

Letters to My Uncle



making recipe cards this week
one that is only nearly missed
related from growing up
who pick nasturtiums f
and eat them. And
READY TO

by Laszlo Krisch

Foreword

This is the story of my family at the end of the Second World War, and our arrival as immigrants in Venezuela. It should be helpful to the reader if I provide some background on what happened to us before the story. Previous to, and during the early part of World War II, we led the normal life of solid middle class citizens of Debrecen, Hungary (pop. 100,000), where our father, Krisch Karoly (Charles Krisch) was the proprietor of a small ceramic stove factory. He not only made the stoves, he sold and installed them. Ceramic stoves were popular appliances in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for heating specific rooms in one's home. He married Elizabeth Konya, daughter of a tobacco shop owner, and they had four children, Eta, Kari (Karoly Jr.), Erwin and Laszlo. This life was rudely interrupted during the early spring of 1944, when the Hungarian Viceroy 1-lorti (Hungary was a kingdom at that time, remnant of the Austro/Hungarian Empire) unilaterally declared Hungary to be neutral in the

war. The German Reich was not about to let go of Hungary, both for military and strategic reasons. Hitler sent to Budapest a few German divisions from Austria, took over the Government, installed a puppet Hungarian Nazi Government, and occupied the country. The consequences were dire, and more so for Debrecen, the fourth largest city in Hungary. Situated in the eastern part of the country, Debrecen was an important railroad switching facility for strategic war materiel flowing toward the Russian front. Starting around March, 1944, allied air forces raided the town three times a day, morning, noon and night. The Americans came in the morning, the British at noon, and the Russians at night. We had the additional misfortune to live only half a mile from the railroad station, so our father's factory and our living quarters became the early victims of the air raids. The only reason we survived was, that my brother Erwin and I dug a deep ditch in the garden as an air raid shelter, covered it with some planks and dirt, where we could hide during the air raids. The property didn't survive beyond the third raid, all that was left was a huge crater. The merciless air campaign lasted about four months. During this time, life was reduced to waiting for the next air raid. When the siren sounded, all able bodied

people got on whatever vehicle was available (horse drawn carts, bicycles, trucks, cars, tramways, etc.) and ran out of town.

We were given some emergency living quarters in the city. Because normal day by day life was impossible, Karl and Erwin decided to move to Budapest to stay with our uncle Jenô (from our father's side of the family). By around June, the town lay in ruins. The last straw was the news that the Russians have invaded Hungary and will be in Debrecen in a not too distant future. There was not much left of our formal life, and the future looked bleak. We decided to go to Budapest ourselves; my two brothers came back, and helped us in packing up and moving. This is where my story starts.

Laszlo Krisch

East Brunswick, N.J., the year 2000.



Caracas, Venezuela, March 29, 1956

Dear Uncle Jenô:

In your recent letter you asked me to write down what happened to the members of the Krisch Family as we found ourselves in Venezuela by the end of the Second World War. For whatever reason, family obligation, curiosity, need to remember things as they were, I decided I will do it. So here goes the tale....

The story, according to your wishes, starts back just before Christmas in 1944, the last time you have seen us. By that time the Russian troops stood before Budapest. One of the most observed traditions of our branch of the Krisch Family was to celebrate Christmas together as a family holiday, come what may. My brother Erwin and I were following this

unwritten rule when we decided to travel from Budapest to Radoc¹, where our father, mother and our sister Eta took refuge from the war. One of the results of the war was that due to heavy bombing the trains were not running anymore, or if they did, they did it if and when they could.

By then we have had a number of war related adventures, so we were equipped to face problems such as no transportation. I don't remember which of us came up with the idea to go by bicycle, but both of us liked it. A bike provides an independent means of transport, goes everywhere, needs no fuel; characteristics that are wonderfully suited to the times of war. The minor obstacle of neither of us having a bike did not bother us greatly, we started our planning. The problem of not having any bikes was relatively easy to solve. Your sons Erizô and Jenô had two beautiful bicycles, which we managed to borrow. The next challenge was to select articles to take with us. Whatever possessions we have managed to bring with us from our hometown Debrecen, after our home was pretty well bombed out, were distributed between Krisch family members living in Budapest.

1 A small village in the western part of Hungary at the Austrian border, about 300 miles from Budapest

We decided to take as much as we could. We used some of the rugs to wrap up the stuff we thought our family could use most, and tied them on the back of our bikes. We regretted this action very much time and again during our trip, because the bundles were very large and the back of our bikes were very small, causing continuous shifting of the weight. As a result, we had to take frequent stops to re-tie and rearrange the bales just one more time. Thus, having packed up and gotten ready for our trip, we said our goodbyes, hoping to see everyone again for the coming new year celebration. Our progress during the trip was slow and painful. The roads were icy, and mostly covered with snow. Let's face it, taking a bike ride in a winter coat, with a fully loaded bike on icy roads was never an enjoyable event. To make things worse, we had to look out for speeding military convoys, cars, tanks and low flying enemy aircraft, so that we found ourselves in a snow-covered ditch more times than we cared to count. But, eventually we made our way to Gyôr². Good fortune smiled on us, we found that the trains were still running in this part of the country, although with one or two days of delay. The fact was that we were running out of time, we had only two

more days 'till Christmas, so we had to hurry. It was not very helpful that we had two fully packed bikes to take with us. We solved this problem by leaving the bikes with a farmer in a nearby village, who was an acquaintance of one of our relatives in Budapest. Of course, we still had two large bundles to carry. After getting rid of the bikes, our luck still held, we got on a train that night, taking us from Gyôr to Sopron³. Arriving in Sopron we've been told that there are no trains leaving for our next destination in Szombathely⁴. After scurrying around for a while for transportation, we found out that there was going to be a train after all, but only with two coaches, and it will take us only to a small station about 6 miles before Szombathely. Not having too many other choices, to make it to our family by Christmas, this was our last chance. But, about 400 other people had the same idea. The situation was further complicated by a railroad employee standing on the second coach, announcing that nobody is allowed aboard. The multitude convinced him, very quickly otherwise, he was just pushed off the platform regardless of how much he screamed.

3 Major town on the southwest Austrian border.

4 Small town, about 15 miles from our final destination Radoc.

In the ensuing melee all 400 people tried to get on board of two coaches that would not hold more than about a fourth of them. It came very handy that both Erwin and I were gymnasts. Using our shoulders and elbows we convinced the crowd that we needed to get forward, even if we carried two large bundles. Boarding the train was relatively simple: Erwin climbed through a window, I handed him the bundles and climbed in after him. We made ourselves at home on the floor by sitting on our bundles and settling down for a four-hour wait, which we passed by eating, drinking and sleeping. The throng that could not get on the train passed the time in screaming continuously, and dragging people off the steps of the coaches to take their place. Then, in a couple of minutes later they were dragged off by some others. The railroad employee kept busy by shouting at the people sitting on the roof of the coaches, telling them that they will serve as decorations on the wall of the first tunnel, but they were not impressed.

The trip was long and boring. We arrived on the morning of Christmas day at the small station 6 miles before Szombathely, which was the end of the line for our train. We shouldered our bundles and

started to walk toward Szombathely on the railroad tracks. We arrived there all sweaty and tired, just to be told that the next train to Radoc was to leave next day. If we were going to make it for Christmas, we had no choice but to continue on foot, hoping that someone will give us a lift. We walked about 5 miles before a military truck driver had mercy on us and picked us up.

