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Listen Harder
A Wehrmacht Soldier’s Experience on the Eastern Front During World War II

A Southern Scholar’s Project
by Cassandra King
This story is dedicated to my mother: who inspires me to think bigger, be brighter, and listen harder to the stories of life.

And to my Grandfather, my Opa: who takes the time to share his stories of life with me, someone who cannot possibly ever fully understand.
Introduction

Propaganda is a kind of psychological warfare used to convince people to buy into certain ideas by telling only one side of an issue (Margolin 15). Nowhere is this more evident than in the legacy of hatred directed towards Germans through propaganda. Because of propaganda, our views of ourselves and other countries that fought during World War II are prejudiced and often completely wrong. Only by recognizing the use of this type of propaganda can we begin to learn to see past the prejudices and listen harder to the other sides of the story.

World War II was presented to the American people as a holy war, for the purpose of bringing freedom and peace to all people. The forces of good were pitted against the forces of evil, and unconditional victory was portrayed as the only option for establishing enduring peace (Colby 11). In order for the American people to support the war, they had to be made to despise the German people as a whole. They needed to believe that all Germans were war-loving and wicked. The efforts to create such beliefs were successful through the use of pointed and often deceptive propaganda (Colby 14).

The New York Times Sunday Magazine, for example, published an article in 1944 by Rex Stout, an author of popular detective stories, entitled “We Shall Hate or We Shall Fail.” The author insisted not only that the leaders in Germany had been motivated by the “adoration of force as the only arbiter and skullduggery as the supreme technique in human affairs,” but also that complete hatred of all Germans was necessary in order to “establish the world on a basis of peace” (qtd. in Colby 123).

Another example of this kind of propaganda was an article by an anonymous writer in Reader’s Digest who warned that the “centuries of predatory tradition inherent in the Prussian character” could not be countered by any amount of education, and that making any distinction between the Gestapo and regular German army officers could
result in another war in 20 or 30 years (qtd. in Colby 126).

Hollywood also worked as an active supporter of hate propaganda while the United States was involved in World War II. One movie, *The North Star*, displayed German army doctors bleeding children in a blood bank, killing one. *Time* critics praised the film because it was “the most successful attempt to show a sickening German atrocity in credible terms” (qtd. in Colby 130).

The cycle of hate propaganda did not stop in America when the war ended. The book *Paper Bullets*, written by Leo Margolin in 1946, has a chapter entitled “What to Expect from Germany and Japan.” Margolin wrote:

> Basically, the Germans and the Japs are on the same level now and will be for some years to come. That level is the lowest possible for any one supposedly classed as a human being to achieve. The military defeats of Germany and Japan are but unpleasant, inconvenient interludes for both nations. Deep down, under the cover of bowing, humility and groveling at the feet of the military conqueror, they are nursing the same hope they have nursed for scores of years: world conquest. It should never be forgotten that it was the vote of the German people which made Hitler and his gang possible. The German people remain what they always have been: accessories before, during and after the crime. (Margolin 134)

During World War II, propaganda reduced the enemy to subhuman status in the American mind. Most of the prejudices against the enemy, however, remained long after the war ended. Even the books we read now about the war can be thought of as a form of propaganda. History books, memoirs, and novels alike often portray one group of people as “good,” and the other as “bad.” We simplify reality in a clumsy attempt to understand it.
After the war my grandfather struggled against the lingering prejudices towards German soldiers. In a letter written to my mother on May 9, 1998, he said:

Dear Edith,

All the things we know, all the “details,” we really know NOTHING about. It is rather devastating to realize how smug we are, thinking we know it all when in reality we know NOTHING. That’s the best we can achieve: acknowledging in humility that we have been arrogant and puffed-up when we thought we knew. For that’s all we can accomplish: knowing that we know nothing. I heard that statement many years ago and agreed politely, but never understood. Now I know. It takes years to get that far and then we have to leave and somebody else comes along, agreeing politely but not having a clue.

Which reminds me -- even I, clumsy with words and over and over again stating the politically incorrect, even I have come to understand how difficult it is to hit it right, to describe the REALITY of war. Which reality?!? A reality where we say, “Moshna?” May I kill you now? That would be utter nonsense, of course. No, a thousand times no, it was NOT like that. Neither did we (as some people would have us believe) indulge in an orgy of killing, raping, and plundering. That’s the other extreme, and utter nonsense again. No, a thousand times no! It was NOT like that.

The reality was much more prosaic. Being a lowly cook filling a field kitchen at a well near Askania Nova and being torn to pieces by a shell. Or being a foot soldier and getting hit in the head by a bullet coming from nowhere. And lucky he was! The next guy got it in the gut and took hours to die, flung over the pack saddle of a mule.
I never saw whether my shells from my three-inch "peashooter" did any harm. I rather imagine they did sometimes, but I could not do a follow-up on the poor kids I hit with my rifle at close range. I rather wish they made it.

No, we were not murderers and rapists. That, my dear, is INTERPRETATION of the reality called war. The victorious one made king (Eisenhower became President), the vanquished branded bandits. I never thought of myself as a cold-blooded killer, murderer, or rapist, and I never ran into one, not in 20 months of active warfare in the front lines. I am somewhat of an authority. . . I was there!

Well, that's enough I guess. If I keep on harping on it even you, my beloved daughter, who is trying to understand, will become suspicious and begin to wonder what I am trying to hide. Don't! I can say with a clear conscience that your dad, the grandfather of you and your husband's children, has NOTHING to hide.

love dad

The more I read and learn about the war, the less I understand. I don't think I can ever understand. But maybe, as my Opa told my mother, admitting that fact is the best anyone can do. Listening to the stories of the previously de-humanized enemy is hard, but it is possibly the best way to come to the realization that our preconceived ideas are not always right.

World War II is "history." The experiences and deaths of the people who fought so bravely on both sides of the battlefield have become abstract and impersonal. But there was nothing abstract and impersonal about being there, watching your friends die, or about dying yourself, no matter which country you fought for. Propaganda designated
one side of the story as more heroic, more noble, more important than the other, but maybe the truth is not quite so simple.

