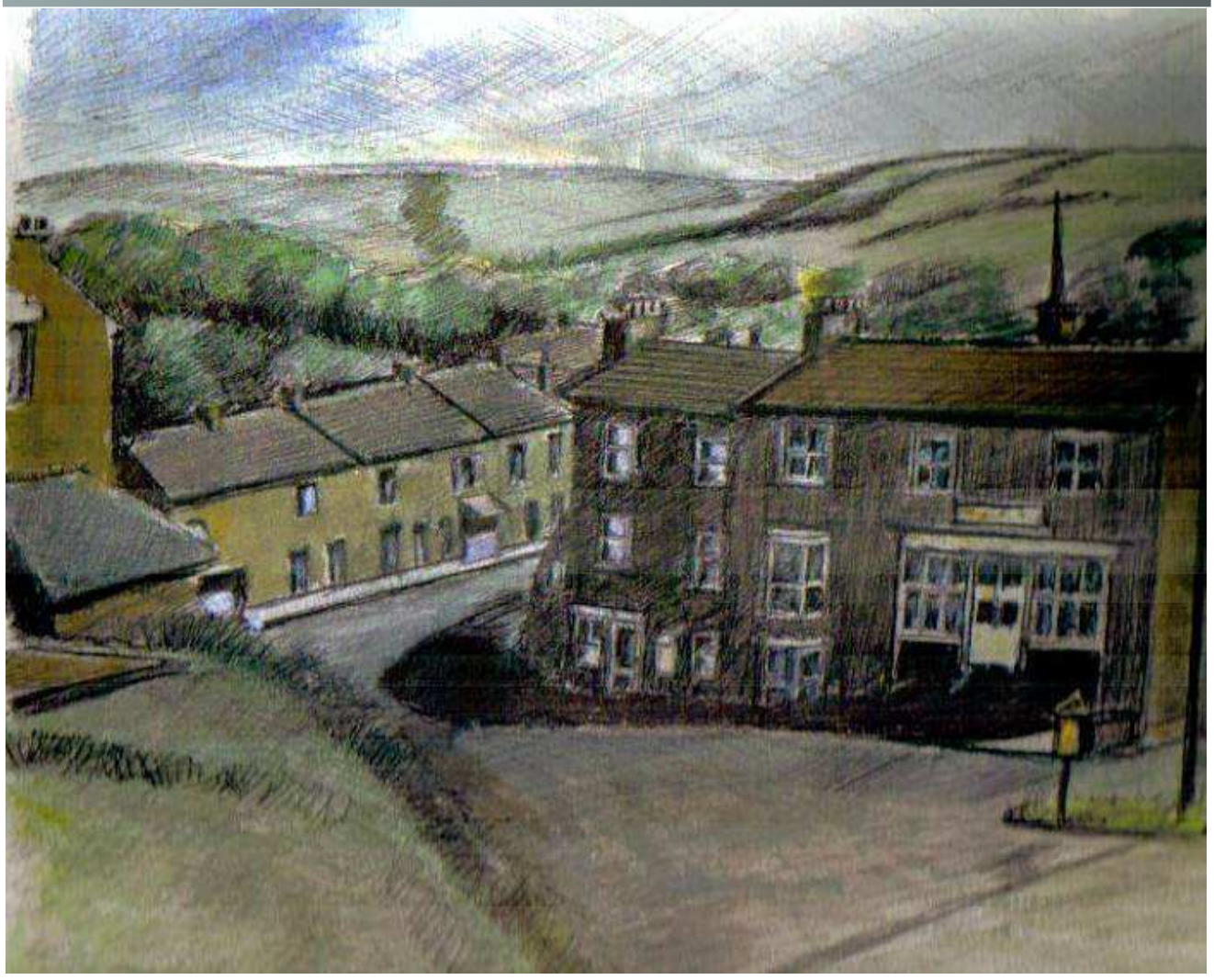
JUST ANOTHER COUNTRY BOY

and an unwilling guest
of Hitler

The Life of Ken Latheron

Compiled and edited by Julia Stephen



In memory of

Kenneth Latheron

1917–2007

FOREWORD

My father, Kenneth Latheron, was encouraged in his later life to write about his childhood and subsequent experiences as a young man and a prisoner of war. He originally started writing about his experiences in notebooks and also taped some of his memories. Unfortunately the tapes proved to be virtually blank when they were replayed a few years later. In 1997 my younger brother, Nick, gave him a computer so that he could complete the task. As my father had learnt to type when he was waiting for the opportunity to go to university that part of the task wasn't too daunting. Using the computer was a little bit more difficult! In his notes he often referred to it as his 'confuser'!

During his later years, when his health started to deteriorate, he found he could no longer work on the computer and the files lay dormant. In 2006 the health of my father declined further and resulted in the move of my parents from their home into residential care. When the family tackled the job of clearing the house my brother made sure that the files from the computer were saved. After a long illness my father passed away on 22 January 2007 – 61 years to the date that he was demobbed from the army.

I have subsequently retrieved the many documents saved by my father plus many handwritten notes and hopefully I have managed to compile the files into the correct order of events. Some of the place names have been difficult to trace with the possibility that he has the spelling written down incorrectly. The spelling of the names of the people he met relies very much on my father's records.

Included in the text are some poems written by my father about some of the events. The sketches of the prison camps and local countryside are also the work of my father.

This is meant as an insight in to the life of an ordinary man from a humble country life. Hopefully his descendents will find the stories interesting and, in some instances, funny. My father had a love of life, freedom and the countryside. As children he introduced us all to the beauty of the countryside and I know that we should all value the freedom that we have today.

Julia Stephen

PREFACE

For some years my friends and relations have asked me to write my memories of the Second World War and of my incarceration in various Stalags in Poland and Upper Silesia. This time I hope to be able to do so but because of the loss of my own diary, which I had kept over the period of my imprisonment, some of the picture may be a little strange.

My first effort to write a book failed because the tapes, on which I had recorded my story, failed after a delay of several years and the spoken words became faint and muddled.

My second attempt began well but unfortunately I lost a portion of my draft and then I seemed to lose interest for a while.

This time, at the age of eighty, I feel it is a must to finish the book for there is hardly time for another go. In any case I now have a word processor and after I have got some idea of the capabilities of the machine it should not prove too difficult a task to get on with the book and finish it.

This tome, I hope, will be for my family and relatives and will not be likely to become a world beater. I, after all, went through the war and these experiences are mine not those of anyone else. The joys, the pains and the sorrows are all mine and I feel that those most likely to appreciate the book will be those who have known me and lived with me in peace time and have watched me grow older and more forgetful as well as feebler of foot.

I hope you will forgive me if at times I make mistakes of time and place. I can remember things which happened a long time ago and I can forget the names of those I was introduced to yesterday. Life is like that and I am often told off for I often quote poems I had to learn at school when I was about eight years of age and then forget to shut the door.

In my lifetime I have been to places which I never hoped to visit and today people go in their thousands to these places, and more exotic places, as though it was the commonest thing in the world to do so

Ginger Rutledge was one of the best and I often think of him and the way we got along together. To the Germans we were cousins and we always managed days off to celebrate our respective birthdays. We were both faithful to our partners, Ginger to his wife and I to my girlfriend, and we both were family orientated and believed in marriage. Ginger and his wife had three children and my wife and I had five children and we love every one of them and their children.

In the Camps it was necessary to have mates or belong to a larger group, for the old saying that many hands make light work was true, for to be on ones own was not good at all. When I was first taken prisoner I was all alone and it took time for me to meet and join up with different people. Sometimes we were good pals and sometimes it was a great mistake but strangely when Ginger and I became mates it was ideal for we both loved classical music and were both interested in art. Ginger was a first class artist and we both settled in to paint scenery for the shows which other people produced.

The people that one met in the camps, people of various colours, religions, nationalities and experiences were all important. The conversations one had with the other people are stored in my memory and are now forming part of a story I am trying to write. If you are interested in other folk then their stories become yours too. In our camp we had Scots, Welsh, Irish, Maoris, Kiwis, Aussies, Maltese and Channel Islanders. All were of interest to us and all passed on stories which were rich in incident, all part of our memories.

Ken Latheron

Mum and Dad
Amy and Sam Latheron

Early Life

I was born on the Seventeenth of September 1917, the third son of Samuel and Amy Latheron who lived in a small mining village in the County of Durham. My father was a time served cabinet maker and my mother was a school teacher, who taught in the local council school. Our parents loved us dearly and urged us to work hard to improve our chances at school and in the world of work.

The village was not a particularly beautiful one and was in close proximity to two collieries, one at Binchester and one at Westerton. East and west of the village were hills and the winds whistled down the shallow valley between the hills and it was said that the village was one of the coldest in the North East.

We as children seemed to thrive on the cold, and the winds, for the school had a very good attendance record and children used to walk up to three miles to go to the school. At this particular time children had to make their own pleasures for there was little in the way of entertainment such as visits to the pictures or concerts and I was relatively old before I went to a matinee at the local cinema. Money was always scarce in the village and work, apart from the coal mines, was not easy to find. My dad was never out of work, chiefly because he had a reputation for being a first class worker and an honest man.

Housing in the village varied from fair to downright bad but, although families had to live in houses which were rather on the small side, those houses were at least waterproof and substantial. We lived in a stone built two up two down cottage totally lacking in flush toilets and without a decent hot water supply but my mother and grandmother were quite capable and turned out lovely food for our delectation. Washday, though always a hard day for my parents, always ended up with lovely white shirts and laundry. Few people in the village were rich or even comfortable. My dad, though an excellent craftsman, still had to survive on around nine pounds per week with one week's holiday with pay. Because he was recognised as the best workman in the factory he earned one penny an hour more than the other workers. He worked Monday to Friday 6.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. and Saturday 6.30 a.m. till just after midday.

The countryside around the village was very pleasant, but at times the winds were very blustery and winters were rather rough. Spring and summer at that period seemed to be very lovely and as children we had fun playing in the woods, catching fish in the various ponds, climbing trees and making camps. None of us had much money to spend and pocket money was never great but we in general had very little desire to change our way of life.

At the age of four I started in the infant's class and I have never forgotten the day I was welcomed into the class by Granny Lewis, who clapped us into the classroom, and became a mother to us all. Granny Lewis was a spinster who had hundreds of children, for she loved us all and we knew it all our lives. She and my grandfather played a large part in my early life and I learned a great deal from them both.

As a young boy I accompanied my grandfather to his allotment in the village and loved to see how he dealt with the work of digging and seeding and in particular how he grew his potatoes. My grandfather always kept a store of strawy horse manure which he had stacked in a corner of his allotment and to which he added more and more manure as it became available. Because we lived in the country there were many horses and the country folk used to keep a pail close to the door so that if any of the horses left little gifts behind there was always something to collect it in. In those days all people were of the opinion that home grown food was far better than that from the shops and allotment holders were prevalent among the villagers.

My grandfather was a retired miner and he and I used to go for long walks down the country lane near home. It was a pleasure to learn about the names, colours and smells of the local plants and to discover the nesting places of plain and lovely birds. My grandfather had lived in America but had returned to the United Kingdom to look after my mother. In all of the places he had visited he had learned about the flowers and animals and because he loved us he was only too pleased to pass on his knowledge. On Sunday evenings we would all go for walks down our favourite lanes and my mother would tell me stories of the animals and the fishes in the streams. We were indeed lucky to live where we did and as growing children we walked whenever we could. From time to time we went up

Grandfather
Thomas Latheron

to Teesdale and visited our relatives on their farm at High Skears. At that age a farm seemed to be something magic and I loved to stroke the horses, dogs and sheep and of course fantasise about the animals and the things they were capable of doing.

We also went to Egglestone and drank bottles of pop made in the village by Matthew Raine. Nothing ever tasted better than that pop. The village was tree lined and somewhere in the area I used to go with my mum and dad to play in a stream. In my eyes no foreign bathing hole was as sweet and romantic as that stream in the Dales.

Soon I left the infants class and began to work in the senior class under the guidance of the Deputy Headmaster, a Mr Peel, who was the kindest and most cheerful of the teachers I have ever met. He, unlike the Gaffer Mr Royston, knew and loved children. Sadly he was a toper, drinking far too much for his own sake, and so in spite of his zeal as a teacher his own life was a bit of a shambles and he committed suicide on the local railway.

While I was at this school I began to play football and did well to become a regular member of the team. We now had a Mr Andrews in place of Mr Peel and though he was good he was not as good as our former teacher.

After the death of my grandfather in 1924, when I was about 7, I continued to find pleasure in and around the village where we lived, particularly in the various woods which were in the main open to the public. Now I went climbing etc with my friends, male and female, and the girls were just as good as we were when it came to climbing trees and swinging from ropes. We still built nests, collected blackberries and apples and went fishing for gudgeon in the mining reservoirs. In the winter we took our sledges to Goosey Banks or the Lime Kilns where sledging was first class. Close to home there was a reserve aerodrome from the First World War and almost every year there was a long narrow pond which froze solid and on which, for several weeks we were able to skate by day and by night. When the thaw came and the water drained away, private planes and organised shows used the Aerodrome. I well recall the time when Jimmy Mollison and Mr McKeever of the Newcastle aero club were supposed to join with the Sir Allan

Cobham Circus to give a display. That day the heavens opened and all our houses were filled with people who were searching for some place to dry off. The Circus was stuck in Lancashire and planes from Newcastle had to join forces with Jimmy Mollison and provide trips. The site was waterlogged and planes found it very difficult to take off, leaving streams of water behind as they left the ground. One of the planes piloted by Mr McKeever struck the perimeter hedge and nose dived into the adjoining field, where the lady passenger sustained a rather serious cut over the eyes and the pilot got a bloody nose.