We arrived in Radoc in about half an hour. Our family was quite surprised by our arrival, they thought we somehow dropped from heaven. They were overjoyed by our presence. And they also cherished every one of the articles we brought along. This was our consolation for having shlepped the two bundles all the way from Budapest. The only missing member of the family was our brother Kari, who we believed was stationed in the western part of Hungary as a second lieutenant in the Hungarian army. We passed the holidays in peace and quiet. Of course, the rumors ran wild in the village on what's going on in the war. One rumor had it that the Russians had Budapest encircled. We didn't believe this, because we thought that the joint German and Hungarian armies will do everything to defend the capital. After the holidays, we said fare-

well to the family and were on our way to return to Budapest. We had their good wishes (and a great deal of food) to remember them by on the way back. We started out in a leisurely manner. There was no reason to rush any more. We retraced our steps first to Sopron then to Gyôr, where we picked up our bikes at the farmer's home, where we left them. As we traveled, we kept asking everyone we found about what the latest news from the war was, but nobody really knew. One would swear that the road is open to Budapest, and the next one would say it has been overrun by the Russians. Regardless of the rumors, we felt we had no choice but to see it for ourselves. We climbed on our bikes and off we went toward Budapest. I don't remember the name of the village, about half way to Budapest, where we were stopped by a Hungarian MP sergeant, who wanted to know where did we think we were going, the front being about half a mile away? He thought it was very funny when we told him we were on our way to Budapest. His opinion was that nothing much will change at the front for the next two weeks, by which time they hoped to break through the Russian troops encircling Budapest. He suggested that we go back and try it again in about two weeks. We didn't have much choice, we followed

his advice and turned back. On our way out of the village we decided to do some sightseeing. It presented the usual devastation that war brings to the countryside, the soldiers were coming in and out of the houses, they were using a couple of them as stables for their horses. The local grocery store was plundered, what they did not take, they destroyed. I still recall the image of the store as we were leaving, on the top shelves were rows of bottles, frozen and their contents sticking out from their necks like candles, with the cork on top of it. We looked around the empty homes. Everything was in shambles. In one of the kitchens we rescued about six plates out of the broken dishes, to take them back to our mother who needed them badly. Now richer by six dinner plates we were on our way back to our parents. This time we didn't leave our bikes behind.

Our arrival in the small village of Radoc was quite a sensation, when after a week of absence we reappeared, now richer with two bikes and six dinner plates. After two weeks of waiting it was time again for our trip back to Budapest. The rumor mill was working full time, one of them being that Budapest's siege by the Russian army was broken and the city had been liberated. We were determined

to go back to Budapest because we left all our belongings there, and what were we going to do in a small village anyhow? So, once more we started on our journey. We didn't get very far, though. When we got to Szombathely we have been told that the Russian encirclement of Budapest is total. Once more we needed to make a decision whether to go or turn back. To decide we tossed a coin: heads we go, tails we don't. It was heads, so we went. Not that we got very far, we didn't get further than Sopron, where we have been told that there is no hope whatsoever to get back to Budapest, the city was about to fall to the Russians. Once more we turned around and returned to the family, where they had already heard the bad news and were expecting us. The question was, what now? There were no job opportunities in a small village, and our money supply was fast dwindling. We needed a solution, and needed it fast! Then, we recalled that when we were passing through Szombathely last time, we saw some posters, calling on the populace to volunteer to work in Germany, where job opportunities and living accommodations were available. Starving to death not being an attractive alternative, the family council decided that we will volunteer and go to Germany. One of the main factors in this decision

was that our sister Eta, who was pregnant with her first child and was living in terror, thinking that the fighting will get to the village just as she was ready to give birth. There was not much to lose and maybe something to be gained by going to Germany. So, the three men, our father, Erwin and I traveled to Sopron to find out about the volunteer program. When we got there it was to our advantage that Father spoke German, the German authorities were much more friendly than usual. They were quite positive that it would be to our advantage to sign up for the program. Facing a grim future in Hungary, it didn't take us too long to decide. We signed on the dotted line. With the paper work behind us we returned to Radoc to pack up our belongings, then traveled back to Sopron.

When we arrived there, they put us on a train the same evening of our arrival to start out to our unknown destination. We crossed the Hungarian Austrian border on February 2, 1945, around midnight. The train did not stop at the border, so we didn't know exactly when we left Hungary. We knew we were in Austria when the train stopped at a small station where the people spoke German.



Caracas, Venezuela, September 3, 1956

Dear Uncle Jenô:

I hope you got my first letter. Let me pick up the story at the time we arrived in Vienna at noon of the same day. There, we were transferred to a communal living facility, which was called “Lager⁵.”

The “Lager” concept at that time was a uniquely German institution. The concept is simple: take an empty school building, or an abandoned military facility; put in as many bunk beds as you possibly can; fill it up with people. The advantage of this approach is that it houses the greatest number of people in the least amount of space. The only place to sit is on your bed, or at the table at the middle of the room. There is no space for your belongings except under the bed. Each room had its share of infants

that spent the night screaming their heads off. The trick was to learn how to sleep soundly through the screaming, snoring and squabbling that went on all night. But, truth will out: in retrospect the “Lager” in Vienna it was one of the best we stayed at. It was relatively clean, and although the food wasn’t abundant, it was edible and you could always cheat and sneak back into the food line. The fact is that we spent a relatively peaceful and happy two weeks in Vienna. Of course, peaceful is as peaceful goes if you include frequent air-raids. But, air-raids were old-hat to us. Anybody who survived the air-raids in our hometown of Debrecen didn’t get too worked up about them in Vienna. Debrecen experienced bombing raids three times a day (morning, noon and night,) for about four months, and being a mid-size city (100,000 inhabitants), it got thrashed quite badly. Vienna was too big for us to be bothered by air-raids, unless we happened to be in the part that was being raided.

So, Erwin and I spent our days roving around the city, we went home only to eat and to sleep. Vienna captured our imagination. We criss-crossed the city front Stefanskirche⁶ to the Schönbrunn Castle. What we regretted most was that all the

museums were closed due to the war. We had two happy weeks in Vienna, courtesy of the German state. When they had enough people to fill up a train they shipped them out, so we found ourselves on a train again, without the faintest idea where we were headed. The trip lasted about four to five days. The only way we knew in what direction we were going is by noticing the stations we were passing by: Passau - Linz - Nürnberg, which meant that we were going westward. We stopped quite frequently to let military trains by. As always, the small children suffered most. The railroad coaches had no heat in the winter, and without any warm food they were all hungry, or had colds, or both. If one started to scream, it woke up all the rest, so they could all join in. We really felt very sorry for their mothers, who were at their wits' end what to do with their babies. At Nürnberg the train turned north toward Oberfranken⁷. The last large city we passed was Lichtenstein, then shortly afterwards we arrived at our final destination: Burgkunstadt. Poor Burgkunstadt, its misfortune was that it had two large shoe factories and the town was small enough so that nobody cared to bomb it.

7 Oberfranken is a German province, north of Bavaria

The German high command decided to move some steel manufacturing facilities from, the Saar industrial region of Germany that was raided daily by the allied bombers. It didn't take a genius to figure it out how desperate the Germans were, to schlepp relatively small steel manufacturers across Germany to a godforsaken small city in Oberfranken, so that they can function in peace. Goes without saying that they had to throw the shoe manufacturers and their workers out before they could move the stuff in from the Saar.

We found ourselves in a Lager once more. In theory we were "freiwillige arbeiters" (volunteer workers), but that was only theory. We were part of a group of workers that consisted mostly of prisoners of war the Germans captured from, all over Europe. There were Poles, Russians, Serbs, Latvians, Rumanians, etc., and we were placed right in with them. Not that it mattered, we were all supposed to work for the greater glory of Germany. Where it did matter was in food. As volunteer workers we were supposed to be able to decide where we wanted to eat: in the cafeteria or getting our own rations. They made it easy for us: we were to eat in the cafeteria. When it came to food, they didn't believe in over feeding

their workers, it would only slow them down. They served a “light” breakfast: black chicory coffee, as much as you wanted. And, if you had a sweet tooth there was always saccharine, which increased its nutritional value considerably. Then, to top it off, you got a slice of black bread with a spoon full of margarine and the same amount of marmalade. We amused ourselves during the breakfast by trying to guess what the marmalade was made of carrots or beets. Not that it made any difference, it was red and sweet, with no other characteristics in taste. At noon we had two boiled potatoes with a sauce (ingredients undetermined,). Dinner: what was left over from lunch, made into a soup. I’m giving you these details because this was our fare for the next two months. During this time Father made a tremendous effort in talking the authorities into letting him, our mother and sister move out of the Lager, and eventually succeeded. They moved to a nearby village by the name of Weidnitz, consisting of about 100 buildings. This arrangement had the advantage that they did get their food ration tickets issued to them, so that they could cook for themselves. If Erwin or I felt somewhat faint from hunger, we could always visit them for some additional boiled potatoes. Based on this generous

feeding plan, we can safely say that the workers, volunteers or otherwise, did not kill themselves in helping the Germans to win the war. What did we do? Father became a supervisor to about 20 Ukrainian forced laborers, and in face of a total lack of understanding of each other's language, no work records have been broken. Erwin became a warehouse man, and I was given the responsibility of installing totally useless machinery in the empty shoe factory. We slowly got used to the conditions, nay, adopted to them the best we knew how. Only change was, that after I installed several machines, never to be used for anything, I got transferred to the electrical welding department. Nobody cared that I knew absolutely nothing about electrical welding. Nobody else did either. The advantage of this job was that because my work clothes were made out of some synthetic material, it caught fire with great regularity from the sparks generated during the welding process. In time though, I developed a wonderful and precise system of detection: when I started to smell burning rags, I knew I was on fire. I just stopped welding for a moment, put out the smoldering fire with my gloves and continued welding. The result was that although I did start to look like a Swiss cheese, the holes remained

relatively small. Meanwhile, the war was grinding on, although we didn't hear much about it until the American troops crossed the Rhine. Then, the whole atmosphere changed. The discipline became much looser and the foreign workers complained much louder about living and working conditions. We thought we'll wait for the end of the war in Burgkunstadt, but the best plans of men and mice...