This is the story of my grandfather, George Sittlinger, who was born March 1, 1924, in Lavamund, Austria. When he was 19 he was called to fight with the German army in World War II. His story interested me because it gave living color to a piece of history that had always seemed black and white before. When my mother told me he had written her short excerpts of his experiences in many letters over the years, I was even more intrigued. I wanted to listen to his story because I believe that every story is important, and as long as we are trying to understand any particular event in history, we must take all stories and points of view into consideration. I began supplementing my mother’s letters with my own conversations with my Opa. From those letters and conversations I have pieced together my Opa’s story, and I tell it now from his point of view.

This story is not supposed to be a confession, accusation, or lesson. It is simply the story of an ordinary man who survived World War II. An ordinary man who fought and lost with the German Wehrmacht and lived to tell me about it.

The victors write history, but every once in awhile we can hear the faint voice of the vanquished above the stereotyped conclusions and suppositions.

We should listen.
Chapter 1

The Germans took over Austria on March 11, 1938, when I was 14. I can remember my mother crying around August or September of that year because of the Sudeten Crisis. She was afraid for her sons. I was drafted on December 7, 1942, and sent to Kufstein, in Tirol, for training. I was only 19 years old. My mother was 54 at the time, and she took me to the train to see me away.

It was the middle of August 1943 before I was sent to the front. We traveled in a very crowded train, and I can remember sitting on the floor at times. All the way from Poland to Crimea I slept very little. The heat was almost suffocating. I remember stopping for provisions in Dshankoi. It was so hot that the large can of meat I was told to carry onto the train had a layer of liquid sitting on the top.

When we arrived at the strait of Kertsch we got off the train and crossed over on a ferry. We then took a truck the last leg to the Kuban Bridgehead on the east side of the strait. The Kuban River runs from the Caucasus Mountains into the Sea of Azov. This bridgehead was to be the springboard from which a new offensive into the Caucasus
Mountains and the oil fields near the Caspian Sea would be launched.

I remember lying awake that night before going to the front, watching in wonderment as a light anti-aircraft gun tried to hit a solitary airplane flying above our heads. The tracer bullets were rather pretty as they arched skyward through the darkness. They darted into the night, stabbing quickly into all directions until finally it was quiet again. I didn’t know then that these planes came across regularly, dropping small bombs. These bombs usually didn’t do much damage, although once, many months later, I saw the awful destruction on a supply column that such a nuisance raid could inflict. The rather apt term for these small planes was “Die Nahmaschine.” Interestingly, the Japanese did the same thing in the Pacific and the GIs called it “The Sewing Machine.” It’s a small world.

The next day the division commander, Lieutenant-General Kress, was killed by a sniper during an inspection tour of the front line. I felt sick and reported to the kranken stube, the sick bay. The elderly sergeant took my temperature and made the right diagnosis. He explained to me that I was afraid, and talked to me in a fatherly way, trying to reassure me. But my spirits weren’t lifted. If even generals got themselves killed, what were the chances for a soldier?

I was no ordinary soldier, of course, I was artillery. The difference between artillery and infantry was the same as day and night, but I didn’t know it at the time. I learned only little by little, and fully realized only after the war was all over, how wonderful and lucky it was to be in the artillery rather than a Gebirgsjager, a foot soldier. It was well known that the mortality rate for these replacements was always high. Their inexperience and curiosity did in many of these kids. As an artillerist, I hardly ever had to see “the enemy” or know what damage the shell did, but the infantry men were right up in the trenches, often forced into hand-to-hand combat.

I was assigned at the beginning to a group of “communication” soldiers in a
bunker dug into a steep slope right on the Black Sea. It was my first experience in the sea, and we went swimming often during our time at the bridgehead. Below us there was a narrow dirt road running along the coast, and behind us were the mountains. We were signalers; we looked after the telephone lines which ran from the battery up to the observation post. Because the cables had been in position since May, they were buried under about six inches of dirt and rock for extra protection. Every once in awhile, a shell would land directly on the trench and sever the wire. Then one of us had to go and find the spot and repair it. We always carried our tools, extra supplies, and a gun, just in case we ran into trouble.

I remember one of the first times I was out on that steep slope; there were two of us trying to repair a line. A strange whistling sound made me look up to see what was going on. A shell, a mortar bomb, had crashed a short distance away. The other man had thrown himself down, and he gave me a tongue lashing for just standing there, stupidly watching. I was called names another time, too, a short time later. We were trying to repair the wires in a different location where they were not buried under the dirt quite as deeply. We grabbed the wires in our hands and ran along until we found the break. Then we found the other end and tried to splice them together. For some reason there was quite a gap, and the other soldier couldn’t get the ends together; he needed more wire. Instead of walking back to our bunker, he cut a piece out of the infantry line and used it for ours. When I protested he exploded at me. “If you think I’m going to walk back to get the piece we need and then hike all the way back up here again you need your head examined!” He was an old timer and had been with the unit in the Caucasus. I often heard him talk about various harrowing experiences. From the beginning of my time at the front I sensed a certain anger and hostility against the leadership which had led men into such a mess.

On the way back to our bunker we passed in front of a dugout and heard a radio
blaring very pretty music. I was surprised to hear such beautiful music, but what really shook me up was the dead Romanian soldier lying next to the trail. It didn’t make sense that there was a war going on, a dead comrade in front of me, and happy music playing in spite of it all. I thought either there should be war and killing or music and gaiety. It turned out, ironically, that we could indeed have both. Some had fun and an easy life, others killed and got killed in turn. I was just the fool who didn’t understand until much later. And only now do I think I’ve got it. I suppose I’m what they call a slow learner.
Chapter 2

About three weeks after I arrived at the Kuban Bridgehead, September 10, 1943, we began to evacuate. Our command post killed the cows for us to eat, and we were given an unusual ration of goodies -- sweets and chocolates -- to eat before leaving. They were trying to make the evacuation easier on everybody by using up stocks.