When the eleven plus had to be taken I was in Class X Seven in the village school and I found the examination quite easy. I was pleased that I passed with flying colours and made my way to the local Grammar School at Spennymoor. This for me was a great adventure made more interesting by the fact that a number of us walked to school, a distance of almost three miles. Because we were some twenty yards or so short of the three miles my parents had to pay my bus fares. I soon discovered that a friend of mine, by the name of Steve Best, drove a milk float from the Old Park Farm to Spennymoor every day of the week and was only too pleased to give me a lift to school. At lunch time another friend, by the name of Corner, offered me a lift on the back of his motor cycle. The bike was an Indian, I believe, but after several weeks my mother started worrying about possible accidents and I was forbidden to travel on the bike. I was lucky for a short while afterwards Mr Corner had an accident when his bike skidded and he struck his head on the kerb and was killed. I now started travelling on a bus run by the Favourite Bus Co. This was a good service for they went out of their way to help us, taking us home for lunch and picking us up for the return trip.

Now at the Grammar School I found they had a very good football team. One of my dad's relatives had played football for England but had been killed in the First World War. I was keen to follow in his footsteps and become a professional footballer but my parents did not like the idea. I am afraid that I was a fool and neglected my work, although I did very well in subjects I really liked.

School was a mixture of bad and good. I enjoyed some lessons, although one particular mistress hated my guts and I, in turn, just could not stand her. She was a French teacher and though I was quite good at the language, I used to lose

marks because I was always in this woman's bad books. There was only one lesson which I really hated, and that lesson was algebra. Because I had never been taught algebra in the council school and we had a Scottish teacher who just could not or would not teach us. We also had a chemistry master who walked behind you when you were working at the desk and who flogged you with his cane if he felt that way inclined. He was an old rogue and when he left sold bags full of hard backed note books for two shillings and sixpence per case full. I regret to say that at this time in my life I was inclined to be idle, particularly as I had started courting a redhead and thought that she was absolutely divine. There is no doubt that I wasted a lot of time, but my examination results were still high enough to secure me a place in university and as soon as money became available I started to study Architecture as my oldest brother had done.

When I was about fourteen my Father, who always found things mechanical of great interest, procured a Vale Special car for the princely sum of two pounds, and brought it home so that he could use the engine in his workshop. At two pounds this was an outstanding bargain for the various parts of the machine, the brass lamps, the quarter inch thick aluminium bodywork, the horse hair upholstery. The phosphor bronze clutch parts were worth a small fortune. My Dad was not a great lover of money and he therefore sold off any spares at a reasonable price. He was paid approximately two pounds for each of the brass lamps. He was keen to use the engine to work his various machines in the workshop. The car was almost new and it is doubtful if it had done more than a hundred miles. It appeared that the gear system had been a bit difficult for in those days there was no such thing as synchromesh and the gears were a bit of a handful. I can still remember that car as it was with the steering bobbin protruding from the front and the wire ropes which operated the steering mechanism. The windscreen, I recall, was of plain glass and was pivoted at each side so that it could be raised or lowered as required. On this car there was no means of washing the windows while the car was in motion and the dashboard was of timber similar to that in the old Rover cars and the gear lever operated in a stout track which had three positions for the gears. The two front seats had metal framing and the padding was in one and a half inch thick layers of horse hair. These, when taken out of the seats, were ideal for kneeling mats and were used by my mother and her friends as kneelers when they washed the kitchen

floor. The front of the car was covered by a hood which was of leather and folded on to the back of the front seats when the weather was fine. Behind lay the Dicky seat and this had no cover so if it rained then the occupants of the seat got well and truly soaked! The tyres on the car were solid and were in pristine condition and the car was finished in a yellow colour. This then was the first cause for excitement in the family. Some years later my eldest brother bought himself a hundred pound Ford car and because he and I were at the time quite close, I was allowed to learn to drive this car and between us we travelled quite large areas of the country for pleasure and for work. At this time traffic was very light and petrol relatively cheap. This car too did not have synchromesh on all gears and it was necessary to double declutch for the lower gears. This car was ideal for me, from the point of cost and upkeep, and I was able to do most of the necessary repair work myself.

In the period between the juniors and the seniors at school, I had a full life of sport of various kinds, football, cricket, roller skating, sea angling and finally car driving. In my youth I had always played football, either with a local club or with the younger element on a Saturday afternoon. I was also quite a good football player either as a full back or on the right wing and without boasting I can say that I had a good kick in either foot. At this time footballs were of leather and not as today of plastic. Anyone who played regularly in those days knows how heavy a ball could be and what pain could be caused by balls which were not properly inflated. I can well remember having been hit in the face by under inflated balls and the spells of headaches after failing to read a high cross properly and getting the ball on the wrong part of the head

As a cricketer I was best known for my bowling, but still often opened the batting and when not playing helped to maintain the buildings and cut the grass for the village club.

During this period of my life I skated both on ice and in a roller rink, often in and around Scarborough, where prior to the war I went with my brother James almost every weekend. He did not skate but went sea angling in a boat belonging to a Mr Philips, and we both went out early in the morning from the beach and

out to a point between the two piers where we fished for codling and mackerel. Our catch was cooked that day by our landlady and was delicious.

Each time we went to Scarborough we had to travel some seventy plus miles and I would drive one way and my brother would drive on the return leg. This was done in his 100 pound car.

As a lad I enjoyed heading for Byers Green, a favourite haunt of mine. I would wander down the lane enjoying all the various types of flower to be found there. After about three quarters of a mile I would turn left and then after a short distance I would turn left again and walk down the road that led to the wood. As I wandered I would take a careful note of the lovely blue bells growing in masses in the fields on my left side. Flowers which we allowed to pick to take home to our mothers. There were areas of meadow sweet and other types of flower perfuming the air. Once I reached the wood I would climb trees, make a camp in the wood, go bird nesting and dig up what we called ground nuts. In the woods were masses of blue bells and other types of flowers while only a step away there was a lovely stream, tadpoles, frogs and water boatmen. The wood was on a hill and the trees over the road formed a natural canopy which was rather useful on very hot days. Hot days seemed to be, at that time, the normal type of weather as rain was rather infrequent. At the bottom of the hill the road took a turn to the left but normally I carried straight down the Black Road, a footpath which had a coniferous plantation on its right side and luscious fields on the left. Both sides of the path were overgrown with hazel and hawthorn bushes and when I eventually emerged from these bushes it was on to an area of semi bog land. Here there were masses of marsh marigolds, cowslips and milkmaids and a sprinkling of spotted orchis plants. I then would wander down to the little hamlet of Mount Slowly and turn left to meet up once more with the road. I would then turn left again past the old fort on the left and the orchard and Old Park Farm where my old friend Steven Best lived. Then it was on through the avenue of lovely beech trees and back to the bottom of the hill and the top of Black Lane. There were of course many variations on this walk and these were used to lengthen or shorten the walk but all the walks were a boon for we loved the country and the exercise and I know I always slept well afterwards.

The village, a small and rather quiet one, had no great claims to fame and it was not particularly beautiful, but the people were a kindly lot. One exception was Polling Day when those who supported any candidate other than the Labour one were ostracised, and if the conditions were right, their children were attacked by the village children who had Labour voting parents. My parents always voted for the Liberal Candidate so on Polling Day the three of us always stuck together and thus avoided confrontation with other children in the village. On the whole we got on well with the other kids particularly because we could also play football rather well, and it came in useful when we played visiting teams.

There were several rather strange people in the village and perhaps the strangest was one 'Snotter Johns' who, as his name implies, could never keep his nose clean and spent his time running the line at the football matches poking his fingers up his nose all the time. We had also a man known as Simeon Mathews, a very learned man, who bought up old horses which were on their way to the Knackers Yard. He then fed them on nothing but freshly cut grass which, I believe, causes the stomach to become bloated. He would then sell the horses and make himself a fair profit. He was known as a horse builder. Another famous son of the village was one Johnnie 'Cut Cabbage', noted for cutting show vegetables in an effort to win a prize for himself and his own not so good vegetables. This man was also known for trying to steal coal from a wagon over a coal depot. He was caught red handed and became a bit of an outcast. We also had a couple known as Tommy Lucy, a brother and sister who kept a very rundown shop which sold pikelets, but the majority of the pikelets were eaten by the mice. We had a gang of five men who never worked till the Second World War began. These men had always said that they were miners, so when war was declared, it is said someone spun them round and showed them where the colliery was. There they stayed till the end of the war when they resurfaced, the saviours of the world.

The village seemed to breed eccentric characters. Among these were Jackie Shaw and Bobby Holley. Both home grown and always interesting, not for their brains but for their strange exploits.

Middlestone Moor stood on the main Bishop Auckland to Durham road and Jackie Shaw and his brother were the owners of a bus, known as the Bonnie Heather, which plied between Byers Green and Spennymoor, the local township. When I say that the bus plied between these two places, I mean that it was supposed to travel between the two places named, but Jackie Shaw had a girlfriend living in our village and his love was so fervent that he just could not pass through the village without spending some time with her. When, therefore, the bus arrived opposite the dwelling of this lady, Jackie stopped the bus and regardless of the feelings of his passengers, switched off the engine on the bus and ran in to see his hot lipped girlfriend. Naturally the villagers were not amused and called his bus "The might have to" because of the frequent trips made to the home of the lady.

In those days most maintenance to the buses was done by the driver of the bus and I cannot say that the majority of buses were really roadworthy. The fire protection was of minimum proportions so if you were a regular traveller on the Bonnie Heather you always had to be prepared to jump off the vehicle if it showed signs of catching fire.

Bobby Holley was a regular traveller on the bus at nights, for he danced in one of the local watering holes and, in a semi inebriated state, travelled home on the bus each night. Bobby, as I say, was rarely sober and had gained a name for himself by shovelling coal for an old lady into her coalhouse. When she had to pay for the coal she said she could not afford it. This did not please Bobby so he shovelled all the coal out again. I recall that one night I had been to the pictures and boarded the bus to travel home. Bobby got on the bus with a paper of fish and chips, carefully took out the fish which he then put into his raincoat pocket, ate the chips and then some wag on the bus told him that he was passing by his bus stop. Bobby, who was a wee bit under the weather, stood up, opened the door of the bus and walked out into the night. He was a lucky man for the bus was doing about thirty miles per hour and Bobby staggered across the village green without falling down and safely negotiated all the hazards on the way. Had he been sober he could well have injured or killed himself.

Among the characters in the village were seers, horse builders and others who in their lifetime had done something foolish. One character was Poor Cheddar Jack who wired himself into a room when he was building a wireless set and had to be rescued by other villagers who heard his cries for help. He was never allowed to forget his foolishness. We, of course, knew every inadequate person in the village and sometimes went out of our way to see that they were punished for some of their actions, but in general we were by no means harsh on those who because they were a little lacking in sense, upset us.

One of the local characters was Dodey Bell who kept a couple of lurchers and who spent all his spare time and, since he never worked, had ample spare time to go poaching down Byers Green Lane. Now, in those days, there was no such thing as Myxomatosis and rabbits were very much a part of English country dinners, as were their cousins the humble hares. Dodey had specially adapted pockets in which to place his spoils. They could hold something in the region of a couple of large and healthy hares and/or rabbits. Dodey was a relatively small man, not given to effusiveness and in fact he spoke very little. He had a magnificent pair of bowlegs, just like the hoops on a barrel and when he walked his gait was a rolling one due, no doubt, to his short legs and the fact that they were so bowed. This gait was a bit of a handicap because if someone set out to trap Dodey they found it relatively easy to follow him, so distinct was his gait. This man was a great deal older than I was but he was one of the villager characters never to be forgotten.

There was also in the village a seer of somewhat doubtful parentage and when I talk of seers that is exactly what I mean. This man loved to peer at the sky at night and then expound on the wonders he had seen. He did so while the simple children of the village listened to his stories and did all his work for him so that he was never out of breath. Sadly for Thomas the children had a habit of growing up physically and in good sense. I met him one day when he hoped to tell me about some little known feature of the night sky and strangely that day he was pushing a rather heavy barrow. He promised to tell me all about the Comet in the sky if I would push his barrow for him. My older brothers knew Tom well and had told me not to be taken in by him. I therefore thanked Tom for his offer but felt that it would be better if he asked someone else to push the barrow. He never asked me again. Apparently one day he pushed his barrow to Redcar, some

thirty miles or so away, called on the Mayor and told him that he was Tom Green the veteran walker, night sky studier and various other things. He said that he had not eaten that day because he had started out early to reach Redcar in time for tea. Tom looked simple but was much brighter than people thought, and certainly lived on his wits, for he was in truth work shy.

Along with Thomas Green there were three other characters who lived in the village and who were quite unique. These characters were Sammy Allswop, Dummy Hicks and Box Egg. Sammy had been employed on the local rail line and had worked in the station at Spennymoor. One day an elderly lady arrived in a train at Spennymoor and being of ample proportions decided to get off the train backwards. Sammy seeing the lady trying to get down from the carriage ran along the platform and, despite her pleas for him to leave her alone, pushed her back into the carriage and closed the door on her. For this he was sacked and never more did he lose the name of Sammy Allswop. Dummy Hicks was not a prominent member of the community and just ambled around the village collecting potato peelings for use as pig food. Dummy carried a pail on each arm and carried the potato peelings in the buckets to the allotments where people reared their pigs. Dummy was paid for this chore and earned a very precarious living. This was a seven day job and Dummy Hicks never dressed up. Box Egg, like Dummy Hicks, was another inadequate type. He was rather simple and had a speech impediment and so all his messages were in a sort of sign language. Box Egg rarely washed but I never ever heard that he was a villain in any way. His life was sad, as was that of the others I have mentioned, but at no time did they show any signs of bestiality and in most ways they were quite reasonable people. Other names spring to mind of people who were rather strange in their ways or had some physical disability. There was a lad known as Splocher who had a deformed foot and made a strange sound as he walked. Splocher also had a pal who was known by the name of Topper Rome and these two were great pals and sometimes they went around with a Mr Moon, so called because he had a face which in profile looked very much like the moon.