One day our brother Kari showed up in his smart uniform of a Hungarian army second lieutenant, in company of two women. I don't exactly remember how he found out where we were in Germany (Red Cross?), but he arrived in Germany the year before around Christmas time, so he decided to pay us a visit. He picked up the women in a town named Hof, where a direct hit on the railroad station during an air raid destroyed most of their luggage. To make the story even more intriguing, one of them was a Hungarian Princess (or so she said,) married to an American living in America. She was in a great hurry to reach the American troops so that she can join her husband. The other woman was her friend. Kari was a military courier. You could count on him, to find an assignment where you didn't have to do much, except travel. One of the benefits of

being a courier was that he had loads and loads of food ration tickets. So, we went shopping and had a real feast. After we filled our stomachs we had no choice but to face the future. We had no jobs, the workers in the shoe factory disappeared and the place closed down. If we decided to stick around, it would represent three more mouths to feed. So the Family Council got together and decided that Erwin and I should join Kari on his travels, back to his station. We packed up our meager belongings and set out for a trip to a town named Degendorf, where Kari was headquartered. We still had the bikes from Budapest, so Kari and Erwin started out on the bikes, while the two women and I got on the train. The train didn't take us further than Beyreuth. Half the town was destroyed the previous night, including the railroad station. We were told by the railroad people that no trains were going to leave from there for the next two to three days. If we wanted to continue our trip, we had to walk to the next town with a functioning railroad station, about 15 miles away. So we walked. Burdened by hand luggage, it took us two days, sleeping one night in a barn. It was a great relief to travel by train again, instead of walking. One advantage of walking over train travel was that you could pick up additional

food ration tickets in every small town or village you passed through. It was really a simple procedure. We all had five or six different I.D.s. When arriving in a town, we went to the town hall we presented one of the I.D. 's and asked for traveling food ration tickets. Once you got first stamp on an I.D., the rest was easy.

The train ride was long and boring, enlivened every so often by low flying warplanes. Then, the train stopped, we got off and dove into the ditch. Since it was not a military train, we didn't get strafed. During the whole trip we sat on the floor of the train coach, which was no great surprise to us, by now we were pretty used to it. When we arrived in Degendorf we took up quarters in a Lager, located in an empty school building. My brothers arrived in about two days. Their trip was more or less the same as ours: biking, diving into ditches, biking, etc. The two women thanked us for our help, said goodbye and went on their way. Kari returned to his headquarters, located in a nearby village, while Erwin and I spent our days hanging out. By now everyone realized that the war was lost, but no one knew what's going to happen tomorrow. Degendorf's claim to fame was that it was the location of the

last Hungarian Nazi Government in exile. By now this didn't mean much to anyone, including the members of the government. There was absolutely nothing or nobody to govern. They spent their time in thinking up clever lies to tell to the American military authorities, when they arrive.

The nearer the fighting came the more the discipline disappeared. All the soldiers in Kari 's headquarters faded into the background, and we decided we wanted to fade away too, instead of sitting around and waiting to be occupied. We decided to go south, and meet the occupying forces. Of course there was no transportation of any kind by now, but we had bikes! As a matter of fact we had only one bike, the other bike had been stolen. Desperate people do desperate things, so we went out and "got" two more bikes, without necessarily paying for them. I got one, since my bike got stolen from me, and Erwin got another. We checked out the candidates first, to make sure they had decent tires. In about half a day, we were ready to roll. We were about two days underway, when just before us a German military convoy was attacked and destroyed by American airplanes. We of course had a good view of the action from the ditch. It wasn't pretty.

Afterwards we had a meeting of the Family Council and decided that we were sick and tired of the war and diving into ditches to save our lives. So, instead of continuing our trip southward, we decided to go back to Degendorf and wait there for the American troops. Little did we know that we were making a rather bad mistake. We turned around and returned to Kari's headquarters and settled down to wait for the occupying forces.

Just before the arrival of the Americans, the public order went to hell. Groups of people began roaming the streets and emptying stores, warehouses, abandoned barracks, anything. One story was that one of the groups found a wine cellar and proceeded to get drunk. As part of having a good time they bashed in the side of some of the huge vats of wine, and proceeded to drown in it. Of course the most popular item was food, by the time the troops arrived, everything was gone. We were in a room of one of the barracks, preparing some gulyas from a German canned meat, when three American soldiers walked in. Kari, being the friendly type, offered them some of the food. But, they had other interests, instead of food they took our wrist watches. After this friendly gesture they herded us out to an open

field, where by then they had accumulated a few hundred souls. There, another friendly American took Erwin's leather jacket off. It was brand-new. Although at that time we didn't know it, we became officially P.O. W.'s (Prisoners of War). This is where it became clear where we made our mistake. By returning to Degendorf we came back to a town where the American authorities were picking up all men between 15 and 90, regardless of type of dress, uniform or no. The city was the site of the last Hungarian Government in exile, and the Americans wanted to make sure they picked up all of them. It was also a mistake to stay in the barracks. If you are in the barracks you are a soldier, uniform or no. As we were captured late afternoon, the whole bunch of us were herded into a warehouse of a nearby fruit canning factory, for safekeeping. There, everyone helped himself to the canned fruit, since nobody fed us. The consequences of filling your stomach with canned fruit in syrup are rather severe, especially where there is nowhere to go out. The three of us took some precautions, which we remembered from our childhood, as to what happens to you when you pig out on canned fruit. We had some ground coffee with us, which we ate to steady our stomachs after a good dinner of canned pears. Everyone knew that

coffee at that time was anything but coffee, it was all chicory and roasted grains, which did wonders for our stomach.

Next morning, they started us off on foot to our unknown destination. We walked about 15 to 20 miles without anything to eat or drink. Fortunately, we had some canned corned beef and a couple of canteens of water, which we ate and drank as we walked. Next day we arrive in a much larger camp, where they had several thousand men. Slowly we were getting used to the routine that when the night came all of us just laid down on the ground. I still have fond memories of our first night out in the field, near a town called Cham. In the middle of April in Germany, it still tends to be kind of cool during the night, so what do you do about the cold? The solution was to get a group of about six people together, and dig a ditch with some spoons, and sit down in it. The ditch wasn't very deep. You can do only so much with a spoon. The arrangement was that the first man sat at the end of the ditch with his legs open, the next one sat between his legs, and so on... until the ditch was full. If you were lucky you had a blanket to pull over your head. At the beginning this wasn't a bad arrangement, we could

even sleep some, but as the night wore on problems developed. Someone's legs or arms went to sleep, and he needed to wiggle to get back the circulation. You did get back the circulation, but you also woke up everyone else with your wiggles. By about midnight we gave up the ditch, and tried something else. The something else was to squat in a circle with our backs to each other, and pull the blanket over our heads to keep warm. This wasn't such a good solution either, when someone fell asleep he fell over and the whole group collapsed. We also had some problems with sanitation, or the lack of it thereon. There was no food and nothing to drink, but that was the least of our problems. What we didn't have were some latrines. So, in desperation the men started to relieve themselves behind some trees on top of a small hill. This could have been a perfect solution, except that when it rained, the rain started to wash down everything to the bottom of the hill. And, not having anything to drink, some enterprising men dug some ditches to accumulate the rain water for washing and drinking. We stayed away from the stuff but you kind of shudder when you think about the consequences.