We moved back, always at night, walking for hours on end. I learned to sleep and walk at the same time. By morning we were established in a new location, staying for a day, sometimes longer. I was no longer with the communication unit, instead I became part of a gun crew. During the day our guns went into position and fired at the approaching Soviets. The guns didn’t do much good, however, because they were so small -- only 7.5 cm (3 inch) with a maximum range a bit over 5 miles. The ammunition was carried by mules in boxes containing three shells, one box on each side of a pack saddle. Three mules together would pull one of our guns behind them. In mountainous terrain the gun would have come apart into seven loads, one per mule, but we never did that.
When we arrived at a new position there was lots of work to be done. The guns were set up in a battery (made up of four guns, set 40 or 50 feet apart). The guns were then sighted, parallel to each other, and the firing position marked. We dug holes for the ammunition and cleared obstacles away from the front of the guns. Because they only fired 3 inch shells in a shallow trajectory, nearby trees would get in the way. When the Soviets got too close, we were told to “stand by” or “commence firing.” A Second Lieutenant and his assistant manned the forward observation post, and they would call if there were targets which needed to be fired on. Then we would race to our guns and swing them around neatly, raising or lowering them as needed. For awhile I was in charge of ramming in the shells. The next man up closed the breech and pulled the line to fire.

A week or so after we started the retreat the battery next to ours lost its #2 man when a shell exploded in the barrel and splinters tore off an arm and a leg. He died after hours of agony. The anti-tank shells were prone to do that, so we always jumped into a fox hole and pulled the lanyard from there.

The weather was wonderful. One gun battery position I remember was right in the middle of a vineyard. I ate hundreds of ripe white grapes under the warm sunshine. A mile away the engineers were demolishing railroad tracks, and we watched the exploding charges slowly creep along the line.

The Soviet Air Force wasn’t very active in that area and didn’t bother us much, but I do remember very vividly when one of our anti-aircraft guns hit a plane, one of three planes that had been dropping bombs at a distance. It was hit by our gun and burst into flames, crashing to the ground only a few seconds later. We cheered wildly. There must have been two or three young kids up there, just like me, who died a horrible death. They all perished, there were no parachutes. But we cheered wildly, wrapped up in the ignorance and insanity of war. We were afraid of the Soviets, scared to death of them. I
had heard nothing but horror stories about their cruelty to their own people, and of course, to German prisoners of war. So we cheered at the time because they were dead and we were alive. We were busy fighting a war, so there was no time for reflection. Their deaths were a mere abstraction to a group of scared artillery soldiers.

The retreat from the Kuban Bridgehead lasted approximately three weeks. The last troops crossed over to the Crimea on October 8, 1943. We were crowded into a ferry, men and animals alike. Our dirty, sweaty bodies were so tightly packed that it would have been impossible to fall down. In the distance, a group of Soviet bombers appeared, flying toward us at a low altitude. I remember thinking, “This is it.” We were all terrified, but had nowhere to run. Anti-aircraft fire began and we frantically started to fire our rifles back at them. Luckily, the kids in the planes must have been as scared as I was, because they dropped their bombs way off into the sea and banked away.

When we reached the Crimea, we did more walking for four or five days. A very strong wind created a dust storm with incredibly fine dust that got into our eyes, mouths, noses, throats, clothing, and even boots. Even worse, it was starting to get extremely cold. Somehow our marching unit became intermingled with a Romanian unit. One of the Romanians, for some reason or another, irritated one of our guys and made him really mad. I don’t know what the argument was about, but they got into a fight, and the soldier from my unit hit the Romanian hard in the back with his rifle, so hard the rifle broke. The argument stopped after that, but I felt very uneasy about the rather unsportsmanlike treatment my comrade had given one of our allies.

After several days of walking, we reached a large town with a huge cemetery that contained hundreds of crosses commemorating German soldiers who had died “conquering” the Crimea. A short time later the Soviets came through and destroyed the grave markers, as they did many other times. The Soviets weren’t always the ones to destroy the German cemeteries, however, sometimes we destroyed our own cemeteries so
the Soviet intelligence wouldn’t know which divisions had been in a certain area.

We were quartered in houses during our stay in the town. There was a Captain with us, probably in his forties, who needed a chair for something, so he told me to go into the next room and get him one. The reason I remember this incident is because he instructed me to say, “Moshna?” (“May I?”). We never killed, beat up, or even threatened people to get what we wanted, and I never witnessed anything like it (though I have no doubt that it happened during the course of the war; war brings out the worst in people), but we usually just demanded and took what we needed for our comfort. We did not say please and thank you if we wanted something. There were not many “Captain Moshna’s” around. His real name deserves to be recorded, but is unfortunately long forgotten.
Chapter 3

One day, late in October 1943, we were rushed to a train station and our unit was hurriedly entrained. We were told the train was heading north; we were leaving the Crimea.

At one point the train came to a halt and we were allowed to go outside to stretch our legs. I was walking around, enjoying the fresh air, when I saw Germ Gustl, a kid from my own hometown of Lavamund. He had lived right across the street with his father, the town shoemaker, and his mother. He was a huge kid who could have beaten me to a pulp. I found out when we started going swimming in the summers that he was horribly scarred all over his upper body. He had been scalded as a child and it was a miracle that he survived. When the train got moving again we stayed together. We propped ourselves up on bundles of uniforms and talked of home. It was wonderful to be with an old friend, to talk of things besides the horrors of war.

The train halted and we were told to detrain in open country, somewhere south of Melitopol. It was obvious that something was wrong because there was equipment
scattered everywhere on the embankment, left behind by soldiers in a rush. We began to march west, and late in the evening we entered a burning village. The sounds of confusion were everywhere. Cows and horses running wildly, villagers screaming and crying as they tried to save what they could from their homes. Our unit threaded its way through the chaos.