Outbreak of War

My two brothers went to University to study for qualifications in architecture and dentistry. My parents had so far managed to pay their way but it was obvious they did not have sufficient funds to pay for me and that I would have to do some other work until money did become available. I decided to study shorthand and typing and then took a job as a clerk until my brothers qualified. Wages at this time were in the region of fourteen shillings per week.

A short while before I was called up, I helped my Father to strip a building plot which we had bought for our parents, but which had to be used as a garden during the dig for victory period of the War. The work was hard and we trenched the site and then set the ground with potatoes which apparently produced a very good crop that year and right up to the end of the hostilities.

I eventually began my studentship in the School of Architecture at King's College, Newcastle in, I believe, late September 1937. Unfortunately I was not able to take a BA because I did not have Latin, a must in those days. All went quite well until September 1939 when the War clouds gathered over this land. I, as a student, volunteered to help defend the country and after a medical in Durham was eventually called up in January 1940 and was sent to Richmond in Yorkshire for training with the Green Howards.

The day I reported to the Green Howards I drove through the snow to Richmond and went to the depot in the market square and was then sent a few miles away to the camp at Waitwith, a new and incomplete structure being built for the expected influx of soldiers. There was no hot water, no N.A.A.F.I. and no heat. If anyone wanted a cup of tea it had to be bought from the Clerk of the Works of the builder. The food at Waitwith was not the most wonderful in the world and I will never forget the pilchards in sauce served up on rusty plate. This was served up time and time again.

We were all given our full complement of injections etc and then sent on Church Parade, which turned out to be a fiasco because so many people fainted or declared themselves sick. The C.O. declared that we were all weaklings and

ordered us to go on a run in the snow and clad in shorts, vests and gym shoes only. That day there was an air raid alarm and we had to shelter beneath bushes for upwards of half an hour and the following day many were sick with sore throats. Again the C.O. called us wimps and the following day he was ill with flu and was rushed to hospital in Darlington. The roads were still ice bound and it was very difficult to get to Catterick a mile or so distance from our camp.

We now started drilling in the M.T. Huts which, though cold, were at least dry and without ice. We marched, saluted and then saluted officers. Then we had to salute when we were collecting our pay. Soon we were quite good at marching, slow, quick march, turning left or right and also turning about. The we started drilling with the rifle and we were told about the Bren Gun, the Spigot mortar and the Boyes Anti Tank rifle, although we never managed to fire one of these guns. There was always a lack of ammunition. There were several soldiers hit by flying rifles when the soldiers carrying the rifles slipped and the rifles flew up in the air. One platoon sergeant was supposed to teach us map reading but just did not have a clue and one day the C.O. stopped us on the way back to our barracks and asked various questions on map reading. The first four people he asked failed to answer a single question and I was next in line. I answered all my questions and the C.O. wondered why I was able to answer and other people could not. The sergeant suggested that I should teach the platoon about map reading and that I need not do any PT, which I detested. Unfortunately a few days later I wakened to find that I had what I thought to be a sore throat and so I reported sick and was told that I was seriously ill and had to keep still till the ambulance arrived to take me to the Hunden's Lane Hospital in Darlington. On arrival at the hospital I was met by a Nurse Brown, who came from the same village as I did, and she wanted to know why I was swinging the lead. She was sorry to find that I was in fact quite poorly with butterfly throat – otherwise known as Diphtheria. I was put to bed and then the Sister came in with an outsize syringe and injected me in the knee and I went off to sleep. How long I slept I do not know but when I did awake it was to find that I no longer had pillows and that I could not eat solid foods but had to be fed on slops and fed through a teapot type feeder. It appears that this type of treatment continued for some time because I was in hospital for some days before I was allowed any solid food.

Slowly but surely I started to improve. I was fed up at the thought of having nothing to do and was glad when a probationer nurse called Joyce showed some interest in me and spoke to me whenever she had to look after me. The nurses in general were O.K. but one or two were a bit randy and no one in my condition had any interest in the body of a woman I was ill and weak and I wanted to be well.

Soon a young boy of about five years old was brought into the cubicle and Michael did a lot to make things brighter. He had apparently been sick with the Diphtheria bug and had been in a cubicle with another child who had died and so he was transferred to my cubicle for his sake. He was a bright child and we became good pals and whatever I did he had to do. Sometimes that was not a wise thing to do, especially on cascara day for Michael wanted to take the same amount of cascara as I had to take and that meant calamity. I helped Michael with his lessons and read him stories for children are so lively and interested. Things went on quietly at least on our ward but we did get some interference from patients who had Cerebro Spinal Fever and who were in cubicles near to ours. This fever was rather nasty when it first began, but with the proper treatment it did not take too long to be cured. At first there were severe headaches which lasted for a few days, but in about a fortnight the patients were tripping the light fantastic with members of the nursing staff.

One day I was told that I could get out of bed but when I did so my legs folded and I fell to the floor. A few days later I was told by the Sister that I was going to Catterick. Michael was also being discharged that day and I managed to get word to his parents that this was the case. Later, when I was on sick leave, I visited them and we had a good old pow-wow. Michael was now with friends of his own age and soon forgot me, but I hope he is still alive and well.

On discharge I was sent to the sick bay at Catterick where I was looked after by a drunken orderly who tried to flog me tea, butter, drugs (for things like tetanus) and everything like rugs and blankets. I was told that I had tachycardia and that I was fit for Home Service only. This meant I would not be fit for marching and I was instructed not to do any lifting. An officer from the Green Howards came in

with a travel warrant, money (from his own pocket), a ration card and a pass for a months sick leave. He then took me to the bus station, helped me on to the bus and wished me well and off I went to see my parents and for a whole blissful month I enjoyed myself. Now I was able to get out into the country with Patch our English Setter and gradually build up my strength.

At the end of the month I was called to Fenham Barracks for a medical examination. This was not one of the best examinations I have had, for the M.O. didn't examine me properly and stood back and said I was A1. I explained that when I entered the forces I was not A1 because I had defective vision and that I would keep going sick until I got a proper medical board. He then declared that I would be temporarily downgraded and we left it that way. I then found I was to be sent to a camp near Hythe in Kent. This turned out to be a short posting and before long I was on my way Beckenham, also in Kent. Soon we were informed that a new Company was being formed to go to France. Because I spoke reasonable French and could type and do shorthand it looked like this would be the right place for me. It soon turned out that the officers were all from the First World War and this also applied to the senior N.C.O.s who were well beribboned and just a little past it. The officers had all been in France before and spoke of the children they had left behind when the war came to an end. I believe that the majority of the officers had been Officers in the Tower. I found it difficult to settle in the company because I was a northerner and all the other members of the unit were from the south, chiefly London. There was a certain clannishness and I did not fit in.

May 1940

There was some urgency with regard to the company movement and after about a week we all had to take our embarkation leave of seventy two hours and I took the opportunity to visit the hospital and also to go to see Joyce who had now left the nursing service because she was suffering from blood poisoning. Leave over, we now set about preparations for the great day when we were to land in France. We all went down to the docks in Southampton and embarked on a ship to take us to France but the first attempt had to be aborted because of enemy action in the Channel, but the second trip was fine and we landed at Le Havre. We were loaded up into wagons ready to travel inland. At first things did not look too bright and the rolling stock seemed to have square wheels. Alongside the railway there seemed to be mile after mile of First World War Cemeteries and it was not till we reached Amiens that I felt some interest in the countryside. The route we were taking was the route my dad had taken during the First War and I remembered that at Amiens he had found a piece of timber from the organ of the cathedral which he later carved and used as the back of a mirror. After some time we stopped in a siding. We were then sent to a transit camp where we settled down for a short rest. Food in the camp was fair but we were very happy to buy eggs and chips from the residents of the farm next door. On Sundays Roman Catholics went to mass and I went along with them so that I could help them understand what was being said. This helped to break the ice between myself and other members of the unit. The R.Q.M.S was a staunch Roman Catholic but a bit of a toper, and soon got drunk, and so he had to be carefully handled when in his cups. Before long the Phoney War came to an end and one day we were sent to a place called Cysoing to unload ammunition from a train in a siding. The ammo was chiefly six inch H.E. and there was also anti tank ammunition. We had not been working long when a flight of German Stukas bombed us. We were caught napping but dashed away from the station and flung ourselves down behind one of the platforms. The planes dived down to about fifty feet and then dropped their bombs, complete with screamers, on us. Fortunately the bombers were attacked by Canadian fighters and scattered and the bombs missed their target and our lives were spared. Sadly one Canadian pilot was shot down and although he parachuted, his chute failed to open and he was killed. Here was a very brave

young man who gave his life to save ours. We had no casualties, only a couple of drunks who mopped up the cognac and other alcohol when the local estaminet was hit by a bomb. They were severely lectured by their commanding officer. We did not return to the railway siding but were sent to a place called Lessines in Belgium where we stayed in the Rue des Rois until things became very tricky and we had to move once more. We had made friends in Lessines and we were sorry to have to leave them behind but we had our orders and these had to be obeyed. I have never believed that people live more than once, but I felt that I knew the town and when I was sent to recover some plans from the Hotel de Ville I knew exactly where to go and what is more, the town made me feel at home and seemed familiar. At night two of us used to go to a butcher's house where we were able to listen to the BBC. The butcher had been badly wounded in the previous war and he had a son serving in the Belgian forces.

Soon the retreat set in and soon we were on the march at night, for to march during the day was stupid for the Germans ruled the skies. Never did I see a French plane and only once did I see a French tank. From time to time we came across newly dug graves and in most cases these were R.A.S.C. drivers who had been killed while driving singly, or in convoy, along the tree lined roads. Now during the day we went on parachute patrol or were sent to cover the approach to bridges over roads or rivers. We marched through the Maginot Line and the Little Maginot Lines and never saw a French soldier. Part of the night would be spent marching and then we would find somewhere to sleep during the rest of the night. Quite often the billets we had occupied at night were destroyed early the next day. At times we settled down in houses at the side of the roads and most of these dwellings had a cellar where wine had stood. Now the officers occupied the cellars and the men kept an eye open for possible trouble. One day we stopped in such a place and not far from us was a farm occupied by men from the Foreign Legion. This Farm was attacked by German fighter planes and a battle raged for some time. A short while earlier, a plane with Belgian markings had passed over the farm and could have notified the Huns about the troops in the farm house. It is rather frightening to travel in convoy and to be jumped by low flying enemy fighter. The driver, who has the noise of his own vehicle to deal with, does not always hear the approaching planes. On this occasion we missed disaster by the skin of our teeth. When we marched at night we were quite often afraid that

when the moon was full we would be seen but we were lucky for never did we see or hear enemy aircraft. For some time we were on the march and, on one never to be forgotten night when we passed through Armentieres, we saw in the shadowy porch of an estaminet a figure passing a bottle of beer to each soldier as he passed the door. Soon we reached Lille and as we passed through the square a bomb exploded somewhere in the town but we had no time to spare for we were being led into the depths of the woods where many soldiers could be seen preparing their meals and doing their various chores. For me the most astounding feature was the continuous croaking of the hundreds of frogs which lived in the ponds or lakes of the woodland, a sound which seemed to obliterate all others. Slowly we moved through the trees and were loaded into trucks which carried us through the narrow corridor between German and Allied forces. As dawn arrived we came out in to the Pas de Calais and spotted German aircraft attempting to bomb the little town of Cassel and being prevented from doing so by fine anti aircraft fire. We debussed and made our way up the path which led to the square. On the way up we got rid of all surplus items such as greatcoats and typewriters and then we went for breakfast in the square. A half tin of bully beef and a packet of hard tack biscuits plus a large mug of tea. In the meantime the Officers had decided that we would head for Dunkirk and so, breakfast over, we started out towards the coast. Shortly after we left Stukas started bombing the square and I turned to see what was happening. Bombs were dropping on the houses in the Square and the debris was falling down on French soldiers who were attempting to escape. From time to time French soldiers could be seen running from the dust and smoke caused by the bombing and I felt very sad for it was obvious that casualties were going to be high. As far as we were concerned we had been lucky to leave Cassel when we did and we moved on to find out what we were about to face as we travelled to Dunkirk. I cannot forget that picture and know that had we not cleared that area we would suffered the same fate as the French. Soon we came to a cross roads where soldiers, in British uniform, told us that the road towards the coast and on the left was closed and the only road open was the one to the right. We sent out scouts and took the right fork, but a short while later we were advised that there were German tanks on the road ahead. We therefore took avoiding action and soon found part of an old First World War trench which still had dugouts and the like. Meanwhile the Germans had started machine gunning and mortaring the position and things were none too healthy.

Some members of the company had found shelter in an old dug out and were now playing cards with little or no interest in the war, and I was left to keep my eyes open for any enemy action. Some time later a Lieutenant and more of our men arrived on the scene and suggested that there only appeared to be a few enemy troops around. The officer suggested that we fixed bayonets and charged the enemy and he had to be told that since we had no bayonets it was a bit difficult to use them. The troops then moved to a place where there was an old crater filled with water and we settled down to engage our enemy. The officer, a brave enough man, stood out in the open and what appeared to be a stick grenade exploded close to him and he fell into the crater where his body floated. Two of us waded into the water, pulled him out and laid him on the bank for the medics to deal with while we carried on firing at the Germans. Bombs and mortars continued to fall on the infantry close by. There was another explosion and one of the vehicles close by blew up. A piece from the chassis struck me on the right arm. The impact was sufficient to completely numb my arm and my battle dress jacket was scorched by the heat of the metal. When another mortar bomb blew up I was blown over by the blast and a piece of shrapnel struck the rim of my steel helmet. I felt a sharp pain in my forehead and my helmet was jerked off my head. When I pulled myself together I found that one officer was dead with half his head blown away and another was unconscious with a gaping hole in his back. Blood was running down my face but the wound was not too serious. Fortunately I had been falling backwards as the shrapnel hit and it had failed to do too much damage.