Caracas, Venezuela, November 10, 1956

Dear Uncle Jenô:

This is my third, and last letter to you about our adventures. After a couple of days of the great outdoors, the powers to be decided that we should be moved. Huge open tractor trailers showed up on the third day in the morning, and we were told to board them. To make sure that the trucks were properly loaded, they made us to throw all of our belongings (small and pitiful that they were) on the ground. As we climbed up, a couple of soldiers were hitting us on the head with same planks to have us back into the trucks; once the trailers could not take on more people, our belongings were thrown on top of us. This action provided us with great fun, because we had to pass around all the belongings over our heads so that their owners could identify and claim them. Our trip lasted most of the day, with

the trucks careening on the high ways with their human cargo. Once we arrived at our destination and climbed down from the trucks, we were lead into barbed wire enclosures about 1,000 persons to an enclosure, guarded by solders. Overall, there must have been about 40,000 prisoners of war, sitting in barbed wire enclosures, set up on a very large hayfield. And then. ... the long awaited moment has arrived: food!

The soldiers have picked out some prisoners to bring in the food in large 10 gallon tins, and we all lined up to receive it. Surprise: the dinner consisted of two tablespoons of dried peas, and one tablespoon of backing powder. Following the handout of these somewhat puzzling (and generous) rations, we looked at each other, and we asked the obvious question: Now what? Unless we wanted to chomp on the dried peas, and wash it down with baking powder dissolved in water, we needed to cook it somehow. To cook it, we need a container, and we need WOOD. The container we had, because once the peas were distributed, the 10- gallon cans were available as cooking pots. But, where is the wood? The answer came from an apple tree in the middle of the hay field. Within minutes, the tree was full of

prisoners sitting on the branches like large black birds, and shaving it with whatever implements they had, running a gamut of pocket knives (those which survived repeated searches), sharpened spoons, sharp stones, shaving blades, nails, etc. Within an hour, under the concentrated assault from the men the tree disappeared down to the ground. Once the wood problem have been solved, small groups were formed to pool the food, so that it could be cooked more efficiently. And, after cooking the peas (and adding the baking powder to speed cooking) we had our dinner. After the delicious dinner, we were ready for bed. By now we were veterans at accommodating ourselves to the terrain, we just laid down on the grass and went to sleep. After this exciting beginning, we settled down to surviving the best we knew how. Although the sleeping arrangements remained the same, as the days passed, it became early summer so we could climb out of our trenches, and sleep wherever we wanted. The bad times were when it rained. You sat under your coat, or whatever, and waited for the rain to end, so that you could get up and walk around until you dried out. The problem with walking around was, that when 40,000 men start trampling around on a soft ground, it becomes mud, the sticky, staying kind, hard or impossible to

scrape off. On the food front, our keepers brought in field kitchens, manned them with prisoners so that after all, we could have some warm food (the operational word here is “some”). The authorities did not believe in overfeeding prisoners. They get sassy and hard to handle. But, this arrangement created one unanticipated result: we had something to talk about. What we all talked about endlessly and with passion was: FOOD! You remembered big parties, weddings, christenings, funerals, Christmas, Easter, etc., with tons of food, and told everybody who cared to listen what the food was, and how it tasted. And they did the same for you. One thing that short rations do for you: you come to believe sincerely that given half a chance you could eat for two days, without stopping. Of course, this feeling can bring some unfortunate (nay, tragic) results. One of the prisoners managed to get hold of a whole loaf of bread, which he ate in one sitting. Then, of course he became very thirsty and had a lot of water to drink. End result: his stomach burst, and he died. Besides talking about food, what else did we do? We traded! The currency? CIGARETTES! You could buy ANYTHING for cigarettes. This fact gave us, the three brothers, an edge. None of us smoked. The main trader in the family was our brother

Charles (we called him Kari). He was the trader's trader. Because he was always worried about his head, he fashioned a headdress out of a couple of handkerchiefs, and roamed the camp in search of trades. Whatever it was, he would trade it: boots, shirts, blankets, cooking utensils, back packs, food in all its manifestations, but above anything else: CIGARETTES. Most prisoners were heavy smokers and they went through some horrific withdrawal symptoms. They would sell their food, their clothing, their jewelry (if they managed to hold on to them), or their soul (if anybody would be interested) anything for a smoke. I remember one prisoner who had nothing left to sell than his overcoat. He sold it for a pack of cigarettes, which he proceed to smoke. Once he smoked all of them, he lay down in the mud, and died. He was not the only one.

The setup and the equation were perfect: overcrowding + malnutrition + lack of shelter and sanitation + lice = Typhus. Due to the diligence of Kari, we were relatively well fed so we were late in getting sick, but sick we got. First I got sick, then Erwin got sick. For some reason, Kari never got it. I had a relatively easy time of it, but Erwin got it really bad. We were both sent to the hospital,

which consisted of the attic of a nearby high school. Stretchers were placed on the concrete floor for the sick. We got lucky because our doctor turned out to be a Hungarian medical doctor, who was also one of the prisoners. Once he understood that Erwin and I were brothers, he allowed us to be side by side. Because I was on my way to recovery, I could take care of Erwin, who by now was really delirious from high fever. It fell to me to give him cold compresses and to hound the orderlies and the doctor for aspirin and other medication to control Erwin's fever, which broke in about three days. The bout with typhus took its toll, we lost a tremendous amount of weight, Erwin weighed about 80 lbs., while I was about 90 lbs. It was obvious to the authorities that we would never make it if they sent us back to the camp, so they gave us a medical discharge. Because we had only pajamas, they gave us some second hand uniforms, which we suspected belonged to prisoners who didn't make it. Erwin was dressed as a Serbian soldier, while I was half German half something else (Russian?) that I could not identify. But, it covered our bodies, which was the main intent. As all good prisoners released from prison, we headed for the railroad station. Our intention was to return to Weidnitz,

in the Province of Oberfranken, where we left our family, hoping that we will find them there.

We found the railroad station quite bombed out, overrun with released soldiers, just like us, looking for transportation. There were soup kitchens set up by the city where we could get watery potato soup, and chunks of black bread. Since we were very hungry, we joined the lines several times, until our stomachs were full. This much done, we looked around for trains. Not seeing any, we asked a railroad employee about train schedules. He had great news for us: there were no trains running! Or at least no passenger trains. The only trains running were freight trains, and we were welcome to board them. Sticking around was out of the question, so we asked for the next train heading in the general direction we wanted to go. For our luck there was a train, just pulling slowly out of the station. We started to run to catch it, but it was heavy going, we weren't in the best of physical conditions. At last I managed to catch a rung of the ladder attached to the railroad wagon, and pulled myself up. Then, reaching down to Erwin, still running next to the wagon (and running out of steam pretty quickly) grabbed his hand, and pulled him, up, to join me

on the ladder. There we sat until we recovered our breath. Then we proceeded to climb up the ladder to the top. This was an open coal wagon, with about fifty soldiers already sitting on top of the coal, so we joined them. At the first stop we climbed down, from the top and got ourselves into an empty cattle wagon, so that we had some roof over our heads. Of course, this wagon was also jammed full with soldiers heading home. As time went on, it became night and rather chilly, so that the doors of the wagon were pulled shut. It soon became obvious that this was somewhat of a mistake. All soldiers had their soup and black bread back at the station; this meal not only gave you : nourishment, it also gave you gas. With more than a hundred soldiers jammed into a freight wagon and with the doors shut, there was enough gas in the air to drive the wagon to the end of Germany, without any locomotive. Luckily, nobody thought of lighting a cigarette if he did there would have been a conflagration.

It took us more than three days and quite a number of train changes to get to the city of Lichtenstein, which was the nearest railroad station to Weidnitz (population 400), about ten miles from Lichtenstein. And, as usual, no sight of public transportation.

