seven years it had thinned between me and Quality. I--I knew other girls along the way. But I couldn't let her be lost in Germany. Then, when I found out what you did, I was glad, and mad, and amazed, and finally relieved. I realized that it wouldn't have worked out with Quality. We're different types. But Krista, now--there's a woman I can relate with!"

Ernst had forgotten about this. Lane and Krista! But he realized that it was a good match. They were of a similar temperament. "Then there is no bad feeling between us?"

"Hell no, man! I saw your son. Krista's taking care of him now."

"Krista? But--"

"I pulled a string to get you released early," Lane said. "Let me tell you, it was hell to locate you! The American camps won't release any names at all, but after this one was transferred to British control, they got the names, and notified us. But they told me that you weren't ready to leave the camp yet. So Quality came here."

"Quality--here?" Ernst asked, dazed.

Then Lane took him down the hall to another office. There was Quality, just finishing at a desk. She was very like an angel.

She turned and saw them. "Ernst!" she cried gladly.

He embraced her. Then she explained. "Thee helped me when I was interned. Now I will help thee. I have learned some German, and I know how to help the hungry."

"It's been cleared," Lane said. "She's been deputized as an aide and assigned to you. You have been deputized as temporary staff. When you finish up here, you'll know where to go. And now *I* have to go. There're things to do in Wiesbaden, too." He stood up straight, and lifted his hand in a military salute. "Good luck, friend."

Bemused, Ernst returned the salute. Then Lane was gone, and they were walking back out to the camp to help the remaining prisoners. His life was reappearing before him.

**The End**

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