I was remarkably tired, so I attempted to hitch a horse to an abandoned wagon. I got the horse hitched, but could not seem to make it go where I wanted it to go. I kept thinking about little 12-year-old Sammy Schwarzhentruber back home who used to plow his fields with four horses. I couldn’t even manage one. I tried and tried, and eventually I found myself alone at the edge of the village in the dark, facing a fork in the road. I had no idea which way my unit had gone. I left the horse and wagon and headed to the right. After awhile I realized I must be on the wrong track. Standing perfectly still in the dark I could hear my unit far off to the left. I walked cross-country, but was alone and very tired, and my pace must have been extremely slow. When you’re by yourself it’s hard to tell how fast you’re walking. By day-break I had found the other road and could see my unit way up ahead. There were some Romanian soldiers who were even less energetic than I who had fallen way behind, also. A truck came along and gave me a lift the last four miles, and in no time I was back with my comrades. I had been on my feet for 24 hours, and it felt great to finally sit down. They served us breakfast -- a hunk of bread and thin, watery coffee -- and it tasted wonderful. I found out later that the Romanians I had passed along the road hadn’t made it, they had been captured by the Soviets.

We had reached a place called Askaniya-Nova, a cluster of buildings in the Nogayskaya Steppe. The land there was absolutely flat. On the horizon to the north we could see a large mass moving towards the west, parallel with us. We couldn’t make out details, but we were told they were Soviets. Occasionally they would fire with artillery and mortars at us. Battalion commander Captain Wolferseder was riding off to the north,
surrounded by his men on foot, when we saw a tiny puff of smoke near his horse -- an exploding Soviet shell. Captain Wolferseder fell off his horse in a lifeless heap.

We resumed our march west -- hundreds of soldiers, mules, horse-drawn carts, artillery pieces, and motor cars. An assault gun ran over and killed a man. Our sergeant major came over and told me how happy he was to see me because somebody had told him it had been me.

Late in the afternoon we came to another cluster of buildings. There were wells there, and we all crowded around, hoping for a drink. A man was there with a rope and pail, who insisted on watering his mules first. The soldiers yelled and cursed him until he became so flustered and nervous that he dropped the rope and pail into the well and nobody got water, not even the mules.

Suddenly, Soviet shells were exploding everywhere. They were trying to cut us off. We forgot our thirst and fatigue and would have gladly broken into a run if it hadn’t been for our lazy mules. We prodded them with our rifle butts, but they were tired, too, and did not feel the terror that we did. We were forced to keep pace with the mules because they pulled our guns and carried our ammunition. Our cook was filling his field kitchen with water at another well and was killed by a shell.

Luckily, the firing eased and finally stopped, and on we marched westward. Later in the afternoon we crossed through an area where our infantry had broken through the Soviet lines. Finally, well after dark, a halt was called and everybody just dropped. We had covered 113 km (70 miles) in 30 hours. Hundreds of soldiers and mules bedded down in the steppe. Standing guard for two hours that night was hell. We knew we would be court marshaled and maybe shot if we were caught sleeping, but we slept anyway, standing up. It was physically impossible not to drift off to sleep no matter how hard one tried. It was a wonderful feeling to be relieved and allowed to lie down and sleep.
There was no breakfast the following morning. We got up and marched all day again. There was no more shelling, and our mood was more upbeat. In late afternoon we stopped in a small village and I ate the best meal I’ve ever had: boiled potatoes, sliced onions, and bread. At the time I didn’t give a thought to the occupants of the hut I ate in, but I have no doubt that they were very poor, hungry people, and I was eating their food. They were “liberated” by the Soviets just hours after we left, but I am certain their food situation did not improve. War is indeed hell for everyone involved.

By nightfall we were in a strange-looking land just east of the Dnieper River, where it flows into the Black Sea at Kherson. There were long, low hills of sand. Around November 1, 1943, the battery went into position, the infantry deployed, and our division (the 4th Mountain Division) held the Kherson Bridgehead well into December.
Chapter 4

Apparently, Hitler was still entertaining the idea of resuming his drive east and the Kherson Bridgehead was supposed to be the jumping-off point for a renewed offensive. We held the position there all of November and December and evacuated shortly after Christmas.

I was part of a battery at an observation post on a high dune, overlooking the Soviet lines. I slept in a dug-out at the foot of the dune at night. The officer in charge yelled at me because he saw me take the time to undress to go to bed. He must have thought I was a young, ignorant fool.

There was not much action from the Soviets, only sporadic firing. By that time I felt old and experienced as a Frontschwein, and wasn’t scared very often. I do remember one time, however, when I was caught out in the open in Soviet katyusa rocket-launcher barrage. We called these rapid-firing rockets “Stalin’s organs.” In the dug-outs there were planks covering the “roof” which protected from such shelling. But I was caught out in the open and all I could do was drop the plank I was carrying and fall to the ground.
Close to 40 shells exploded around me, but I escaped unharmed. The Soviets never actually attacked the sector I was in during my time at the Bridgehead. I only heard of action in other areas.

On December 24 I was sent to the rear, and I spent Christmas Eve in a house in Nikolayev. We drank tea while our Sergeant General spouted-off the party line, "Endsieg" -- Final Victory -- by the light of a candle.

Shortly after Christmas the Kherson Bridgehead was abandoned and the bridge dynamited. Our division was sent north to Vinnytsya by train. The trip through snowy wasteland in early January lasted a few days. We were all crammed into cattle cars and slept on the floor. When we got off the train, we marched east in a blinding snow storm. Our winter clothing was inadequate, and we were constantly cold, wet, and miserable. At night we slept on the floors of run-down houses in poor Ukrainian villages. Sleeping in houses during the winter was one of the many privileges of being an artillerist instead of an infantryman. We could keep our gun emplacements next to a village and sleep in the houses. In the summers we used our "tents." Each soldier carried a triangular piece of tarp, and four comrades would come together with their tarp pieces to make a tent to sleep in. The infantrists, on the other hand, never slept in houses, they always just slept out in the trenches under the sky.