Once we asked around, we found out that friendly truck drivers will give a lift to needy citizens. So, we scurried around, and found a waiting truck going in our direction. We threw in our meager belongings over the gate and climbed in. There were some other people already sitting on the floor, waiting for the truck to start. As we sat down and looked around, we couldn't believe our eyes: one of the passengers was our father! We shouted "Apa!" "Apa!" (Daddy, daddy in Hungarian). First he looked at us with bewilderment, then it slowly dawned on him that the two scarecrows, dressed in strange dirty uniforms were in fact his sons. We embraced, then proceeded to tell him about our adventures. We also had to tell him that our brother Kari was left behind in the P.O. W. camp, and God knows what has happened to him. After a short drive we arrived home. Home was a small room in a local farmer's home, where our mother, father, sister and her baby boy called Eugene lived, ate and slept. We were put up to sleep in the barn on the hay, which was heaven after the P.O. W. camp and as far as possible from the crying of Eugene during the night. Of course, our mother was quite alarmed about our condition and decided to fatten us up the best she knew how. Our mother got an electric one burner stove at one end

of the room, on which she cooked for all of us. What she cooked (the only ingredient available to her in quantities) was potatoes. She made potato soup, mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, fried potatoes, potato pancakes, potato bread, potato dumplings and variations thereon. During the first week we ate about 10 lbs. potatoes a day, which was probably as good a diet you could have after a long period of chronic hunger (the soldier with the loaf of bread came to mind). In about a month we regained our lost weight, and were ready for some action. Ready for some action, to do what? Germany lay in ruins and the Germans themselves had nothing to do. Our entertainment consisted mostly of going over to the trash pit of the nearby high school, where some of the occupying American troops were billeted. The trash pit contained treasures beyond our wildest dreams: boots, socks, shirts, trousers, coats, blankets, Life and Look magazines, Readers Digest, and an endless selection of pocket books. There was also food: large tins with leftovers in the bottom: dried eggs, powdered milk, Spam, dehydrated potatoes, jam etc. We became absolute experts on G.I. food and clothing. We picked up all these treasures, and took them home. Very shortly, we started to look like AWOL American soldiers,

dressed up in discarded uniforms. One of the few things that were available in the stores was fabric dye. Our mother dyed everything a beautiful brown, so that we are not taken for American soldiers. She also made some very fashionable jackets for us from some thick fluffy curtains we found at the pit. They seemed to have come from the auditorium of the high school that someone decided needed to be redecorated. Better for us! We looked great in those jackets. Because there was really not much else to do, and I loved to read, so I started to read all the stuff my American friends threw out. I was a really ravenous reader, and I kept at it. Very slowly it started to make sense. The best were the cowboys' stories, because both the text and the dialog were simple, and somewhat repetitive. With the aid of an English- German dictionary, in a couple of months I picked up enough English to enjoy most of what I read.

After about three months of blissful existence, all of a sudden everything changed. The change came in the form of a post card, with beautiful mountains on it. The card was from our brother Kari, and he sent it from a small village in the Province of Bavaria, not very far from Munich. He wanted us to

go to him, and pick him up. He needed to be picked up because he had no documents. Few fugitive soldiers do. At that time, anybody traveling without documents would be picked up and thrown into the brig, until they found out who he was (like Hitler, the fugitive?). Wise in the ways of bureaucracy, we set down and forged some traveling documents for him, replete with good-looking stamps (you can carve really good stamps out of potatoes) using the farmer's rickety typewriter, then we set out to rescue our brother.

By now passenger trains were running, but since the Deutch Mark was worthless, nobody took fare collection very seriously, so we didn't need any money. It took us about three days to get to our brother, who was working in a cheese factory in a small village. After eating enough cheese to drop an elephant, we sat down to listen to Kari's story. It was somewhat the same hair-raising story we had, with some variations. It seems that after we were taken ill at the P.O. W. camp, Germany was partitioned among the four allies shortly after, The Americans, the British, the Russians, and the French. The camp fell under French occupied zone, so the Americans turned over the camp to the French.

As far as the prisoners were concerned, this was a very big mistake. The problem with the French was that although they were one of the victors, France was almost as badly off as Germany as far as war damage was concerned. Which meant that they had no food, no supplies, no nothing, least to give it to their former enemies? Whatever they got, they got it from the Americans. The French commandant called in the town council of Bad Keutznach and told them to feed the prisoners, since they were their countrymen, and the French had no food for them. Unfortunately, the town's entire population consisted of 16,000 people, and exactly how they were going to feed 40,000 very hungry and mostly sick prisoners was a mystery. The last Karl heard of it was that there were 30 bags of half rotten potatoes in the warehouse for the entire camp. Luckily, he was transported to France, helping to tear down the fortifications that the Germans erected during their occupation of France. As time went by, the French started to pull out soldiers from different countries, and transport them back to their country of origin. Kari had no intention of going back to Hungary, partially because he knew we were in Germany, partially because he heard stories about the Russians in Hungary, who had the propensity

of catching able bodied young men on the street and sending them to Russia, to help out with the reconstruction.

The French train carrying the Hungarian soldiers back to Hungary was passing through Germany. Karl being an inventive kind of guy pried up some planks in the cattle car they were traveling, and when the train slowed down for some signals, he slipped through the hole, on to the tracks. Then, on to the cheese factory. After a good night sleep and some more cheese, we got ready to return. The return was uneventful, nobody was interested in three guys, although we made sure we were as inconspicuous as possible. Much as we believed in ourselves as master forgers, we were not going to tempt fate. Very crowded trains were a help, too. There were people all over the floor. The two-day trip was long and boring, specially at night, and trying to sleep in a crowded train sitting up was no fun. Then, I discovered that the luggage racks were all empty, because people were sitting on their luggage. So, I climbed into one of the racks, curled up and had a good night sleep. Our arrival was pretty well celebrated as the “prodigal son’s return.” Our mother went all out to prepare some food, and

we spent the day eating, drinking and telling tall stories to each other, and our family. But, after the festivities, the nagging question of the future came up, with the “Now, what?” motive. This was particularly urgent for our sister and her baby boy. She was terribly upset about her husband, who was stationed in Russia during the war as a lieutenant in the Hungarian army. With the war over, she hoped to find him and restart her family. With Europe still in the grip of post-war trauma (no mail, no phones, no nothing), there was no way for her to find out what happened to her husband. The only thing she could do is to return to Debrecen (Hungary) where they lived before, and wait for him. After discussing the problem at some length, we came to the conclusion that she and her baby: should return to Hungary, but someone from the family should accompany her. The logical choice was our father. He left some property back in Debrecen, and he wanted to find out what happened to it, and help his daughter at the same time. Also, being an older man, he would be less likely to be taken by the Russians for a long vacation in Siberia. So, he traveled to the nearest place where one of the uniquely Second World War institutions was set up, called “D.P. Lager.” In translation, a “Camp for Displaced Persons.”

A displaced person was a foreigner (not German) who, one way or other wound up in Germany, and now waited for something to happen. A typical D.P. Lager consisted of rows and rows of barracks, full of bunk beds, with tables in the middle, where scores of families with their screaming babies existed in limbo. These families came from all over Europe, speaking dozens of languages and dialects, with broken German being the “lingua franca,” the common communication means. The D.P. Lagers were maintained by the Allied Occupation Forces in Germany. Upon our father’s return he told us that in fact a train is being assembled for Hungarians for their trip back to Hungary. He signed up himself and his daughter and the baby for the trip. There was some discussion about him returning to Germany if he finds the conditions back in Hungary too precarious. The frontiers in Europe at that time were badly guarded so that crossings back and forth were no problem. So, they packed up their meager belongings and after a tearful goodbye boarded the train.

This left the three boys and our mother as a family unit. And, Kari being the eldest took charge of the situation. Being a trader at heart, the decision

came naturally that we should start some trading. But, trade what? Since the money was worthless, what do you trade with? CIGARETTES! Specifically American cigarettes! Lucky Strikes, Camels, whatever. We found out pretty quickly that each American Gi. was entitled to receive six cartons of cigarettes a week, but talking to the supply Sargent (with some occupation Dollars changing hands) would produce more. What do the G.I. 's do with all those cigarettes? They trade them! Trade them for what? Why, such a question! First, they traded them for sex. There were scores and scores of pretty Fraulein (girls in German) who were eager to entertain the poor homesick boys from America for a few cartons. Then, they traded them for things, like Leicà cameras, jewelry, antique articles, paintings, fine clothing, luggage, anything. Rumor had it that an American supply Sargent bought himself a castle with cigarettes. And, of course, the Germans were anxious to trade their treasures for cigarettes. Cigarettes bought butter, lard, milk, soap, clothing, whatever money usually buys. The stores were empty, the money worthless, so what could they do? But how do you do this trade? The average German had no contact with American G.I.'s and even if they did, they would have not known how to go about it.