While at Cassel, Monty apparently stated that the British Army was under armed and under trained and this was certainly true of our company. Few of us had ever fired a rifle, one or two of us had fired a Bren gun and to my knowledge no one had fired either a Boyes Anti Tank Rifle or a Spigot Mortar. There was a shortage of ammunition for these weapons and no one was capable of using them. The Germans on the other hand were elite troops with light and heavy machine guns, Schmeissers and mortars with artillery support. The enemy engaged us sporadically and was able to concentrate on us for he was getting stronger by the minute whereas we were the sitting ducks with no place to go.

Capture

A thunderstorm started and we had to sit around in the rain as there was no way we could get through the enemy defences. Eventually we were overrun and we discovered that the troops we had been fighting were the S.S. All our valuables were taken from us and we were made to sit down while a machine gun was mounted over us. Some of the prisoners were beaten up by the enemy and one British soldier had his nose broken with the butt end of a rifle. Not too long afterwards a high ranking English speaking Wehrmacht officer came on the scene and we were sent to carry wounded soldiers to a field hospital. One wounded soldier was about eighteen years of age and he was from the Northumberland Fusiliers. He was in a very bad state with severe leg wounds where he had been hit by exploding bullets and he had lost a lot of blood. We broke down a door and formed a stretcher for him. A French medical orderly was dealing with the medical side and because it was now raining very hard I placed my ground sheet over the boy to try to alleviate his pain and give him some relief. Sadly a drugged S.S. man decided that his need was far greater than the needs of a badly wounded Brit and he dragged the ground sheet off the lad and went his way. After we had left the wounded we were sent off once more and soon came under fire from an artillery unit from Cassel which scored a direct hit on a German motor cycle unit and killed both the occupants.

Being a prisoner was not an experience I had ever expected. Death, in all its many forms, I had seen too often. Children had been burned to a cinder, civilians had been mown down by the German Luftwaffe pilots and soldiers had been terribly mutilated. It was therefore natural for me to expect death or mutilation but the thought of capture had never crossed my mind. The fact that I had been captured made me determined to escape at the first possible opportunity. There were, however, several matters which made escape difficult. I was completely drained physically. I had not slept or eaten properly so I was hungry and worn out. I also had an almost useless arm as it was still swollen and bruised after the earlier incident with the mortar. Injuries such as gunshot wounds obviously took priority when it came to first aid.

The chance to escape came quite suddenly and unexpectedly. The small body of prisoners and their escort were passing a German convoy when shells began to fall on the roadway. There was a heavy thunderstorm at the time and everything was dark. The German guards dived for cover and I slipped quietly away and headed for the coast. I soon found it was no picnic being alone and free. It was almost impossible to move by day and hair raising to move by night. Time and again I just missed being recaptured and the physical effort needed was beginning to prove too much. Hunger was my greatest enemy and finally, in desperation, I approached a French farm and asked for help. The help I received was from a platoon of German soldiers and once more I found my way back into captivity. The group of soldiers gave me my first good meal in days. I was allowed to rest all night and helped to wash and shave before being loaded onto a truck and to rejoin the main column of prisoners.

Finally we reached a place, which I think was Bailleul, where we found a lot of carnage. There we found a church, the tower of which was riddled with shell holes and the spire blown away. We had to pass through a gate into the town square and there a twenty five pounder gun was stood up against a wall and the body of one member of its crew had stiffened where he had fallen and had been covered by someone. On the opposite side of the square a large German tank and two smaller tanks still burned. It was still raining and we were all soaked to the skin. In desperation I went to the parish priest to ask if we could use some of the runners from the aisles as blankets so that we could get a decent night's sleep. The Priest agreed and we managed to roll ourselves up in the carpets and got a fair amount of warmth. A French soldier gave me a half tin of rabbit stew so that I did not go to sleep hungry. The next morning we went on the march towards Doullens.

I well remember the day we left Bailleul for that day we actually saw large numbers of French soldiers who, it appeared, had come up from the depths of the earth and had brought all their worldly goods with them. Here we had men who carried everything, including the kitchen sink, and who had a stock of food and equipment to help with a normal life. We, on the other hand, had little to carry and certainly were not well off as far as food was concerned. We were few in number and were tagged on to the end of the marching column. I could not help

thinking of Julius Caesar "and we at the height are ready to decline, the enemy increaseth every day". The numbers of British prisoners did not seem to grow, but the French grew hourly and as far as the eye could see they stretched in never ending lines along the French roads. This being the case they also were the first to receive any food handouts and we just had to hope and pray for something good to turn up for us before we got too weak. The march started at about 7 a.m. but because we were at the end of the column we were the last to start at about 9 a.m. The weather was very hot and humid and since we had been marching for some weeks prior to this day we were not in the best of health either physically or mentally. We had not at this time recovered from the trauma of being captured and since we were now not getting food the whole picture looked more than a little bleak. In the distance we could see a cloud of dust from the columns of French and their colonials and right at the back and receiving more than a little attention were approximately three hundred British soldiers. 'For you the war is over, Tommy' was the most frequently heard statement from the cock-a-hoop Germans, while we were forced to pull faces at the German soldiers who insisted on taking photographs of us. Soon we began getting clear indications that close by there had been military action for the smell of death pervaded the area. We had now arrived at St. Pol.

We passed through St Pol and headed for Doullens. Here we were incarcerated in the prison which now bulged at the seams with Algerian prisoners. We were forced to sleep in the exercise area of the gaol, not the healthiest of places. While I was there I met and spoke with a French Sister of Mercy and was able to give her all my details for transference to the Red Cross in Geneva and my home. The information reached my parents some six months later, just before they had official notice of my position.

After Doullens I remember little of the towns through which we passed. Day after day and week after week we plodded along the filthy, dusty roads of France and week after week we became dirtier, hungrier and angrier for we got none of the treatment laid down in the Geneva Convention. What was more depressing was that while our numbers increased only minutely, the French numbers increased alarmingly. Few and far apart were the times when we were able to head the column and get a few perks of food and water from the French people.

The civilians, in particular the females, were very brave and helpful but unfortunately we did not meet up with them very often. We were now suffering from leg ulcers caused by dust and grit which got into our stockings and caused sores which festered and were very painful. From time to time our sores were examined and our legs bandaged but since the bandages were made of paper they were not very effective. Soon we had suppurating wounds which smelled awful and were very uncomfortable.
The Germans who dealt with us were a variable lot. Some were absolutely rotten and some, chiefly the older types, were more sympathetic and I know of at least one German who had a daughter married to an English soldier. He brought food and drink for a number of us who were rather hungry and thirsty. The drivers of the large Bussing Nag lorries were by far the worst of the Huns. They deliberately went out of their way to make the lorries belch foul smelling oil fumes so that we would suffer nausea and they would take photographs of us to show how upset we were. As you will no doubt know we were always very polite in our dealings with them and never forgot the old 'V' sign!

Day after day, week after week we marched through the dusty lanes of France and eventually we reached the Ardennes region of Belgium, a very attractive part of the country now sadly damaged by the invader who had broken through in that area. Many houses and villages had borne the brunt of the fighting and were in a state of dilapidation. The countryside was fairly heavy going and one day we were given a lift by a friendlier German lorry driver who intimated that he had some wine in the back of his cab and that we could share a bottle with him. Unfortunately we had not eaten for some days and we were soon quite tiddly. He, nevertheless, had done us a good deed. Quite soon we came to a chicken farm and we stayed there overnight. The chickens were dealt with that night and the next day the only chicken to be seen was fixed to a stick carried by an Algerian. Shortly after this episode we came upon a lake or large pond and because we had not had a decent wash for some time we stripped off and bathed in the lovely water. People also used the lake as a large loo, but in spite of this people still drank the water and were not made ill. It appears that this place was called Bertrix. Now we were loaded up into horse boxes and taken to a place called Triers Hof where we were unloaded and had to climb up a steep hill to a camp on the top. On the way up we got rid of our helmets and gas masks and sat for hours

outside the camp while a German band played 'Deutschland Uber Alles' time and time again. At last the doors of the camp were opened and in we went to discover more Brits from Calais and the brother of my mate in the Company. For them there was great rejoicing but for me nothing for I was now alone. We managed to stock up with food in this camp and went to bed for once with a full stomach. We saw little of the town proper and I remember the views from the top of the hill, views which I was able to see again on a tour of the town when I visited the area on a holiday many years later.

In the morning, like the Grand Old Duke of York, we went down to the foot of the hill but this time we were crammed into the horse boxes and we could not lie down or even sit down for a period of five days and nights. This time our destination was a place called Schokken in Poland.

Schokken, Posen and Lamsdorf

Schokken appeared to have been a thriving little community in Poland, a number of quite well appointed houses round a small square, and it was now being used as a transit camp for prisoners of war. When we arrived we discovered that there were already quite a number of British servicemen in the camp and that the Red Cross was supplying them with very good individual parcels, which included some fine Bermaline bread sealed in tins. You can well imagine how we felt when we had to eat our sour gherkins and Polish hard tack biscuits in a room where other established prisoners were eating bacon and eggs.

In Schokken I met briefly with a man from the same camp and room at Waitwith who asked me what the hell I was doing in Schokken? I will not say what my answer to that was! The established prisoners in the camp were chiefly from the R.A.F. and the Navy although there were one or two from the Merchant Navy and from the Army from Norway and from the period of the Phoney War. Here were survivors from the Rawalpindi, the Cossack, the Sea Horse, the Undine, the Starfish and Venetia. There were pilots from shot down planes during the leaflet raids. Schokken was very neat and quite new. It had obviously been occupied by reasonably wealthy people.

Here we were given our Stalag disc and number, were photographed and issued with our drinking mugs and cutlery and then prepared for a move to a bigger camp. Finally the great day arrived for our move into Poland and for this event the powers that were in Germany made their preparations. This was to be a great propaganda exercise, complete with radio cars and people proclaiming that these were the men who laid down their arms and refused to fight for Churchill. Off we went and the Poles were not impressed for they knew all the German tactics and knew we were their friends not the friends of the Hun. Round the almost deserted streets we went and finally emerged on the way to the Stalag in Posen (Poznan) known as Fort Eight. Here the road ran between green fields on the right and rather pleasant buildings on the left. As soon as the fields came in sight the prisoners who were suffering bowel troubles dashed into the fields and squatted down and got relief. The Guards could do nothing about it. Now that

their problems were at an end the Brits marched into Fort Eight and settled into their new abode. We were now unwilling guests of Hitler.

Fort Eight was a solid engineering building, not an architectural masterpiece and was almost square on plan and built in engineering brickwork. There were three main parts to the building. First there was the Fort proper, which was about two storeys high and contained the dormitories, the assembly rooms, the ablutions, cookhouse and stores and two large loos. Finally in this block there was a pump which went some twenty feet under the floor and the water was ice cold and tasted of iron. Secondly there was a dry moat which had several manholes in it so that the effluvium from the loos could be collected and removed to a spot some way along the road. At first floor level was a timber and steel bridge from a car parking area which held the Kommandatur and offices. The bridge was for foot travel only and led to the main door. The roof of the main block was covered in soil and grass and then with rolls of barbed wire. Finally, there was one door into the moat from the main building, and appells and such happenings always took place in the moat. On the few occasions that the cess pits filled to overflowing the manhole covers blew and all the muck and filth spewed across the moat. The smell was ghastly! When at length we were allowed into the building we were allocated certain rooms and soon found that there were too many people for the available bed spaces. This meant that certain of us had to sleep on large tables located in each room. I was lucky for I was put on a table and not on the floor which had a covering of lice filled straw. Although the table was uncomfortable at least it was louse free! The straw was eventually taken away and burnt then the whole area was bleached clean of lice. Bunks were then introduced, the table (my old bed) was then bleached and I got one of the new bunks. All walls were in brickwork and this applied to all floors except those in the dormitories, which had hard wood strip flooring. In the early days of occupation the food in the building was awful, with black potatoes and these smelled and tasted disgusting. Every time a potato clamp was opened foul smelling steam was emitted and since there were quite a lot of clamps you can well understand why we smelt so rotten. Our clothes were evil smelling, for we could not get rid of the smell which came from the impregnated shirts and clothes.

I remember well the first job I had to do when I got to Posen. We were ordered to strip the turf from the top of a hilly portion of ground. The turf was then

Fort VIII Poznan (Posen)

transported to the top of the site and piled up so that the building contractors could get on with the foundations of urgently needed barrack blocks. I was at the time still affected by the spell of Diphtheria which had struck me down in England and which had left me with heart trouble, tachycardia, and it was not easy for me to work. It was particularly hard working on a sloping site which entailed pulling turf in wagons up a slope which though not severe for fit folk was not too pleasant for any one who had physical problems.

The Medical Officer, a Captain Dansie, occupied a room in the main entrance hall of the Fort. As many of the soldiers were at this time troubled by the lice the M.O. was very worried about this in case he too should catch the little visitors. Around this time I received an interesting letter from my girlfriend. In the letter she detailed all the scores of planes, German and British, lost in the Battle of Britain. I took this letter to show to the M.O., who at this time was not the senior officer. He was thrilled with the news and asked if he could borrow the letter to show to General Fortune. I was only too pleased to oblige and off went the Officer to, as he put it, show the Krauts just how good we were. Sadly a short while after this incident this same Officer died from a heart attack.

In my early days in Fort Eight I went to work in the Kommanatur preparing work sheets for all who were supposedly working for money on several jobs operated by the company in Posen. While this was a comfortable job, carried out in the offices of the Kommandatur, it was still very boring and we were badly paid. I therefore gave up my job in the Fort and went out to work at a little place called Lenzigen, built entirely upon sand as most places in the area were. Like all small places it had little in the way of appeal for the village had a few really derelict Polish huts and no great amenities. There was a single farmstead run by an old man and his wife, a few pigstys where their total wealth of pigs was housed. We were not interested in the pigs, apart from the fact that they were pigs and therefore edible. Our job was to load sand into carts pulled by sorry looking horses and then ferry it about a mile down the road for the purpose of building new huts for the Huns and new roads to open up the area, for at this time it was pretty desolate.