When we finally caught up to the front, there was a lot of action. For awhile we pushed the Soviets back. We passed through villages which had been recently liberated by the Soviets. I was designated "cook" for a time. I would cook in the poor civilians' houses in their straw-heated ovens. I found potatoes easily, and occasionally even a chicken. We still had a field kitchen, of course, but extra food was always welcome.

At that time I was also part of the gun crew. I began in the #3 position (ramming in the shell), but advanced to the #2 position (shoving the cartridge after the shell, slamming the breech shut, and pulling the firing cord).
One night two of us were sent up to the front with a horse and sleigh full of supplies. We drove down the village street, but stopped when we heard hushed voices calling out to us. They whispered that there were Soviets in the next house. The war would have ended for us right there. We were scared stiff of the Soviets, and were grateful that we had been seen and warned of the danger in time.

In early March 1944, the Soviets began a big offensive with tremendous artillery support. For two days the front held, but then gave way. In the previous weeks we had come across many uneaten meals, hurriedly left behind by Soviet soldiers when we entered a village. On March 5, shortly after noon, we left behind our own food, ready to eat, and took off.

Before we left we received orders to burn down the few barns in the village. The barns were full of straw, and our superiors didn't want to leave behind anything the Soviets could possibly use. Unfortunately, burning all the barns not only meant the Soviets wouldn't be able to use the hay, but neither would the poor villagers. And so we all did the same thing, we gave the children from the homes we had stayed in pieces of candy, then left to go burn down a barn somewhere else in the village. Meanwhile, other soldiers who had stayed in the homes elsewhere in the village would give the children there small pieces of candy, then come to where we had just left to burn down the barns.

When we left, a soldier shot in the stomach was thrown over the back of a mule like a bag of flour, face down. He died along the way, a slow, agonizing death. The days were warm enough that the ground was no longer frozen, and the thaw had produced massive amounts of mud. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of soldiers, vehicles, guns, mules, and horses churned up the road into deep, sticky mud as we traveled away from the advancing Soviets. My friend lost one of his boots in the mud and walked all night with only one. This retreat would have been the only time it would have helped to take our guns apart and transport them piece by piece. Unfortunately, our mules with the special
pack saddles with fittings to accommodate the gun parts and ammunition were at a sugar factory 20 km away. So we tried our best to pull our guns through the spring mud, but by the next morning we had only one left, the other three had to be left behind.

During the day we took shelter in a village to wait for nightfall to continue our retreat. We washed-up in the typical manner -- taking a gulp of water from a pitcher and releasing it into our hands -- and slept soundly on the mud floor. Since we were a battery without guns, we were formed into a special unit and became infantry. We were told we would counter-attack the next day.
On March 7, 1944, we became infantry and advanced slowly and steadily on level land toward the Soviets. There were only about thirty of us, but there didn't seem to be many on the Soviet side, either. When we got closer, we saw the dead and wounded scattered over the ground. There was no artillery fire and no officer to direct us and keep us going. Only sporadic machine gun bursts and rifle fire greeted us from the other side. We plodded along in the mud, throwing ourselves down from time to time, then getting up again and advancing.

I remember being slightly provoked at one point when Franz Strach didn't get up. He was from Slovenia, but because he was of German background he found himself in the Wehrmacht, in a lonely field in the Ukraine. I thought maybe he didn't feel like getting up, maybe he was tired of that game. I decided to go back and motivate him to get going again. I called out to him, but he didn't move. I crawled back, and when I looked closely he had a neat little hole right in the center of his forehead.

Eventually we were forced to retreat again, and that's when I felt something hit
my right hand like a sharp blow. There was practically no bleeding or pain then or later. I saw two men carrying a wounded soldier in a triangular tarp, so I pitched in and grabbed the third corner. After that things became a blur; eventually I found myself alone in the waning daylight of the late afternoon.

A deep valley crossed the plain with a few poor huts at the bottom. I remember a girl at a well who gave me a drink. I climbed up the other side of the valley and came to a hut with an elderly man; he could easily have cornered me or killed me with a pitchfork, but he left me alone.

At dusk I came to a railroad line and followed the tracks until it was dark. There were some boxcars with a locomotive up front, ready to go, so I climbed on board. The car was filled with wounded, the more serious cases lying on the floor. We were near Uman, a fairly large city in the Ukraine. I began to dream of hospitals with pretty nurses in starched white uniforms, clean beds with sheets, and warm meals. But we didn't move more than a mile or two before the train came to a dead stop. A soldier, gun at the ready, came to the door and advised us to get out. There was a Soviet tank up ahead. We could hear the diesel rumbling. On the road along the railway, vehicles were burning. Those of us who could left the boxcar and began to march. The seriously wounded were abandoned. Somebody knew which direction to go, so we walked cross-country into the night.

We crossed a valley, and towards morning caught up to masses of military units retreating into Uman. There were motorized units, horse drawn vehicles, and, of course, crowds of soldiers on foot. And all the while we walked and walked and walked, with no ambulances, no food, no drink, no pretty nurses, no bed, no nothing.

At Uman I ended up in another boxcar that had bunk beds installed. The train brought us to Bucharest after several days. The city had been bombed the night before and the tracks only hastily repaired. As the train moved slowly into the city, we saw
corpses stacked against a fence like firewood.

Because my hand had gone for so long with no medical attention, it took a long time to heal. It was my right hand, and a soldier is no good without his right hand. I was in a hospital somewhere in Bucharest well into April, but I never saw clean beds or sheets or pretty nurses.

I finally rejoined my unit at the end of May 1944, on the Dniester River, directly east of Kishinev. My comrades told me terrible stories of their retreat after I had left the front on March 7. We stayed at our position through June, and I well remember June 6, when the Allies landed in Normandy.

Our time on the Dniester was not hard. There were mulberry trees everywhere and we would spread our tarpus under the trees and shake the berries down. We had a well that we used regularly until one day a dead dog came up in the bucket. There was a vineyard nearby, but the grapes were not ripe yet. It was very hot so we slept in tents.