But, the Krisch brothers came to the rescue! Under the able leadership of Kari, we were deployed around the high school where the American troops were billeted, and using my budding skills in the English language, we started to trade. Obviously, Weidnitz did not offer much in a way of business opportunity, with its large number of citizens (population 400). Plus, being farmers, their needs were pretty well covered in food. A couple of things they were interested in though. It was the American laundry soap, and families with daughters wanted nylon stockings. They were wild about them! And, the G.I. 's produced boxes and boxes of soap, because there was no limit of how much soap they could buy. The nylon stockings were not rationed either. So, we got soap and nylons from the G.I. 's and sold them to the farmers for butter. We took the butter to the cities, where we exchanged them for cameras, or leather articles, or whatever the G.I. 's wanted for the soap, nylons or for cigarettes. A perfect supply and demand situation, everybody was happy (and so were we). The nearest large city was Erlangen, a university town, very much like Princeton, near Nurnberg. Erlangen, unlike Nurnberg, which was practically bombed back into the stone age, escaped most of the bombing. This meant that the citizens

of Erlangen had THINGS to trade (their homes were not blown to smithereens by allied bombers) for food. For this simple reason, Erlangen became our base of operation. Every afternoon we concentrated on our G.I. contacts, and next morning we took the train to Erlangen (about a couple of hours of a train ride) to exchange the stuff for what the G.I's wanted, and back we went to Weidnitz. Part of our trading route in Erlangen included the local D.P. Lager, where we traded and/or picked up gossip. Through some Hungarian contacts we learned that a couple of childhood girlfriends were living in Erlangen, working as maids for American officer families, who were given German homes to live in. Back in Debrecen, next to our home was an old folks home, run by the Reformed Church of Debrecen. The Director of the home had two daughters, around Kari's age, and we frequently came together to play. Their names were Kati and Palma Nagy. Not having made too many friends in Weidnitz, we were eager to find them, and re-new our friendship. Obviously, they were overjoyed to see us, and we spent a great deal of time exchanging information about what happened in our life, since we saw each other last. Their story was more or less the same as ours. The old folks home was destroyed in a bombing raid, so

that the family had no reason to stick around and wait for the Russians (the Russian soldiers were famous for their gentle ways with young girls). They started to drift westward and eventually wound up in Germany. After the war was over, their parents went home, but the girls stayed. Instead of hanging around in the D.P. Lager, they took jobs with American families, which offered them good food and decent living.

After a couple of months of traveling daily between Weidnitz and Erlangen, we got tired with the commute, and decided to abandon our bucolic surroundings. Not only was it very bucolic, it was also very boring. This decision was easier said than done. Moving around was frowned upon by the authorities because of the bombed out cities had no housing for the adventurous, and your food ration cards pretty well tied you to where you were. But, us being young and foolish went a long way to overcome obvious obstacles. In our wanderings in Erlangen, in the outskirts of the city we found some partially burned down barracks, with refugee families living in the parts that did not burn. At the very end of the barracks there was a room that was mostly undamaged by the fire that was

not claimed by anyone, until we came along. We planted the Krisch Family flag right in the middle of the room, and took possession. We cleaned out the place, replaced broken windows, put a padlock on the door, patched up the larger holes in the wall, and went forth to scavenge for furniture. We found a couple of broken bunk beds behind the barracks that with some effort could be fixed, which we did. Then, using our connections in the D.P. Lagers, we got an old table and a couple of chairs, which finished the decoration. One thing that we lacked was a stove that we needed both for cooking and for heating. Back in Weidnitz we had a spare small stove, and between three of us we had no problem to take it to our new digs in Erlangen. There was one additional problem: what about our mother? Did we really want to have her move into a half burned down barracks in Erlangen? The answer was of course no. Because of our ongoing business connections in Weidnitz, we would continue to travel there. We just didn't want to live there. So, we left our mother in the farmer's home in Weidnitz, where all by herself in the room she was much more comfortable; One of us went back every day for business anyhow, so she could not claim that she was left alone. Of course, this stuff was all pretty

illegal. Legally, we continued to be honest (although not necessarily hard working) citizens of Weidnitz, but for all practical purposes we lived in Erlangen. Our motto was the old adage: “What the authorities did not know could not possibly hurt them.” Not that they were really interested, they had other worries, like where to get their next meal, or how to get the German state working again. As time went on, we settled down to what some people might call the: “Dolce Vita” (“Good Life” in English), or at least the after WWII war version of it. We had a roof over our head, we had fashionable clothing made out of G.I. blankets, or modified (and dyed) G.L uniforms, and we had enough to eat. Hey, what else do you need in life? Not only that, but we had bundles and bundles of cash. Of course, you could not buy anything worthwhile with it, but what the hell? And, there were some things that you could do with the money. You could buy train tickets; you could buy movie tickets; you could go to the opera and symphony halls. So, we traveled to the mountains to ski, we took sightseeing trips in Germany. Accompanied by our childhood friends Kati and Palma, we went to all the movies, operas and concerts we could find. We had FUN! My specialty was to buy tickets to events. Because money was so plentiful and worthless,

everybody else wanted to spend it. The lines to buy tickets were immense. But, I had something that my brothers did not have: a passionate habit for reading. I equipped myself with some pocket books (courtesy of the G.I. trash pit) or German books out of the Erlangen University Library, and stood in lines for hours, reading my books, and buying tickets for all of us.

Eventually, we had to face up to the fact that we needed to legitimize our squatting status in Erlangen. The way to that was to get ourselves some jobs, so that we could prove that we needed to live in Erlangen. Good idea, but how? There were no jobs to be had for love or money. Once more, the American Occupational Forces came to the rescue. They were hiring mostly refugees to work for them in their vehicle maintenance shops. So, I became an auto-mechanic, and Kari was hired to work in the battery shop. They hired tons and tons of people because the Americans made the vanquished German state pay our salaries. The Germans did not mind, the money was worthless anyhow. Erwin wanted to do something else, so he hired out to a German bakery shop to learn about bread making. Exactly why he wanted to get up at 4 a.m., in the morning to bake

bread was never adequately explained to us, but we were not the prying kind anyhow. Except, of course the unlimited bread he could consume. And so, we did get housing permits in Enlangen, and continued to prosper. But, all good things have to come to an end. The end came in two events. One was that winter came, and holes in the wall in our room so readily ignored in the summer, became a source of sharp and very cold wind in the winter. As long as we fed our stove until it was red hot, things were more or less O.K. But, when we went to bed and the fire died out, then things started to go down hill in the temperature department. But, as always, we had a solution. Other people get undressed to get into bed. We simply reversed the process, we got dressed to go to sleep. Boy oh boy, did we get dressed! We put on two or three undershirts, two or three shirts, a sweater, jacket, great coat, ski cap, two or three socks, then the blankets. As we climbed in our beds, we put our boots under the blankets with us. You may ask, rightfully so, why would you want to sleep with your boots? Because if we did not, by the morning they were frozen into a solid block of ice. To understand why this would be so, you have to appreciate the quality of our boots. They may have been a German engineering wonder,

but they were pretty poor quality boots. The uppers were made from some kind of composite material, mostly containing leather remnants, pressed together to form a new material. The sole seemed to be made out of old rope, compressed and held together by glue. This construction allowed the boots to retain maximum amount of moisture from the snow and the slush on the streets. Result? Solid ice if left out of bed. Have you ever tried to put on a solidly frozen pair of boots? No? You haven't missed a thing. You didn't miss much either to sleep in a room at a temperature of 0° degrees Fahrenheit, although it is supposed to be very healthy, believed mostly by people who sleep in over heated rooms. My brother Erwin used to tell me a harrowing story about how he arrived late one night, and found Kari almost frozen to death, and how his heroic efforts in reviving him saved Kari's life. At that time I was in Weidnitz visiting with our mother, so I cannot vouch for his story. You want the full story of this great act? You ask Erwin.