Slowly, but surely, the conditions improved, especially when we started to work out in the surrounding area and were helped by the ever helpful Poles. Under the Naval Petty Officers we now formed up into three companies and before long working parties were to be found in the whole Posen area. After our short stay at the transit camp at Schokken, Posen came as a severe shock. It was like travelling back to the dark ages. There were two different worlds within a space of a few metres. One world where women dressed in a number of shawls skirts etc and another world where the women were modern in their approach to dress and of course mode of life.

When we moved into Fort eight we discovered that there were people dwelling in the earthworks, which held the actual Fort, and it was surprising to see the smart young women coming out in their finery and heading off into town, perhaps to earn the money to sustain their existence. Cheek-by-jowl with these smart women were the peasants who looked after the geese and these young ladies were dressed in the clothes which we, in the west, expected peasants to wear. I am not saying that this is the type of livelihood they would have followed had they been free to please themselves, but certainly at this period of their lives they had to do something and the only thing they were allowed to do was mind the geese.

The work for women was varied but never as bad as that given to the males in the town. The Germans, having defeated the Poles on the battlefield, then set about taking all the best of the animals raised by the Polish farmers. The farmers were left with animals which should have been in the knacker's yard. It was awful to see Polish men driving skin and bone animals and trying to do a job of work with these poor beasts.

It appeared that the Poles had three choices if they wished to survive under the Reich. They could join the German Army, they could take work in a factory or similar and accept the wages the Germans proffered, or they could try to escape which many did and managed to survive in the forests of Poland. Whatever they did was no picnic. If they went into the German Army they had no freedom and were always under the watchful eye of the Hun. I know this to be true for several times I was escorted to various towns, some in Germany and some in Poland. The Guards were Polish and they put on a show of beastliness while they were

being watched by the Huns and were absolutely great once the Huns were left behind and the Poles could act naturally.

Some times as we marched through Posen we had strange and often sad experiences of the things German troops did. Polish women often took their children with them when they came out to give help to the British and some times the children threw cigarettes to the troops and were caught doing so. Some were lucky and got away with a beating, but I saw men beaten unconscious by Germans using the standard issue belt with the "Gott mit uns" logo embossed on the buckle. Once I saw a man bayoneted and a pregnant woman kicked in the stomach by a Jack booted Hun simply because she had given a prisoner a single cigarette.

Soon all the Royal Navy people, all RAF crews and all sailors were sent to Marlags and Luftlagers and a number of mining types were sent off to the various coal mines in the area.

After a spell in the Kommandatur, I went out to work on a new barrack block at a place called Kuhndorf near to Posen where new barrack blocks were being built for the soldiers of the Reich. Here there was a large contingent from the Fort doing the building work and I was employed on removing the heaps of spoil from the buildings. We dug out the soil and loaded it into small skips pulled by a small engine and the spoil was then taken to a central dump where it was deposited and the empty wagons came back for more. This process took about half an hour and while the trucks were away we did a bit of liberating of wire cutters, leather, bayonets, revolvers, and even a cavalry sabre which was then used by its new owner for chopping wood in front of the guards. From the railway station in Posen a wireless set was removed along with a number of car clocks, neatly removed from the dashboards. The wireless set was a godsend and was used right through the war.

By this time our boots and clothes were a little below par so the ants had to busy themselves with obtaining the materials for the repair of clothes. The Poles were busy supplying us with sandwiches and this meant we had to swan through the huts, grabbing parcels of food placed in window bottoms and then hightailing it

out of the doors and windows. There were quite a few elderly Poles working on the site and one of them adopted me as his son and each day brought in a loaf of bread for me. This bread he hid in the sleeve of his jacket, and as soon as the coast was clear he would signal, and I would go to the guard and tell him that I was going to the abort (toilet). I would then collect my bread and hide it, then return to my work. One day a Pole found that it was my birthday and a bottle of wine was brought on site. The guard that day was a wine lover and insisted that he should have a share in the contents of the bottle. We all had a nice break! At Kuhndorf there were always plenty who went around acting for sympathy among our ranks and one professional actor used to play to the Kuhndorf sweethearts to try to get himself more bread and cigarettes. One day, in the middle of one of his acts, a guard spotted him and crept up behind him and delivered a hearty kick up the backside. On another occasion I was being chased by a guard through a hut and, in order to escape, I jumped out of a window and flattened another guard walking on the outside. Before he recovered I was well away from the scene. These incidents were common and kept everyone on their toes. Often we, who were working, had sufficient food for our needs whereas some soldiers who were ill and in great need for extra food were unable to work and obtain extra rations. It always seemed absurd to punish those who were least able to help themselves. At this time we were on the verge of collapse because our rations were so meagre and so repetitive.

One German guard, an elderly man who had won the Iron Cross, treated us well and he was an asset to us for he did not make us work too hard. At this time I spoke reasonable French and often spoke to the guard who was a French speaker too and we had a fair rapport. One day one of our boys fainted and the guard called me and asked what ailed the boy. When the boy came round I asked him what troubled him. He said that he had gone to the cook house to collect his bowl of soup, had fallen on the wet and slippery steps leading down to the serving area and had broken his bowl and spilled his soup. He then went to the cooks and asked for more soup but had been refused any help. Rations at the time were rather meagre and as we had just finished a three months march none of us was in the best of condition. The old guard opened his pack and handed some white rolls to the boy and also gave me a white roll. I was not too hungry and slipped my white roll to the boy who was still very hungry. The guard must have seen me

for, that night just before we left the site, he came over to me and produced a parcel of food for me and said that every day he worked on site with me he would give me a parcel of food. He was one of several guards from the same company who showed kindness to us. These men were from Hamburg, Bremen and Lubeck and proved to be among the best guards we encountered in Germany

That was my first experience with the Germans and though we did meet the odd Hun who treated us badly, we often found that the older guards and wounded front line soldiers were always willing to have a chat with their British counterparts. It was amazing to find just how many Germans were not Nazis and regretted the war.

I know from personal experience just how miserable life can be when you have too little to exist on. As far as I was able I went out of my way to help worthy people who, because of ill health, were living a miserable life. Sadly not all people looked at things in the same way and I know of people who were much better off than most. Some were selfish and they would not share anything, not even with their mates. When we went into the Fort at Posen we were a mixed bag of troops and we had with us old sweats and the greenest of conscripts, all jumbled together in rooms which held some thirty men per room. In room 22 where I lived were four regular warrant officers and a load of South country men and I was the lone northerner. As I remember I mucked in at that time with a fellow from the Royal West Kents and although we did not know a great deal about each other we did not exactly fight each other. At one time there were four prisoners from the same regiment, Q.V.R.s, with surnames starting with the letter 'D' – Dicker, Dexter, Dooley and Darling - and they were in a syndicate which received parcels long before any other people were lucky enough to get a parcel. In spite of this the members did not bother to open up any of their tins. We were then moved to another camp and the parcel holders had to pay other people to move their parcels for them for they were quite weighty. About the same time, some free clothes were sent to the Fort by the Red Cross. It was intended that such clothing should go to those people who had no clothes in a wearable condition. One man, who had received at least three parcels of clothes from home, still went for the freebies and carefully packed his own parcels so that he would not have to go without anything. On the day we were forced to move this character went

around begging people to help him with his stock. I was never a keen smoker and Ginger and I got a large quantity of cigarettes each month. These were pooled for the benefit of the folk in the room and were particularly useful when bartering for flour eggs etc and because we had a cook in the room we fed very well. Cigarettes were available to all who had a legitimate reason for the cigarettes. This did not include those who wanted sex with the local 'filles de joie' but did include those who traded in chickens, geese etc, or who needed new teeth or glasses.

I, in some way or other, became quite friendly with some of the airmen in the room. One airgunner was called Long and because he was young and boyish looking and above all short in stature he was called Shorty. Shorty had been part of the crew of a 'Fairey Battle' which had attacked a German armoured column and had been hit by ack-ack fire from the column. His pilot had shouted to him to bale out and this Shorty had done and landed in the area of the attack. He had disposed of his parachute and then set out to surrender to the Germans but found that that was not a very easy thing to do. Shorty said that the Germans took him for a young Hun and at first did not believe that he was an English airman. It appears that his pilot managed to get back to base, minus Shorty

Another R.A.F man was called Bird and he came from Wigan Pier. When I first met him he was wearing a fleece lined flying jacket and was without socks underwear and such comforts. I had managed to get some extra underclothes and these I gave to the airman who shortly afterwards was sent off to a Luftlager and as a thank you pinched all my spare clothes. Luckily for me, that same week I received a clothing parcel from home and so I did not feel too let down.

There were two more airmen, one from New Zealand and one from Scotland from a place called Invercargill. We talked about moving to New Zealand after the war finished but when that time came about I had married and we had a small child. My lot was at home with my parents who had missed me a lot while I was away and who were now getting on in years.

Of the four old sweats only one was of any importance. He was honest and would not go out of his way to gain anything and unlike the other three he had a heart and was popular with the boys. The other three known generally as the grannies

would do anything to improve their lot and were not averse to theft to achieve that aim. These were the men who stole my boot polish, razor blades and stole their own mate's food when he was admitted to hospital and on his return they refused to give him any help. Luckily the rest of the boys gave help to the old man and from that day on the grannies were 'de trop' in the room, for no one had any time for them.

Kuhndorf lay on the left side of the road into Posen and was a fair distance from the main road. Each day we had to pass through the built up area near the road to the new camp and on this road lay a rather large bakery. This bakery had a fair assortment of goodies on show and one day the temptation proved too great for the prisoners passing through. The prisoners made a dash for the shop and in a matter of seconds cleared all the stock for their own use. This food was quickly devoured and never again did the lads have a second go.

Work finished at Kuhndorf and we were sent to clear the streets of Posen from the heavy snow falls. Here, and for the first time, we went to town in tramcars, which helped us a lot for we were now wearing clogs of various types. Warm, but not comfortable, and treacherous on ice. As was the usual case the Poles looked after us both in the tramcars and in the town. We received oranges, apples, food, clothing and above all scarves to keep us warm. The Poles may not have been angels but to us they were life savers and I, for one, never forgot their kindness. One of my great regrets was that we were never capable of giving freedom to the Poles because they, above all others, were true friends. One day we were told to go to a certain place where the Poles had something for us and each person was given a box of tobacco. The tobacco was very useful for me. Although I personally did not smoke I was able to help out my old friend R.Q.M.S. Watters, who lived for his tobacco. At last we moved from the town proper and went to work in the suburbs renewing faulty drainage systems. Here we worked at places like Scharnhorst Strasse, Blucher and Bucher Strasse and enjoyed the best food we received in German hands. In the party were thirty men including a cook and a medical orderly and I was the cook. Or to quote my old guard friend Carl Weisse, I was the Scheissen Koch. Each day we had a lovely soup made from fresh vegetables and meat of one sort or another. There was beef, mutton and of course pork plus an adequate supply of good potatoes, a half loaf of bread and

two cigarettes. We normally had a bowl and a half of nourishing food every day and Buckshee Harry Turner always got an extra half of soup because he looked so worried and sad. At weekends we were allowed to buy two loaves of bread and we received ten cigarettes per man plus a half loaf of bread. I was lucky because I also went 'soupe holen' and received a small tot of schnapps, two white rolls, and the soup from the guards. May I say that our soup was the best and the soup from the Gasthaus not so good. In all I worked on five jobs for this firm and had the same guards each time.

These two guards we were happy to call friends, for that is how they treated us. Hans Bartelsehen and Karl Weisse were really good men and they always tried to make our lives happy. After the war I tried to find them, but I think Karl must have died fighting in Russia. I later discovered that Hans, who came from Lubeck, died at the age of eighty. While we worked on these jobs we were not forgotten by our Polish friends and one very brave man who contrived to give us cake every day of the week. When we moved from the area he too moved. We then had a job in a Jewish Cemetery but because of the cold and the frozen ground were able to put off this job.

Life in a prison camp was never easy for so many things could arise to upset the smooth running of the camp. If, for instance, the Commandant was a bit of a bastard, then everyone suffered. If the guards were poor then the discipline of the camp inmates could also suffer and if someone in the camp was a bit stroppy, the others could also become stroppy. In a normal camp there was a wide variety of men and they had a wide variety of talents, some good and some bad. I can recall incidents which arose from the good and bad in prisoners.

In Posen we had a high court judge, a very capable and highly educated man, but completely useless when it came to cleanliness and tidiness. No one in their right minds argued with the judge for he could out argue any one who came up against him. I often saw him wandering about with his glasses dangling from his lips, his clothes all dirty and hanging loose on his body and his nose running all over his face. He did not appear to be affected but the effect on other people was awful. They would go out of their way to avoid meeting him and would cut him dead just

because he was so dirty. All efforts to help him change his ways failed and the last time I saw him he was still disgustingly filthy.

In the same camp was a man from a well known and admired North Country family. This man was best known as Candles for he never wiped his nose and was almost as unkempt and scruffy as the judge. Unlike the judge he did respond to the teaching of other folk and I gather that at the end of the war he took a Commission in one of the North Country Regiments and went with them to India.

We now come to Ben Gunn, the name of an R.L.S. character. When I first met Ben he disgusted me for he had neither washed nor shaved for some time. He wandered round carrying a filthy porcelain bowl which served him as a wash basin, drinking bowl and urinal and toilet. The bowl was never washed out and no decent man would associate with Ben. In this instance someone had a flash of genius and made Ben boss of the camp potato peelers. Lo and behold Ben became a new man, clean shaven, smart and a picture of health and what is more the most British of Britishers.