Every time the forward observation post noticed unusual activity across the river the battery was alerted. We jumped up and ran to our guns six or seven times during the night. During that time I promised myself that if I made it through the war alive I would buy myself an alarm clock and make it go off every hour, just to experience the sweet pleasure of turning it off, rolling over, and sleeping on. So now I'm an old man and my wife does exactly that. She sets the alarm for six, turns it off, and sleeps on. Good for her.

In July, our Division was sent into the Carpathian Mountains, occupying a line roughly along the 1939 boundary between Poland and Czechoslovakia. They took us there in trucks. During the summer, the Soviets had made big gains north of the Carpathians, penetrating deep into Poland and right up to Warsaw. It was feared that they would burst into Hungary across the mountains.

I remember exactly where we were on July 20 when we heard of the assassination
attempt on Hitler. After the attempt, the military salute was changed. We were ordered to give the Nazi Party salute instead of the traditional style. I suppose the primitive man at the top thought changing the salute would solve all his problems. We also got “Commissars” like those the Soviets had, because the politicians back home felt that the officers were no longer reliable.
Our time in the Carpathian Mountains was uneventful and rather quiet. Once again, we were the forward observers on a high hill. The Soviets must have noticed the increased activity on the peak, and a few mortar shells came whistling in. None of us paid much attention, but when the smoke had cleared our Lieutenant was dead. Even after 56 years I remember him well. He was very nice to us. I can still hear him reciting the opening lines of Schiller's "Ode to Joy", and every time I hear the chorus at the end of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony I think of that Lieutenant: "Freude schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium, wir betreten feuer-trunken, Himmlische, dein Heiligtum . . . ."

Sometime in August Romania switched sides and began fighting on the side of the Soviets. We found out later that most of our front-line soldiers on the Dniester perished because suddenly they had the Soviets in front, and the Romanians at their backs.

Again our division was moved, this time out of the mountains. We were trucked south into Hungary to help establish a new front. We stayed in Hungary until the end of
the year, slowly retreating. One day we came upon a stretch of road littered with crushed wagons, dead horses, furniture, clothing, bedding, and cooking utensils. Soviet tanks had overtaken a column of refugees and rolled right over it. In late summer, early fall, we found a wine cellar. There were about a dozen barrels, at least ten feet tall, with wine spurting out. We couldn't believe our good luck and used pails to carry away wine.

On October 30, 1944, I remember defending a hill above a factory courtyard where Soviet soldiers could be seen scurrying about. On the climb up the hill we came across a dead Hungarian soldier. When we reached the top and looked down toward the factory, we saw a dead Soviet soldier caught in the shrubs. I crouched behind a low stone wall with my gun at the ready. I remember being terrified that some of the Soviets down in the courtyard might creep up the hill towards my measly shelter and open fire from their submachine guns as they rushed at me. Fortunately, nothing happened, and at nightfall we left the hill.

A couple days later we retreated again toward Kosice. There had just been an air raid along a stretch of the road, and though it was pouring rain we could see blood everywhere. The dead and wounded had already been cleared away, but the blood remained to tell the story.

Outside of Kosice the front held for a week or two. While we were there, I was told to bring Master Sergeant Baechtle to the cemetery. His boots were much better than mine, and he didn't need them anymore, so I got his, and he was buried with mine.

Soon after the New Year the front collapsed under the intense Soviet pressure, and we moved north into the mountainous land of Slovakia. In the middle of January, I became part of the artillery liaison for an assault battalion. Lieutenant Laut and I climbed up from the valley late one night and trudged along a mountain ridge for several miles until we were well behind Soviet lines. We then came back down toward the valley floor through a ravine to try to sneak up behind the Soviets. We came across a Soviet supply
unit that was bedded down for the night. They were quite a bit more surprised than we were, and scattered into the hills. We continued down the ravine and came to a road that was swarming with Soviet troops pouring out from the village and fleeing away from the German lines. It was a victorious but useless minibattle, just like all the others.

On January 19, 1945, Franz (a comrade), Lieutenant Laut, and I climbed a steep hill covered in snow. We were the observation crew for our battery. On the way up the hill we met an infantry soldier dragging down his dead comrade, and I sensed that I could come off that hill the same way.

On the top were two stone huts with several dead Soviets inside. We cleared them out so we could use the huts to sleep in during the bitterly cold night. In the morning a man brought up supplies, and then left hurriedly. It was fortunate he came when he did, because immediately after that all hell broke loose when suddenly there was a bombardment of artillery fire. Franz and I took cover in one of the huts, huddled together, leaning against the rock wall. A shell exploded outside and pushed the wall in, pitching us into the middle of the room. Franz never said a word, never moved, but when I looked at him his back was riddled with shrapnel.

Terrified, I burst out of the hut and took cover in a shallow ditch. I threw a hand-grenade down the slope towards the Soviets, but it hit a tree and bounced back at my feet without exploding. A tiny splinter hit me in the back, and I heard Lieutenant Laut cry out as he was hit in the knee.

He took off running away from the front lines and back toward our artillery unit down in the valley. I was not far behind. I didn’t even bother to take dead Franz down with me, though I’m quite sure he wouldn’t have minded. It was not a very heroic or glorious experience, rather cowardly really. I should have drunk that Schapps the supply man brought up, the whole bottle, and defended that hill. But my father had given me good advice: “Better a cowardly dog than a dead lion.”
Halfway down the hill we could clearly hear the "Urra" of the Soviets as they stormed the peak. It had been a narrow escape.
Near the end of January 1945 we moved north into Slovakia. All I remember of that time was the marching. Marching, marching, marching, an army on the move. Marching through the snow and wintry terrain.

We ended up west of the Tatra Mountains — pretty mountains in the south of Poland, not far from Crakow, famous for good skiing — at the end of January, early February. I can remember the names of two small towns: Trstena and Dvrdosin. It was quiet where we were; there was no heavy fighting. Our observation post was high up on a densely forested hillside in a well-built bunker overlooking a valley. I spent much of my time peering through the stereo-telescope down toward the village in that valley. Our infantry was positioned lower down on the slope. At night, standing guard, I learned quickly now to distinguish the rather slow “tack-tack-tack” of the Soviet machine gun from the rapid “purr purr” of the German MG 42 (Machine Gun 1942).