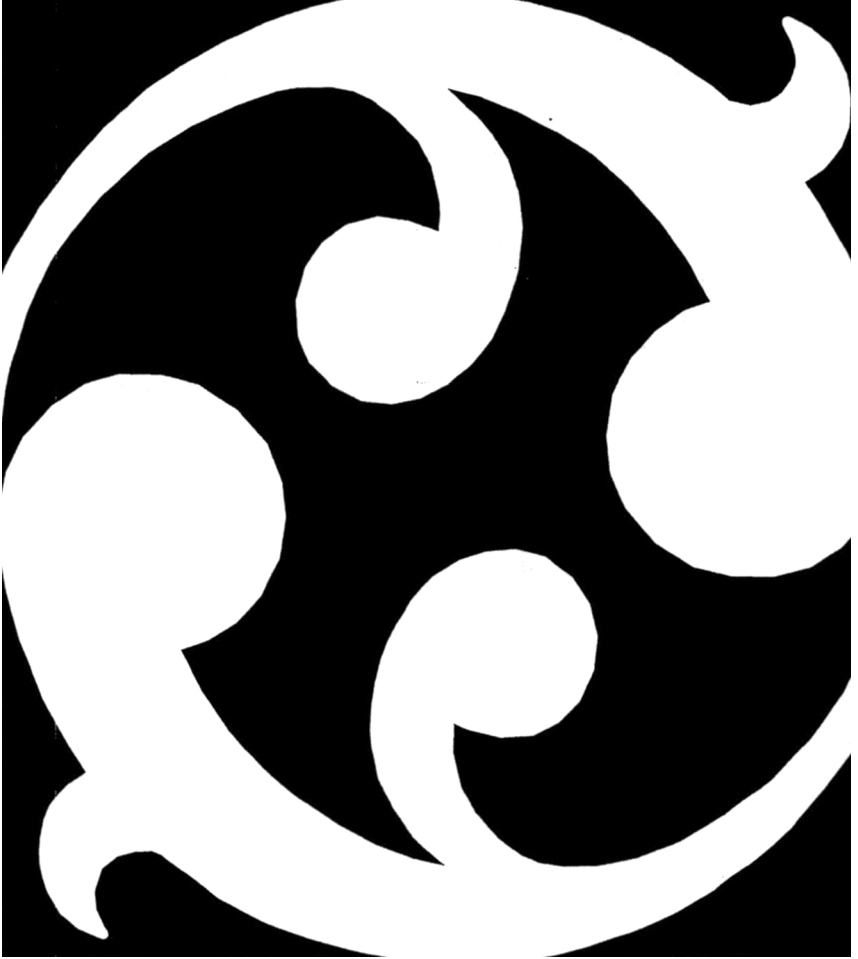
The second event was that the German state decided to get rid of the old Deutch Mark, and exchange them for the new Mark. So they did. Regardless of how much old money you had, by turning it in at

any bank you got 150.00 new Marks. This step not only got rid of all the old money, it got rid of us as well. All of a sudden, the German state did mind to pay people to do the Americans' dirty laundry. it was thought that the G.I.'s might want to fix their own vehicles, instead of having someone else fixing it for them. The result: we were all fired. Now what? One side benefit of having survived the war was, that by now we have gone through so many crises, almost lost our lives a few times, lost everything down to our last handkerchief innumerable times, that losing our jobs did not create a feeling of depression. The lesson we learned the hard way was that if you keep at it, all problems get either solved, or will go away, or you just ignore it. Looking at the future, it was obvious that to continue to live in Germany would be hard. The Germans hired Germans for the jobs available, and hanging around D.P. Lagers just did not seem to be all that much fun. As usual, the Krisch Family Council was called to order to look at alternatives. There were three alternatives: 1. Stay in Germany; 2. Go home to Hungary, and 3. Go somewhere else. We did not fancy staying in Germany. We lived there for almost three years, and the near future looked bleak. Going home to Hungary was out of the question, the Russians

were still there, and the Hungarian communist government did not have friendly thoughts about young men who chose not to return to Hungary as soon as they could. So, solution 3 was a winner; let's go somewhere else, and go as quickly as possible. Our sources at the D.P. Lager told us that the main location for refugees to seek re-settlement was in Augsburg, which is about 200 miles from Erlangen. So, we got on the train, and traveled to Augsburg. Augsburg was a pretty little town, full of buildings from the Middle Ages that escaped extensive bombing. It even had a small fortress. Due to this luck, it was selected by the Allied Forces to set up a large D.P. Lager in a former military barracks, to process refugees who for one reason or other, did not choose to return to their home land. By then, there was little love lost between the Western forces and Russia, so nobody was interested in convincing us to return to Hungary. We signed up for re-settlement, then returned to Erlangen to liquidate our life in Germany, and move on. We packed up what we had (and very little it was), gave away the pots and the pans and the furniture. We also said goodbye to our friends Kati and Palma Nagy, and wished them luck. (A few years later we heard from them. They were living in Winnipeg, Canada, where

Kati became a medical doctor, and Palma was a social worker). Then, on to Augsburg. In the D.P. Lager we were moved to what to us was familiar surroundings: large rooms full of bunk beds and full of screaming babies. There were bulletin boards (mostly in German) with announcements, and plenty of gossip about chances and places for re-settlement. Almost everyone we talked to wanted to go to the USA, but the wait was very long, and the results uncertain. There were families that have been waiting for over a year. Being three young guys with a mother gave us what many people with children did not have: flexibility. What we wanted to know is, where is it that we can go, and go the soonest? Then came the news: a Venezuelan consulate group was scheduled to arrive next week, and they were looking for craftsmen (craftspeople?). : Hey, we were craftspeople! Our mother was a cook; Kari was an auto-mechanic; Erwin was a baker, and I was a welder. In short order we produced wonderful looking authentic documents certifying our professional qualifications, for the appreciation of the consul and his staff In between, we asked ourselves and anybody who cared to listen: where is Venezuela? What kind of a language do they speak? The answer was that Venezuela was a country on the

northern part of South America of about 11 million inhabitants, and they speak Spanish. Then, the big day came, we had an appointment with the consul for an interview. We put on our best duds, and lined up in front of the Venezuelan delegation. It wasn't much of an interview, they spoke only Spanish, and their translator spoke very bad German. We gave them our proof of skills, not that it did matter, nobody in the delegation knew how to read German. But, here were three strapping young men and their mother. That's what Venezuela needed! We were in, like Flynn. We were given instructions to get ready for our trip to our new country, next week. The trip was going to be by charter airplane, out of Munich. When the day arrived, we boarded buses that took us from Augsburg to Munich, about a half day ride. At the airport the bus pulled up to a large DC 10 passenger airliner, which we boarded for the first flight of our lives. Goodbye Europe!



A Sequel

We climbed up into the airplane to join about 310 other passengers bound for Venezuela. The plane belonged to a private American transport company called WORLD AIRLINES, and it had all American crew. Very quickly I became the unofficial translator for the passengers, because nobody from the crew spoke German, and no one else spoke any English. The trip lasted two and a half days, landing to refuel in Shannon - Ireland, Newfoundland, New York, San Juan - Puerto Rico and at last, Maiquetia, Venezuela. We arrived late afternoon, when we were asked to disembark. And, this was the first opportunity for us poor Europeans to appreciate what the tropics is all about. It was about 120° degrees on the tarmac, and the sun was mercilessly beating down on our heads. Soon, we were asked to board some buses, for our first trip in Venezuela. None of the buses had either windows or doors, but in that heat, who would complain? At first, the buses took a tortuous narrow and winding

road up the mountains to reach Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. This was our first introduction to the driving habits of Venezuelan bus drivers that had only two speeds, fast, and faster. Careening around the curves on the mountain road at high speed, skidding on the turns next to 1,000 feet deep crevasses put the fear of God into the hearts of the passengers. Then, we had a picturesque tour through the slums at the outskirts of Caracas, racing on to our destination, which we reached in about four hours. Our destination was another D.P. Lager in the middle of the jungle. And, as usual, we were put in barracks made out of corrugated tin plates, full of bunk beds and screaming children. The Venezuelans did learn something in Germany after all. They recreated the environment that we all so cherished, so that we could feel right at home. We stayed there for about three weeks, during which time they gave us a medical checkup, and some temporary documentation as new immigrants to Venezuela. Once we had our checkups and documents, they said goodbye to us. They gave us four bus tickets to Caracas, and 30 Bolivares each, as spending money. They also gave us the address of the Caracas D.P. Lager, where we would be welcome to stay for a few days. That was it! Once again our