I remember the story of a fellow by the name of Eddy Skerrett who I came across in Fort Eight. Private Skerrett was suffering at the time from an attack of sores and ulcers from the march and was in a very sorry state for the whole of his body was affected and he was in great pain. He was very upset and it appeared that he was the object of troubles not uncommon to prisoners at that time. First of all he had lost the whole of his family in a bombing raid, I believe on Coventry, and was also having a bit of an argument about his army pay. Eddy was apparently a driver stretcher bearer and in some way his pay was affected because he was classed as protected personnel. It appeared that Eddy was also supposed to be engaged to a girl back in Blighty and had made over part of his wages to her. She must have been a shallow type for she wrote thanking him for the money which had come in quite handy for she was now married as she put it to a '1941 hero and not a 1940 coward'. This was a bitter blow to Eddy because he had volunteered for the Forces and being a non combatant could hardly be accused of cowardice. I rather admired the lad and have never forgotten how well he faced up to his problems.

I also recall a man by the name of George Hancox who had been wounded in the feet and who in spite of his troubles was still very cheerful and useful. George was well over six feet tall, a quietly spoken man with a thick Birmingham accent. He worked with a heating engineer and had a lot to put up with for this engineer was a real pig and nothing George did was right. One day in the middle of an air raid George's boss and his second in command were out in the open when they were hit by shrapnel from their own guns and were left lying above the ground in the open. George without thinking of his own safety went to see how the two Germans were. Finding that neither German was too badly injured he tucked both under his arms and walked to a slit trench and dumped both men in with their mates. Nothing was ever said.

Over the years that I was in the prison camps I came across a variety of actors and comedians who did their best to keep us entertained. In the early days of Fort Eight a lot of the entertainment was done by a matelot known as Shippo and an actor known very well as Stanley. Shippo, a submariner, had a rather coarse type of humour and his jokes would not have gone down well in a ladies knitting circle but they were welcomed by people who were feeling a little low. Stanley, on the other hand, was more polite and was in private life an actor in a Shakespearian company. As an actor he was good but unfortunately he never stopped acting and this did not go down well with his room mates and those with whom he worked with in Posen. I remember one Geordie who in one session told numerous dirty jokes and never repeated a single joke.

We had, of course, our full share of so called singers who droned on about their dear old mothers and the Irish who were forever singing about the 'Rose of Tralee' and other Irish characters. For some the singing was very good, for others it was agony.

We had two well known Geordies who had just learned to tell stories and these two were liked by all but unfortunately the Germans discovered that they were coal miners and they were sent to the pits in the area and we never saw them again. We did have some very good straight singers like Bill Saville and a Welsh tenor and both were liked by a majority of the prisoners in the camp. I recall a

concert at Wollstein where Bill sang a duet with a very good French opera singer and everyone at the concert was thrilled to hear such wonderful singing. In those days Bill was just a young lad and though he came from a place near me I never had any news about him after the war came to an end. While Bill was best known for “Trees”, the song he sang best was “Bird songs at Eventide”.

In the period following the declaration of war we used to tune in to the German propaganda stations to listen to a person known to us all as Lord Haw Haw never thinking that in a few months time we would have to listen to the same man. In most of the camps I was in, listening to the German radio was one of the punishments we had to put up with. It was amazing what damage these stations did to the morale of certain people. At one time, I think in Fort Eight, there was a boss man who listened in to all the German broadcasts and was deeply affected by the news bulletins. So much so that he let them kill him. After that happened, our electricians decided that the connections should be severed and made unusable. In that camp at least Lord Haw Haw was heard no more. I regret that certain musicians did me no good and that even today I just will not listen to the works of Strauss, simply because every day of my life I heard Strauss waltzes played loudly over the German radios in the various prison camps. Some people love the Redetski March but to me it is like a knife in the arm because for several weeks in Posen a German cavalry band played it almost continuously just outside my camp room.

There were always pressures of various kinds in prison camps and it was difficult to keep the same mates for any length of time. When you are incarcerated and see the same people day after day boredom does set in and even the best of friends have off days. I have on occasions seen firm friends fighting just because they were feeling the strain of living in a small community and missed the variety which freedom brings. When this happened there were apologies all round and then for a period peace reigned until frustration set in again.

I regret that I have forgotten certain members of the staff of the camp who played an interesting part in the running and control of the camp, in particular the warrant officers of the Navy and Army who had such a hectic time when we first went into the Fort. I remember my early days in Posen and the return to that

camp of several escapees and the punishment meted out to them for attempting to escape. I do remember one man, Ted Gunton, who came from Newcastle and I spoke briefly with him as he came out of the bunker. There were, I believe four men in the party, three airmen and a fellow from one of the sunken destroyers and they had hoped to steal a German plane from an airfield near the Polish coast. Sadly no planes were flying on the night of their escape and someone had become ill and the rest gave themselves up so that he could get medical treatment.

At this time the English Commandant was a C.P.O. called Newman and because he and the Germans disagreed we were made to go on appell every hour for twenty four hours and if we did not get on parade quickly enough we were awarded extra appells. At one time there were very few senior N.C.Os left to run the camp for all the others were in the cooler.

Whilst at Posen I was working close to the Bernardina Church and several fat Germans kept passing by and muttering rude things about the British. In a fit of exasperation I replied ”and the same to you!” One German came over and said that he had been a POW in England during the last war and bet that I wouldn't know the place he had worked in. He then told me that he had been in a place called Heighington. “I know it well” I replied, “It is between Darlington and Bishop Auckland”. The German was delighted and said that when the war had finished he had tried to stay in England but unfortunately he had been sent back to Germany. He had been working on a farm in Heighington and lived in the farm. He had fancied the daughter of the farmer and they had both looked after injured horses and had a good life together. I only met the man once but he enjoyed our talk and there is no doubt that he had a soft spot for England.

After about a year, the powers that be decided that the Fort was too good and warm for simple soldiers and that it should become an Offlag. Those who had tidied up the Fort were sent to another place on the other side of Posen and we went off to Eichwaldau, our new home. This camp was situated alongside the Lvov to Posen road and the Adolf Hitler canal. The camp was not as solid as the Fort and was split up into three distinct areas. I was put into a house with a balcony and there were about fifteen of us in our room. The next block along was

a big hut, divided into cubicles, and directly opposite were the toilets which were somewhat primitive after those in the Fort. Just beyond these buildings was the cookhouse, the main office and the NCO's accommodation. The whole plot was fairly flat and across the road were the levees of the Adolf Hitler Canal. The worst problem we had was the water supply for water was only available for a short while and there was very little water running through the system. All of our washing had to be done in one bucket including our early morning ablutions. The first few would be scrubbers used fairly clean water but numbers fourteen and fifteen had to wash in almost solid dirt. The same two people were always last in line for morning washing. It is strange how some people will never hurry about anything and these two men were always like a tail behind. Some people rose early each day to witness the antics of one of these two, for he dressed in a Polish cape and hat and then, mess tin in hand, went along to the cook house to collect his hot coffee. He then theatrically flung his cape off his right shoulder and dipped a spoon into the coffee and raised it to his lips. Then there was a terrible sucking sound and a deep sigh of relief. This same man used to buy Polish bread and tear off lumps and stuff them into his mouth. Then, because he was always acting, he would recite and wet, sloppy bread would be spread all over the room. While we were at this camp we used to work in the sand pit close to the camp, and this pit was waterlogged. In between the loads of sand being sent out people would climb on to the digger and take a dip in the water. This way they kept reasonably clean and also got quite brown in the sun.

Here we got new guards and in particular Wonk Eye Schmidt who had a glass eye (hence the nickname), a voice like gravel and a wonderful nature. He was a very good friend to the POWs and he hated Adolf Hitler. He dished out the Red Cross parcels when they arrived and at times we slept on two or more parcels at a time. Schmidt also arranged to buy suitcases for us so that everything could be packed away tidily.

Close to this camp there was also another POW camp (a mustard factory) and a Jewish concentration camp. For the first time in their lives British POWs were to see the atrocities of the Nazis and they were not about to relish what they saw. They were about to witness beatings, prisoners being killed with bayonets, shootings and public hangings. This was their first sight of the 'master race' in

action! This camp had originally been a football stadium and the Jews were housed in the dressing rooms and under the stand. The unfortunate inmates were forced to work very long hours and were beaten with rubber truncheons to make them work. The sick were often taken to work by their friends as to be unfit for work was as good as a death sentence. It is, perhaps, highly relevant at this time to explain that it was not only the Jews being ill treated. The Poles were also having their fair share of trouble. It was not uncommon for men, women and children to be brutally beaten by the members of the 3rd Reich. Many of the women were forced into prostitution to keep body and soul together. Some of the girls were very beautiful and they were selling their bodies for a quarter of tea or a tin of coffee. Many declared quite openly that they wanted to bear English babies.

One day the levees in the Adolf Hitler Canal gave way and the camp was flooded to a depth, in places, of some three feet. To get around the camp meant the use of stepping stones and to sit on the loo was a very difficult business. This meant a further move and this time we were not so lucky for we met up with Old Jagged Joints who was undoubtedly the worst camp boss we ever met. Jagged Joints was not a raving beauty but then beauty is only skin deep and his skin was rather thin and his temper was equally bad. We had been sent to an old Polish cavalry barracks and our billets were in the old stables, large wide open spaces now packed with tiers of bunks. All around was the sandy riding area liberally filled with rocks and the morons who guarded us loved to fire at the rocks so that the bullets ricocheted in all directions and if someone was injured or killed that was just bad luck. Irishmen were also being punished but they appeared to be giving as much as they were given and they did nothing for old Jagged Joints and his guards. We hated the place and the boss. Appells were always dangerous as the Irish just refused to get on parade in time and this upset Jagged Joints and his pals.

Whilst at this camp I was taken ill and had to go sick. Here I was debagged and a large onion shaped thermometer was stuck up my anus. There were several of us having our temperatures taken and what a strange sight it was to see several men bent over with thermometers sticking out of their bottoms just like a battery of guns. I was given light duties and had to pump out the mephitic urinals in the

camp. The stench was awful and it was impossible to get rid of the smell. I was then sent back to work in the canals and I was supposed to bend steel reinforcement. All I got in the way of food was two paper thin sandwiches. One contained some type of meat spread and the other contained ersatz jam made out of turnips.

Because this was an old cavalry barracks the rooms were very high and we slept in bunks which were about five bunks high and seven along the floor. Getting into bed was a work of art and if, for any reason, you got out of bed it was hellish trying to get back in. There was a canteen in the camp but all it sold were razor blades and very cheap cigarettes. Because I spoke reasonable French I met and made friends with a couple of Frenchmen and through them was able to get a newer pair of boots and extra biscuits and bags of dates which were issued to the French.

After a few weeks we had a call to the gate and were told that we were free to return to Posen. Within a few minutes all were back on their transport and soon we were heading out of the camp at Eichwaldau. As we entered Posen Wonk Eye saw us and grabbed a bicycle and beat us to the camp. When we arrived he dished out Red Cross Parcels and we all heaved a sigh of relief now that we were back in our familiar surroundings.

At a later date we heard a rumour that Jagged Joints had been killed by Polish partisans. Apparently he lived in a cottage somewhere in Poland and this hiding place was discovered by Polish partisans who one night paid him a visit. When he opened the door they shot him. I have no proof that this is the true story of his demise. I had heard rumours that he used to boast that he had killed at least five people and that he hoped to increase the number to ten. We did not weep for this man nor for his idiot crew.

Soon it now became apparent that there was no love lost between the Germans and Russians. The German troops drilled, marched and sang. Military bands played marching songs. Motorised infantry and motor cycle combinations were practising all day long. They chose the open spaces and in particular the places where the terrain was hilly or boggy. For the infantry there were long marches

and of course they had their marching songs to be practised till they were right. There was much speculation as to the eventual place the troops would be going but most people reckoned that Adolf had set his sights on Russia. I laid a bet with a German policeman that the Huns would lose the war against Russia and Britain. We were all aware that if Russia was attacked then we would be on the move again. That day came sooner than we expected.

Eventually, we were told that we were to move to a place called Lamsdorf, a Stalag deep in the wilds of Silesia and not looking at all welcoming. That is how we felt and it did not improve, for the inside of the camp was worse than the outside. It was a large hutted place set in the middle of a forest and the whole place was subdivided into compounds. Here was barbed wire in abundance and every gate through the wire was patrolled so that every little compound was forbidding.

When I was a young boy eating all that came my way, I read books about men and women who had been shipwrecked and cast adrift on desert islands where they had to find some means of sustaining themselves. Often these unhappy people had to find out for themselves what things they could eat and what they had to avoid, but I never at that time thought that I too would be placed in a position where I would feel the pangs of hunger and thirst. In May 1940 when I was taken prisoner by the Germans food and drink was at a premium. We took whatever food came our way.

At Lamsdorf I had met a new mate, Ginger Rutledge, and we both felt that this Stalag was not for us. We wanted to go out to a working party with much less in the way of prison and with a variety of things to do. Ginger was mucking in at the time with a T.S.M. Flash Emerton with whom he had served in the Tanks when he was at Bovington. It was obvious that before long the Warrant Officers would be moving out and Ginger and I said that when that day arrived we would team up because we were both interested in art and classical music.

Ken and Ginger

Cosel

Soon a party became available and we signed up to go out to a place called Cosel Hafen on the Oder. The party was a hundred strong, plus a Commandant, interpreter and Medical Orderly and in no time the numbers were eager to go. All of the prisoners under the rank of corporal were forced to go out to work unless they could prove that they were not fit to do so. We all had to say what we did in peace time and, because I was a student, I lied and said I was a fitter and interpreter. My new mate, Ginger, was actually a fitter and so he did not have to lie. The party was soon ready for Cosel and when we arrived, kitted out with new clothes, overcoats and brand new boots, we caused quite a stir because Adolf, in his wisdom, had made us out to be a load of idiots, lacking moral fibre and discipline. When we arrived at the canteen wearing shining boots, smartly dressed in smart uniforms and all in step the civilians were flabbergasted. The impression that day was to remain to the end of our stay in Cosel but was to become much stronger as the war progressed and as people began to mix and work with us. Cosel had been on the Oder/Neisse Line and some of the Scottish Battalions were stationed in the area. There were many red headed men and women in and around the place and the locals sometimes suggested that they were fighting their half brothers.