I remember being tortured by a louse on my left foot. I grew exasperated because I couldn’t scratch. It is impossible to go after a tiny louse inside a heavy boot. Even
pushing the barrel of my rifle against my foot didn’t help. That louse must have had a fine time. There’s nothing lousy about the lousy life of a louse.

We were on outpost duty for several days, then another crew moved up and we had a few days to rest down in the village. One morning I woke up to discover it had snowed the night before. I thought it was a beautiful world until I saw a sleigh piled with the corpses of German soldiers.

From Trstena and Dwdosin we moved north-west by train into Silesia, the south-east corner of Germany. The Germans, the invincible invaders of 1941 and 1942, had become weakened, exhausted defenders of their homeland, fighting on three fronts. In actuality, there were four fronts, because the air war was continually intensifying. In Dresden, on February 13, 1945, tens of thousands of humans were incinerated within a few hours. We knew nothing of that, of course. The soldier lives in a very small world, barely larger than the ground he stands and sleeps on. No wonder he thrives forever to enlarge it. It seems only natural that he would defend it with ferocity.

We were now in densely populated Germany, moving through villages and towns. There was no snow, and the temperatures were much more agreeable. The fighting had become very fierce. By that time I had become part of the staff of the First Battalion, Mountain Artillery Regiment 94, under Captain Christaller.

Sometime in late February, early March, I was informed that I was to go to officer’s school. A few weeks later, after I had packed and was ready to leave, Captain Christaller canceled the order. I wish I could thank him because he probably saved my life. By then our world was coming to an end and any travelers (like I would have been on my way to Juterbog for officer’s training) were taken off the trains and offered as replacements to decimated units. Army units are wonderful things because of the comradeship; the men look out for one another. But as a newcomer, a replacement, you would not be a “comrade,” you would be the lowest man on the totem pole and, as such,
would get handed the harshest jobs. Hauptmann Christaller saved me that day he canceled my order to go to officer’s school.

One day Hauptmann Christaller and I were out on horseback, inspecting our forward position. We were surprised by artillery barrage and jumped into foxholes to take cover. After it was over the Captain emerged and appeared bemused; he reported that the youngster under him had shaken uncontrollably, and he showed me the shrapnel splinter from under the band of his wristwatch. It had not even drawn blood. He must have led a charmed life to have made it that far. I sometimes wonder whether that handsome man with the lovely, ringing name survived.

Dusan Vozel, my friend from Slovenia, was killed about that time. His brother was with the Partisans, fighting the Germans, while Dusan was fighting with the German army. One day Dusan received a letter from his brother, showing him with his fellow Partisans. Dusan was out with the forward observation post, however, and never saw the letter. Nature called, and he was doing what we all have to do from time to time, when an artillery shell came screaming in. Talk about being caught with your pants down. It isn’t easy to take evasive action while squatting with your pants around your ankles.
By April the war was coming to an end and the front gave way every day. The infantry simply got up, left their positions, and started to walk away from the Soviets whether they attacked or not.

Roosevelt died around the middle of that month. His death created some excitement at the top which, strange as it may sound, did filter down to the grassroots level. The theory was that with the American President, staunch supporter of Joseph Stalin, out of the picture, the coalition would crumble and the Germans would triumph after all. Nothing like that ever came to pass, of course, and the war dragged on in the same pattern.

Then Hitler died, a hero, defending Berlin. I will always associate this momentous news with another episode: In an adjoining room an officer was berating a soldier because he had stolen a chicken. The officer threatened to have the soldier shot, and I remember clearly the anguish and terror I felt on behalf of that poor wretch. The facts we learned later about Hitler's death were much different, of course. He had
committed suicide. I thought about Friday, September 1, 1939, when Hitler had spoken about the duplicity and perfidy of the Poles... about how we were going to fight and win the war. About how he had put on his field gray tunic that morning and was not going to take it off until we triumphed in final victory or... and then he paused, just a second or two, to catch himself, reign himself in. And then he concluded with, "or... but such an ending I would not survive." And he didn’t.

Then May arrived, and with it lovely warm weather. On May 4, 1945, Captain Christaller told me to go out and retrieve one of our guns. I was taken on a motorcycle up to the line (to where we thought the line was). I dismounted to look for the gun and its crew, but never found it. As I was walking down a road at the entrance to a village I found myself face to face with a huge tank. The driver inside obviously didn’t see me. Then that long, long barrel started to move, swinging away from me and firing at point blank range — 100 feet or so — into a brick house on my right. That’s when I finally realized it was not a German tank.

Instead of looking for my motorcycle driver like I should have done, I started looking for a Panzerfaust, a simple but reliable shoulder-fired antitank rocket. I had decided to try to destroy that tank. I finally located one and ran back to where I had seen the tank. It was still in the same spot, and still facing my direction. I certainly wasn’t brave (or crazy) enough to walk up to the front of that tank and face its gun again. I decided to tackle it from the side, so I ran through the backyards of the houses lining the street. The tank looked even bigger from the side, and I would have had a clear shot if it hadn’t been for some Soviet soldiers in the yard, blocking my way. One of them met his end, and several more rushed out to come to his aid. When I saw that soldier’s comrades running to help him, completely unaware of their own danger, I lost interest in destroying that tank and gave up. As I turned around and walked away one of them nailed me from behind, giving me my most serious wound in the war. That bullet came very close to
doing me in completely.

Fortunately, despite my wound, I found my motorcycle and driver; that driver was a good man. He bandaged me up, I hopped on the motorcycle, and in no time we were back at the command post reporting to Hauptmann Christaller. He should have bawled me out for the mess I had gotten myself into. Instead, he decorated me. He took the iron cross first class off his tunic and pinned it on mine.

By evening I was at a field hospital. They gave me open ether as an anesthetic and explored the wound, removing the foreign materials. Some time during the night I boarded a hospital train. I was surrounded by the gravely wounded who were suffering tremendously, and all I had was my arm in a sling.