survival instincts have been called upon to cope with a situation beyond our control. Not knowing the country and not speaking any Spanish, with a bus ticket and 30 Bolivares in spending money in our pockets, we were on our own. Obviously, the government decided that coddling newcomers with assistance or guidance will set a bad precedent. On the other hand, (and more likely) it could have been that nobody in the government associated with the immigration program has given any thought to this potential problem. Why should they? It was not their problem, it was ours! They did their part by bringing us over to Venezuela, now it was our turn. So, we went to the bus station, boarded the bus and careened back to Caracas, and our future life. After some wandering around in Carracas we did find the D.P. Lager, which (by now you should have guessed!) consisted of an empty building with bunk beds and screaming children! It gave us a place to sleep though, and that was enough. We took advantage of our stay to do some sight-seeing, and coming from war ravaged Europe, we got an eyeful. The stores were full of stuff! In the jewelry shops, diamond rings, and bucketful of wrist watches! In food stores, endless piles of food! In clothing stores, heaps of shirts, and shoes and...and whatever. The

abundance was stunning, we were in paradise. Of course, we had no way of earning a living, or didn't even know how to ask for directions (the solution was to show addresses on a piece of paper, and smile, but small things like that never bothered us. The customary Krisch Family Council was called to order once more to think of alternatives. After talking to fellow refugees the rumor was that there are jobs to be had in Maracaibo, the oil capital of Venezuela. Since we were certified craftspeople, we could get jobs there! As a precaution we decided to split up: our mother and Erwin were going to stay in Cacaras, and Kari and I were going to go down to Maracaibo. We went to the administration offices of the D.P. Lager and hustled them for two free tickets to Maracaibo, as their last generous gift to the cause of immigration. So, Karl and I went to the bus station, and got the next bus to Maracaibo, an 800 mile trip. As usual, the bus had no windows and no door; and for some reason, all passengers had a towel around their necks. We thought that they were so dedicated to cleanliness, that they wanted to make sure their towels were at hand when the need arises. Ha...Ha... We found out the real reason soon enough. Once we left behind the larger cities at full throttle, the roads became dirt, which consisted

of red clay. And with the constant traffic, the clay became an all covering red dust cloud. Those in the know (and with towels at hand) covered their heads and mouths from the swirling red clouds. It took us a record short time to dig out the towels from our bags, and imitate the rest of the passengers.

The trip not only provided choking dust, it also provided a very bouncy ride. The dirt roads were full of large potholes and the driver made sure he drove into every one of them. Of course it is possible that he could not see them from the dust. Most certainly we couldn't see anything, if we cared to look. But we were mightily entertained by bouncing around in the seats, with an occasional bump on the head, when our heads hit the ceiling in a very large pothole. During the infrequent stops for gas, or giving the passengers a chance to eat something, we all emerged from the bus like red statues, somewhat similar to the Comandatore in Mozart's opera "Don Giovanni", but instead of white marble, we were red. Now, the towels were used to dust ourselves off, becoming small red clouds ourselves in the process with a human in the center. The trip took three days and a harrowing trip it was. Part of the problem was that we had almost no money, so

facing the unknown in Maracaibo, we were not about to blow our meager funds on food. We subsisted during the entire trip on fresh oranges. You could buy small net bags full of fresh oranges for a song, so we ate tons and tons of it. It might have provided us with all the Vitamin C we ever needed, but as nutrition it just didn't have it. So, we arrived in Maracaibo ready for a good meal, with Kari slightly feverish from our adventures. Once more, we found haven in the Maracaibo D.P. Lager, where they told us that we can stay only for two days. Two days, huh? Pretty generous, if you ask me. The two days' stay included dinners, so we were saved from utter starvation.

During our first day we made a bee line for the Shell Oil company headquarters building, to look for a job. The problem was that due to our total lack of Spanish, we could not explain to the doorman what we wanted, so every time we went in, he threw us out. This went on all day long. By night we were a pretty discouraged couple of guys, who crept back to the D.P. Lager. When we showed up next day, it was much of the same: we went in, they threw us out. Obviously, unless we get by the doorman, nothing will happen. Then, I got an inspiration. Next

time we saw an American engineer walking into the building (they were easy to spot in their khaki outfits and blond hair, towering over the natives,) we ran after him and I talked to him in English. I explained to him that we were recently arrived refugees from Europe, and being qualified craftspeople, we were looking for a job. But, the doorman would not let us in. You should have seen the look on the face of the doorman, when we showed up again, but now with an American in tow, who just gave him a dismissive gesture with his hand and took us to the employment office. There he talked to the manager, and told him to give us jobs. The manager did speak English, so we had no communication problems. The jobs we got were in one of the oil camps deep in the jungle, called Bachaquero, about a 100 miles from Maracaibo. We both signed up as electric welders, although Kari couldn't recognize a welding machine from a very large hole in the ground, but these things rarely fazed him. Because of my very first job in Germany was as a welder, I had no credibility problems. We got some advance against our first paycheck, and off we went into the jungle.

Once we arrived, we were given a small concrete house as our home, consisting of two rooms,

a kitchen with a gas burner and a porch with a concrete laundry sink. The house was totally empty. As the saying goes: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” we went to the commissary of the camp and bought ourselves two beds, consisting of two sturdy hammocks made out of white linen. Both small rooms had hooks in the walls, so we hung up our hammocks and were ready to go to sleep. This arrangement made a great deal of sense, because somewhere near us passed the Equator, which meant that it was as hot as it can get. It was not unusual for the thermometer to hit 130 degrees at high noon. Would you want to sleep on a bed, you would find yourself pretty quickly laying in your own sweat, if that’s what you enjoy. In your hammock you stick out your foot, give a good kick to the wall and you start to swing, providing natural ventilation. Of course we improved on this system, we bought ourselves an electric fan, which we put up on the wall, aimed at our stomachs. Afterwards, we had no problem with the heat.

When it came to cooking, we alternated between ourselves daily, one day I cooked, the next day Kari did. Unfortunately, my brother Kari had many talents, but cooking was not one of them. Thus, he

invented something called a “sardine soup” which consisted of two cans of sardines, mixed up with a can of Campbell Consomme. You should have tried it (or maybe you shouldn’t). Another of his triumphs was French toast. This gourmet dish was a great success, except that he used a whole pound of butter to prepare it, and due to slow cooking, the bread absorbed all the butter. As a consequence, I got jaundice (I was lemon yellow for a week). From there on, I banished him from the kitchen, causing him great joy. And, of course, we also had to work. We were given equipment, and put to work. They discovered very quickly that Kari knew absolutely nothing of welding, so they put him to learn. I suppose they could have fired him for lying about his qualifications, but having been hired at the Maracaibo headquarters, hey, who is to know? And, who cared? Our working hours matched the climate: we started at 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. Then, we took siesta until 4 p.m. when we started again ‘till 7p.m. Anybody who jokes about the siesta in the Latin American countries has never been to these countries and will soon come to realize that you cannot work in the noon heat, or you cannot work for very long. Extreme temperatures, be that very cold or very hot, require that you adapt to them,

otherwise you do not last very long. It's like getting your socks wet in the Arctic: if you do not take them off in the next three minutes and dry them, you can say goodbye to your feet. It is the same in the tropics, very high temperatures put a tremendous load on your body, especially on your heart. Abuse it at your peril. So, the rules are: walk very slowly and always in the shade; if you have to walk in the sun, wear a hat; take two or three showers a day; change your clothing after every shower; sleep in hammocks; eat light and cook with oil; drink plenty of fluids, and go lightly on the booze. One great disadvantage of working as a welder is that you have to wear protective gear, unless you enjoy putting your clothing on fire from the flying sparks every so often. The protective gear, in addition to a usual helmet, consists of a leather apron and leather sleeves. In the tropical heat, you sweat a lot in this kind of gear. I had no problem with this, but Kari did. In a couple of months his whole body was covered with a bad case of rash. With great regret, both he and his boss came to the conclusion that he was just not cut out to be a welder. So, he packed up his gear and got on to the bus to join our mother and Erwin in Caracas, leaving me behind. By now he had accumulated a small nest egg, so

he did not need to repeat our trip coming down, he could buy himself all the food he wanted. He still needed his towel though. This narrative pretty well told the story of our lives, including our arrival in Venezuela, and the start of a new chapter in our life. What we did afterward, and what the future held for the Krisch Family is another story.

End