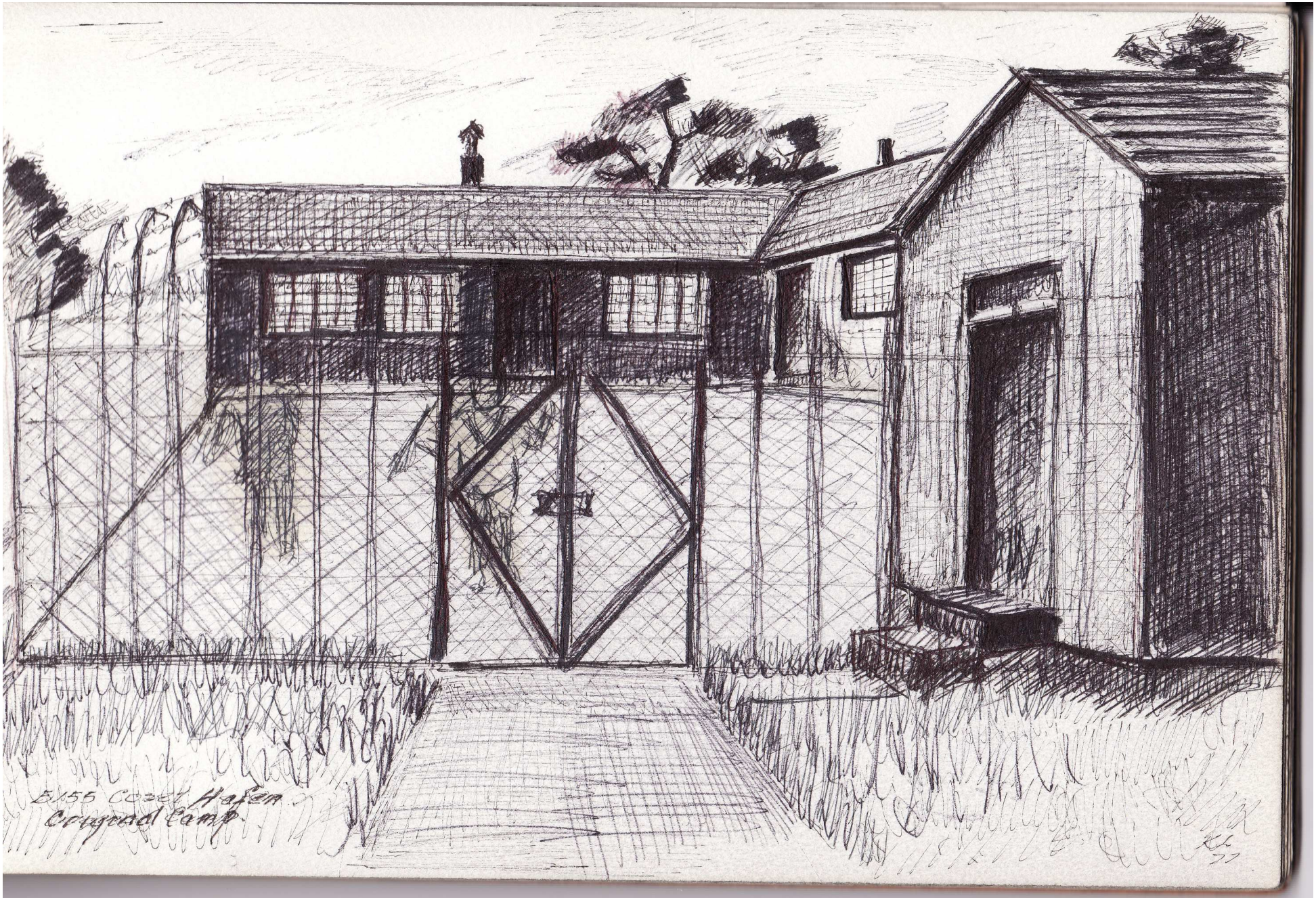
COSEL

When we were sent to Cosel
As prisoners of war
We took the place of a band of French
Who had done the work before
The Nazi Propaganda
had spread the word around
And at the factory canteen door
The people gathered round
The poor misguided creatures
Had heard the Fuhrer speak
And thought that every Tommy
Was an idiot or a freak

The English soldiers badly trained
No war he'll ever win
He's lacking moral fibre
And devoid of discipline
So the Germans stood in hundreds
To whistle and to jeer
And when we marched in through the gates
Derision changed to cheer
For a hundred men in perfect time
Clicked smartly to a halt
And the German people gathered there
Just couldn't find a fault
For we were dressed all in our best
And our boots and buttons shone
Morale was high, up to the sky
While the Germans now had none
The Fuhrer was the idiot
And Goehbels was the freak
And both had lost their credence
In a moment, so to speak
And though we stayed at Cosel
Nigh up to the end of war
We never forgot the victory won
That day at the canteen door

K. Latheron

We were due to work in a Paper Factory but first had to go to the works canteen where we met the bosses. There we had a cup of ersatz coffee before heading for our billets which were in a small compound not far from the railway station. Our first camp was quite small and the guards were under the command of a man by the name of Uffz Schupik. He was a reasonable man, rather on the thick side and it took a lot to rile him chiefly because it took him a long time to decide whether people were as thick as he was. Herr Schupik was a local man and prior to his call up had worked in the factory. His second in command was a fellow by the



B155 Cosel Hafen

name of Schimmel and he was just a first class creep. He went out of his way to be nice to the Brits, for his gain of course. In the compound there was a hut which was allocated to us and a smaller hut which made the dormitory 'L' shaped. There was a room for ablutions, a toilet block, and a store for spare clothes and blankets and finally a guard room to hold about four guards and a commandant. The whole compound was square on plan. French prisoners had done all the work before we turned up and I was destined to discover that they had not been too clean in their personal habits. On my first night in bed I caught no less than twenty five fleas in the first half hour and after I spoke to the Uffz Schupik we were issued with new clean blankets.

There were two lagers in the factory. Lager 1 dealt chiefly with the production of chemicals for use in the factory. Lager 2 was chiefly the production area for various types of paper. I often worked in the second building among the different paper machines and my favourite was an old British machine which churned out rolls and rolls of brown paper and greaseproof paper. The paper passed over some twenty heated rollers before it went to the finishing rollers and was then ready for selling. Not all of my time was spent on the ground floor of the factory for often I had to go upstairs to repair or adjust the guillotines which cut the paper into certain sizes. When the blades became blunt they had to be sharpened by one of our boys, Harry Morris. Sometimes the blades were put back by the old women who worked the machines and more often than not they were put in the wrong way. When this did happen the blade often jammed in the machine and had to be taken out very carefully. Often I got this job and to be quite honest I did not like it for many of the bedouins doing the work were vulgar in the extreme. One day I was called up as usual and our Uffz was there when I went to do the job. While I was doing the job a dirty old crone lifted her skirts, farted and then pointed at me and said "You have shit." I lost my cool and said that she was a dirty old cow. She told the Uffz what I had said and he put me in the slammer for saying nasty things about a German lady. She was no lady and I did not regret my words and I refused to go back to work among the old crones

Down on the ground floor was a paper string machine generally operated by a Polish woman by the name of Maria but better known as Titsy. She had breasts like anti aircraft guns and if you worked on the machine close to her she would

snuggle up closer and one day she said that she was a virgin. I think she was kidding for though at a distance she looked fine, close up she looked hard. She had been married to a German and was now in tow with a Dutchman and a Kiwi and others. She was a kindly girl and had no real life in the places where they had to stay. There were many foreign girls working in the factory and their wages were not great. Most fitters were paid thirty marks and this appeared to be the norm for all people employed. It was necessary for all people in a family to work and thus bring in sufficient to keep the wolf from the door. Women in this part of Germany were very dull and slow and yet they still drew men to themselves, but for my part I found them unattractive and dumpy. Dressed in their fourteen skirts and all sporting shawls they would not go far in modern day competitions. It seemed a natural thing to allow Polish girls to work in the factory for most people in the area spoke a wasser polnisch and so all understood the orders given. Russian and Ukrainian girls were used in the wood yard and also down on the sidings for unloading heavy timber from the Baltic and filling skips with coal. Some of the women were quite neat and really feminine but many were much more powerful physically than we were. I remember a girl by the name of Luba who was chased by sex mad people because she was the most attractive girl around and there was another female known locally as the 'tattooed wonder'. This girl was over six feet in height and was built like a battleship. She wore little more than a vest and a skirt and her body was tattooed all over. I once saw her and three friends deal with a German overseer and he was not nice to look at after they finished with him. They worked on the logs, two metres in length and often full of ice, sent from the Baltic and I could never have slung the wood about the way these girls handled it. These girls had a very good choir and we could often hear them singing their Ukrainian songs. Some of the girls were rough country types but some were really lovely and at least one had a child by an English soldier. On Fridays, when we got parcels, she came to our camp to get her powdered milk and sugar, chocolate, and other tit-bits for herself and for her daughter and she seemed to be in love with her boyfriend. Not all of the girls settled in to this style of life and I know of one girl who became a bit strange. The Under Officer of the day snatched up a rifle to shoot the lass but a Czech took the rifle from him and saved the girls life and the life of the Hun. The prisoners and girls were about to take him apart had he dared to touch the lass. The Czech soldier was disciplined for his action. He was a brave man. Germany, at this

time, must have had millions of forced labourers in the country. Russians fired the anti aircraft guns, while farms, factories and similar places were run by foreign workers. Had Hitler treated his labourers as friends, and not as slaves, he would have had a dedicated labour force. As it was the workers were out to destroy him because he wanted to destroy them. They were non Aryan and were the Untermenschen.

During my spell in Germany I was able to observe how the natives viewed sex and marriage and how much of their thinking actually came from the ruling hierarchy and in particular Adolf Hitler himself. Strangely there seemed to be a feeling, fairly widespread, that Adolf lacked ability to produce children and that he never got sexually involved with women though he gave advice to women about sex. In Hitler's Germany there was strength through joy, free love and bonuses for those who produced many children of Aryan stock. I worked in the factory and from time to time soldiers came home on leave and all seemed to carry an abundance of pornography, normally in the form of photographs of female private parts, of sexual actions and displays of men's private parts. These photographs were shown around the factory and some, though not all, of the girls drooled over them. In the factory there was little attempt to tone down the material displayed and girls were forever getting pregnant at very early ages and it was nothing for an elderly man to feel around young girls and venereal disease was widespread. Certainly in Upper Silesia married couples did not worry about being faithful and the man with whom I worked often used to say that he had been in the paper with various women and not for a Sunday school treat. All the Germans claimed to be good Catholics and went to mass with their wives and children and their fancy pieces and their children. In the Free Love programme the children of the affairs were pawns in the game for it depended on the number of children how well equipped the nursery was. There were medals for two, three and four children and then a pram was given for the fifth child. Medals and prams getting better according to the number of children produced for the Fatherland. To me it seemed so bizarre that the Fuhrer was a 'none producer', Goering was a pansy and a perfumed one to boot, and yet they expected those who were represented by them to do all the production work to allow them to carry on with the war. At times girls were engaged, married and widowed in a period of only a couple of weeks and then the whole cycle began again. Sex seemed to be the most

important part of life for the women of the area. I knew of a German married woman who swam across the Oder daily just to have sex with certain people and who paid her four cigarettes per day. When we went to the hospital at Cosel it was quite common to see half and fully naked women lying in the fields near the gates and waiting for the guards to come off duty. At one time I was in the hospital and a young Belgian, who had his leg in plaster asked if anyone spoke French. I spoke to him and as we were talking a girl known as Anna came out to look after the geese. In a short while a young guard came along and the two had sex right in front of the gates. To make matters things worse, Anna's mother came out and before long she too was having sex. We were surprised that Anna's granny did not come out to join in the orgy!

One young guard from East Prussia told me one day that he hated being in Cosel for if he wished to go to the pictures he had to go with a girl as tickets were only sold to the girls. After he had been to the flicks he had to go to bed with the woman, for that was what they were expected to do. I suppose this was the equivalent of comforts for the troops, but not so hot if you got the wrong girl.

At Cosel there were two French women working in the factory. One was tall, slim and petulant. The other was slightly older, slightly shorter and more made up than her pal. This particular girl had worked on the peniches on the Oder but had been sent to prison for being too friendly with the British. On arrival at Cosel the friendliness continued and soon she was in trouble with a German who tried to have his way with her. She tied him up and painted him with her lipstick. One Sunday, as I returned from work, I met the young lady done up in her finery. She crossed the road and kissed me then we had a very pleasant talk for about half an hour. The guard then sidled up and said that he had to report for duty and could I possibly ask the lovely lady to go. After she went he said what a lucky so and so I was to be able to attract such a smashing piece and better still because I knew the lingo. A short while later she was back in clink, a very good friend and a brave lass.

The other French girl would not speak to any of us and found herself a young and vibrant Pole to keep her happy. This French girl used to work on the auschuss kasten and when she slid down from the top of the waste paper it was quite

obvious to all and sundry that she was wearing no knickers. Working in close proximity was a grey haired Scot and every day that the girl was working in that area the Scot was to be seen drooling in front of the bare bottomed wench. As far as I could see she did not bat an eyelid and just carried on with her display. I don't know whether she and the Scot were in the barter business for most girls appeared to give sex for food and cigarettes and had little else to make them happy.