The train seemed to barely move, and at every station there were endless delays. Because I was ambulatory I moved around that train, trying to get away from suffering humanity, I suppose. There was a woman on the landing positioned at the entrance to the car who was about thirty. She was pregnant, “big with child.” She was also rather pretty, much too pretty for May 1945. A man, probably her father or father-in-law was with her. They had a huge suitcase which probably held everything they owned.

And then, the war was over.
We heard the war had ended on the radio, along with some blood-curdling talk about revenge. "RACHE, RRACHE, RRRACHE, FUR DIE KALTSCHNAEUTZIGE UBERHEBLICHERKTEIT DER DEUISHEN!" "Revenge, revenge, REVENGE, for the cold-blooded arrogance of the Germans." I still remember that announcer’s words after 56 years. He didn’t realize that there is no such thing as “the Germans.”

So those of us who were able to walk got off the train. I vaguely remember the pregnant woman, the elderly man, and the suitcase getting off, too. But where did they go? Where could they go? Where do you turn in a world which hates “the Germans” with a passion that defies description?

I was unencumbered, along with dozens of other soldiers. We only had to look after ourselves now. So we walked west; we were going to the Americans. Somehow the news had gotten around that the Americans were not far away. During the day we walked, during the night we slept under the stars, though I can’t recall getting much sleep. I don’t remember what we ate, either.

Eventually we ended up in a huge camp with thousands of men, surrounded by
Americans. Hallelujah. But our rejoicing was premature. After only two or three days they turned us over to the Soviets. What a disappointment that was. The Soviets formed us into a convoy and we headed out with no idea about where they were taking us. Late in the evening a halt was called and I just walked away towards the south, towards Austria, towards home. By early morning I came to a big river. Since my arm was still useless, swimming was out of the question. I walked along the shoreline until I came to a bridge and boldly crossed it. On the other side an American soldier barred my way. I had breakfast with him and his buddies before they took me to another POW compound where I was again handed over to the Soviets.

They marched us into Austria, to yet another POW camp in Doellersheim. It was a camp that had previously housed British and French POWs. There were hundreds of French suitcases lying around. The French prisoners had obviously been sent home without their luggage. The suitcases with locks had all been shot open and the contents removed. The items not found interesting or useful, like books, letters, and manuscripts, had been left, and I was able to take a few books for personal reading. I chose two in English so that I could practice during my stay at the camp.

Eventually we were taken from that camp and entrained, 40 men to a boxcar. Fortunately, the cars were “double-decker,” so that lessened the space problems. We were very hungry, but suffered even more from thirst. It was the end of July or early August, and it was very hot. The train traveled through Vienna and Budapest. We were clearly headed east. We ended up in a large POW camp in Akna Zlatina, near Maramaroszyget. We stayed there approximately one month before the Soviets sent “all the Austrians” in that camp home. We didn’t allow ourselves to be terribly exuberant at first, just in case they changed their minds. But it was true! We were going home.

The train journey lasted roughly one month. By late September I was home, really home. Praise the Lord.
What did we fight for? Certainly NOT liberty. I think it was about real estate. Hitler wanted access to East Prussia across the Polish corridor. The Poles said no, no way, nothing doing. How the Polish people suffered for their leader’s decision. In the end there was no more East Prussia, and no corridor.

Germany lost huge chunks of real estate. They now have much, much less “lebensraum” than in 1939. For all practical purposes the Soviet border up until 1989 was at the Oder River, less than 50 miles from Berlin. So the “big” winners were the Soviets, but what a win. Around three million German soldiers died in battle during World War II, but over eleven million Soviet soldiers were killed between June 22, 1941 and May 8, 1945. And the Soviet people? How they suffered. And their suffering continues to this day.

When we stayed in houses in the Ukraine, the Ukrainian women always treated us quite well, even though we were “the enemy.” When we left they always gave us a blessing and left us with this saying that I will never forget:

\[\begin{align*}
Nema \ hlebam, \\
Nema \ masla, \\
Nema \ yaytsa, \\
Nema \ mosh. \\
Voyna, \ voyna \\
ne \ harosh.
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
No \ bread, \\
No \ butter, \\
No \ eggs, \\
No \ husband. \\
The \ war, \ the \ war \\
is \ no \ good.
\end{align*}\]

What an understatement.
Epilogue

After World War II George Sittlinger managed to return home safely after his stay in a Russian prisoner of war camp. He went to Graz to study medicine a month later, and graduated in 1951.

He then immigrated to Canada where he took his internship in order to be able to take his medical boards in English. In 1952, at the age of 28, he married Edith Bernard who had been working as a maid, waiting for George to join her in Canada. They had three children: Edith, George, and Bernard.

Sittlinger worked as an attendant at a psychiatric hospital in St. Thomas, Ontario. He did his Junior Internship at Ottawa Civic Hospital and McKeller Hospital in Thunder Bay. While in Ottawa he worked during the day and washed dishes at night.

He started a private practice in Red Rock, Ontario, and spent 25 years there as the only doctor in town. He did many house calls, and for some time even looked after an Indian reservation 100 miles away. He then served for two years at a Seventh-day Adventist hospital in Hong Kong before he returned to Canada and started a practice in Hanover. There he became the chief of medical staff.

He retired in 1992. Since then he has spent his time doing the things he loves most: working on his bush lot and “camp” near Thunder Bay, and spending time with his family.
Literature Cited


Reader’s Digest, February 1944.
SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Cassandra King  Date: 11/11/00  Major: English

SENIOR PROJECT

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student’s supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor’s name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

Using both primary and secondary sources to explore the experience of the conquered German soldier and the silencing of his voice.

Signature of faculty advisor: Helen A. Lyke  Expected date of completion: April 16, 2001

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned:  yes

This is an “A” project:  yes

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit:  yes

Advisor’s Final Signature: Helen A. Lyke

Chair, Honors Committee:  Date Approved:  

Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this “A” quality work.