At times it was quite interesting to work in the factory. One Sunday I was working on repairs to a machine and the work was not going very smoothly and I was not particularly happy. I noticed a rather smart type who was standing near and he spoke to me in very good English. He said "I bet you wish you were in civvy street now" and went on to say that he was Dutch and that he had been educated in London. His father was the Burgomaster of one of the Dutch towns and that he lived in the posh quarter of one of the towns. He gave me some Readers Digests and I gave him some cigarettes and then we parted on friendly terms. I felt that it was dangerous for me to become involved with him, chiefly because I spoke French and a certain amount of German, so one of my room mates took over and from that time on I kept out of the picture. At that time it was not easy to tell friend from foe and the story he told to me could well have been false. The old poster about the enemy was very important. 'Keep your bowels open and your mouth shut'. It is important to know that in Germany there was always intrigue and no one knew who their friends were therefore you kept your ideas to yourself.

Work and play now settled down in the factory and by now the bosses knew who amongst us could or could not do the work they had supposed to be capable of. Few of the boys really wanted to work for the Germans and at every opportunity did a bit of sabotage either to the machines or to the goods. Not all the men were teetotallers and to make hooch became a popular pastime but the output increased when we moved to new building at a place known as Khukles Muhle (Khukles Mill), an old mill built over its own water race and three storeys high. There were also two new timber huts capable of taking about a hundred people, with each room holding fifteen beds, and with a sick bay and washing facilities. These huts were erected in an orchard so that we were never really short of fresh

vegetables and apples, pears and plums. A large Cook House was built between the mill and the huts and there was also a very handy latrine. These buildings were sited next to a very large wood yard and all the lovers going out at night, to see their various girl friends, used to take advantage of the wood yard to get from camp to girlfriend. At this time there were many different nationalities working in the factory, French, Polish, Greek, Rumanian, Yugoslavian and German and later Ukrainian and Russians came to work for the Huns. I only did one spell of work overnight and the machines seemed to work on their own for all the so called workers were in the rolls of paper snogging with the girls, who were as randy as the men, and in many cases were looking after two or three different lovers in the factory. Not all the prisoners were chasing the girls and I would estimate that between fifteen and twenty per cent of the men were chasing the women. The others abstained and I know of only one case where an Englishman was sent to prison for having sex with a German girl. She was only fifteen and was sent to a concentration camp. Our camp was known as E155 and became one of the largest in the area. We played rugby, football and cricket and swam in the Oder, although the pool in which we swam was made deeper by bombs from American aircraft attempting to destroy the railway bridge over the Oder, something they failed to do.

While I was at Cosel the German I dealt with most of all was a character by the name of Neubert. Whether you liked the man or whether you detested him one thing you had to admit was that he was quite an imposing figure. He was always immaculately dressed and his shoes always shone and his bearing was always upright and purposeful. I believe that he came from Prussia. As far as I was concerned he always treated me well but I must admit that we never really fell out about anything. He was a Protestant and because we, in the main, were also Protestants he was happy to help us. This help did not go for Catholics and Jews and for these groups there was nothing but hatred. To me he appeared to be a man lacking in humour and perhaps a little dull for he seemed to accept the Hitler doctrine so easily and never seemed to question anything put out by the Fuhrer. For the youth in the factory he appeared to be the father figure, he who must be obeyed. Now and again the benevolent figure became a raging demon. This was displayed one day when the young German with whom I was working did a stupid thing. When I asked him for a hammer he threw it to me but did not

use sufficient strength and it dropped straight through the copper sieve on which I was working. Neubert lost his cool and struck the young offender with his walking stick. Later the young lad confided in me and said he was sick of Neubert and that all he wanted to do was to work in a forest cutting down trees. At the time I did not take a great deal of notice of the outburst but some time later the father of the lad brought me some cake and thanked me for suggesting to his son that he should get himself made a prisoner of the British and then go to Canada to do logging work. In some way or other this had happened and the lad had more or less said that he would be staying in Canada and not returning to Germany.

Neubert had an undying hatred of the Jews and did his best to ram it down my throat every day of the week. All his arguments were pure propaganda from the Nazi H.Q. and the arguments were repeated time after time. These arguments after a time became sick-making and it seems that a lot of people in Germany learned the arguments off by heart and word for word. It was unfortunate for me that Harry Morris, the one admitted Jew in the camp, also worked under Neubert and fuelled the flames of his hatred. This did not seem to worry Harry and I admired the way he dealt with the attacks by the Deputy Machine Meister. Harry always took advantage of my chats with the boss each day and went into the loo for a smoke. For the period of the chat no work was done by Harry or myself. Neubert was also the teacher in the small school attached to the Sclosserei and I can vouch for the fact that at his job he was good and his boys were capable workmen when they finished their time. I am glad to say that not all Germans we worked with were like Neubert and we met with several really decent types and of course one or two of the rotten apples.

Near to the workshop was a hut in which all the lifting gear was stored and where the Heavy Gang and the Light Heavy Gang worked. I will tell you about the Light Gang first for they were very important to me and all the boys in the camp. There were three little Polish orphans in the gang with ages ranging between eight and thirteen. I understand that their parents were all dead and that the children were sold to the Germans who paid them meagre wages and fed them on starvation diets. All of the children were dressed in cast off clothes belonging to adults and the fit was not exactly what the tailor would have chosen! One of the children

had a large cloth cap which fell over his ears and eyes, a large jacket where the sleeves covered up each hand and a pair of outsize trousers. The trousers fell in monstrous coils around the legs making it difficult for the boy to stand up. When I asked a man nearby why the children were so badly dressed he said it was because they were Polish and not given the same treatment as German children. He went on to tell me how the children had been forced to watch the demise of their parents and then expected to work for the oppressors. Strangely the children never seemed to be depressed by anything. The children were worldly wise and did a bit of thieving on the side. They also smoked, drank and swore but as far as we were concerned they were fine children and our friends. They enjoyed our cigarettes and chocolate from time to time. The children had to push a small wagon carrying items which were needed in various parts of the factory and sometimes their wagon was fixed to the little steam engine driven by a couple of our boys. It was sad to see young children forced to work instead of learning a trade or occupation for later life.

Lines written about a member of the 'light' heavy gang, Cosel .....

I entered through the factory gate
And there a strange sight did espy
Dressed in a mans old cast off clothes
A little child scarce four feet high
A large cloth cap fell round his ears
The long coat sleeves concealed each hand
While monstrous trousers hung in coils
Making it difficult to stand
I said unto a man close by
Why is that child so poorly dressed?
Ah Sir, said he, he is a Pole
Not to be treated like the rest
As bit by bit I heard the tale
How that child was bought for gold
And that he slaved, was poorly fed
And though so young appeared so old

I handed him some chocolate
His eyes with gratitude shone bright
And as he left he turned and waved
And sang and sang with all his might
A sweeter voice I never heard
It made me weep to feel that he
Endowed with such a glorious gift
Should be treated cruelly
This song I heard in forty-one
The memory of it lingers still
Maybe the soloist is gone
Secure now from pain and ill
And yet I pray that I someday
May hear again that voice so sweet
'Come Violetta' that refrain
Be sung once more my ears to greet
And still I see that little child
That dear child so grotesquely dressed
If he be dead then may the Lord
In Heaven with thee find peace and rest
For here on Earth he found no peace
Father and mother both were slain
And the poor child found no release
But suffered o'er & o'er again
He drank, he swore, he oft time stole
For life for him was still his aim
A little child scarce nine years old
A little Pole with ne'er a name

The real Heavy Gang was made up of two senior Germans and three English prisoners and their chief job lay in Lager 2 where they changed the very heavy rollers and other heavy pieces of equipment. The chief German was a man by the name of Jarolin, a cheerful ex-World War One prisoner, who had spent time in hospital in Calais, and his second in command was a fellow called Edmund, who appeared to be a bit dull and miserable but who was a really nice man when the

ice was broken. He was always good to us and enjoyed a good old natter. There were three cheerful English lads in the gang and two of the three came from Kent. All members of the gang helped the Light Heavy Gang both at work and food wise and because Jarolin and Edmund both spoke Polish things were not at all difficult.

Close by was the ausgabe for iron for the factory and this was run by a girl called Manchen, the best German woman I was to meet in the factory. She was in love with a young soldier and flatly refused to have sex with a chap we called 'If you can't fight wear a big hat like Piechek'. This man had managed to keep out of the forces and was married with twin children. He was a real womaniser and we chuckled when he had a finger chopped off by a wheel he was trying to bolt to the shaft of one of the machines. We disliked the man for he got Manchen the sack because she would not let him have his way with her.

There were in all some eighteen to twenty prisoners working in the Schlosserei and a lot of old Germans who were too old for the front and who had been recalled to take the places of the young men who had gone into the army. Many of the oldies had been in prison camps either in France or England during the First World War and were quite sympathetic towards us. As time went on the Hitler Youth also became our friends and we did not suffer too much from them or the bosses

There is a saying in Germany to the effect that orders are orders. No matter how silly they may be they must be carried out. One of the first idiotic orders we received was to do with braces, boots and jackets. Schimmel had to collect these items every night in case someone should decide to do a moonlight flit. At this time personal parcels had started to come through and such items were no trouble to us.

Schimmel tapped on our windows at night offering, for the price of a few cigarettes, to provide us with really hot water for our ablutions. He also had our tea ready for us when we arose. He was a real Dickensian character, always willing and he never ever failed Schupik. We, for our part, always played on Schimmel and his willingness and helped him to maintain his position with his

equally brainy boss. At this particular time in our lives we were receiving quite a lot of cigarettes from America and from home and it was this week we had upwards of fifteen thousand cigarettes and we were by far the richest prisoners in the whole of Upper Silesia. When we had to go to collect our parcels Schimmel opened up one twenty packet of cigarettes just to make certain that there were no files or similar instruments hidden in the cigarettes. Normally the recipient would offer round one packet of cigarettes to the guards who sat round slavering at the mouth and no doubt blessing the prisoner but, because Schupik did not smoke, no member of the establishment was allowed to accept a cigarette. The presentation ceremony finished, the sad guards set about finding ways and means of obtaining some of our bounty and Schimmel was the luckiest of the guards. Needless to say our friend Schimmel was now more and more willing to play ball with us and used to climb fruit trees for us and shake down fruit so that we could keep on eating fruit pies. As Schupik had worked in the factory before he was called up he used to come down to the place for a chat with his old friends and then he was quite an amiable character.

When trouble did come it was really a thing that had to happen and we had a lot of fun from it. The hut in which we lived had a wooden rear wall and in the front wall was, if my memory is right, a large and small window. Over both windows were grilles of steel. Both grilles were offset to allow the windows to be opened. The amazing thing was that the Germans had left the bolts which fixed the grilles so that the nuts could be undone from the inside. The grilles could then be lowered to the ground without disturbing anyone. On a never to be forgotten night over fifty men went for a walkabout. Not a great escape, just for a look around and a bit of snogging with the local talent. The next morning, as per usual, the appell took place and Schimmel realised that the parade ground looked bare. He then went to see Schupik who ordered him to get the other guards and to search the room for the missing men. Schupik then gathered up all the remaining men and held a kind of appell but failed to find either the missing men or manage to total up the number left. Those left kept moving from one rank to another to confuse Schupik. Our friend Schupik could have done with a computer or calculator to help him total up the number of prisoners on appell each day. A hundred men certainly took a lot of counting, particularly when they were forever on the move. In a very irate state the Under Officer went on about

the English soldiers being without character, snatched off his cap, threw it to the floor and then did a dance on it. He then went to report the loss of his men. Before long the walkers returned and peace reigned once more. The grilles were then altered and made thicker and the nuts again put on the inside of the hut. When the next diversion came the escapers cut a hole through the back wooded wall and did a bunk again creating another highland dance for Herr Schupik.

Not all prisoner of war camps were good escape camps. Each camp was looked at carefully by would be escapers and the camp at Cosel was regarded as a good camp because there were easy rail, road and river connections. To be within easy reach of these things could also be dangerous for close watch was kept on all the roads, rail and rivers.

I will give an actual example of the problems faced by escapers. For a while I worked with a French Canadian who had done a deal with someone in the Stalag and changed identities with him. The Canadian then arranged to work at Cosel and was asked to work with Kampa (my boss) and me. He was not easy to work with chiefly because he was keen to escape and also because he had set his cap at a rather severe but by no means ugly German woman who worked in the ausgabe. As a result I saw very little of the man and had to make excuses for him when questions were asked. However it appears that his wooing of the maiden went quite smoothly and then one morning I was told that the Canadian had escaped and been spotted by his German girlfriend who got off the train on which he was leaving. She, as a good Nazi, had reported this to Herr Neubert who had jumped on to his bike and cycled to the junction at Heydebreck hoping to catch the absconder. Neubert failed and the Canadian was on the loose for some weeks before he was picked up by the Vichy French. I believe that other escapers tried the barges going up to Stettin but failed because they had not sufficient food and fell sick.

The main line to Heydebreck Junction ran on an embankment between Lagers 1 and 2 and at the bottom of the embankment there was a railway system for moving materials from one place to another. The embankment itself had metal U channels set into the sides so that any goods discharged from goods wagons fell down quickly to the lower area ready to be loaded on to the trucks there. The

Unknown Location

idea was a good one but from time to time some poor old so and so got clobbered by a log or some other heavy weight and quite often because it took so long for the medics to put on their uniforms the person died.

Quite a few of the camp members were short term men. They were in the camp to use it as a launching pad and they were in and out in a matter of weeks. Most of the back up work for these people was done by those regular members of the camp who had friends in high places outside and who were able to obtain forged and genuine passes and identity cards for all those in need. Civilian clothes were also obtained, at a price, and German currency could also be picked up.

Prisoners of War had many advantages over their enemies and these advantages came chiefly from the packages and parcels of food and cigarettes. Prisoners were able to use these items when they went out to barter for things which they would have otherwise lacked had they been unable to sell and buy the necessities of life. Each year the prisoner managed to have new or newer clothes sent in the clothing parcels from home and these clothes were so superior to those of his enemy that the Hun was always keen to do a bit of bargaining with the prisoner.

The prisoner, on the other hand, knew full well the value of his clothes and how keen the German was to be able to dicker (barter) with him. The great problem with the German was that he was poorly paid and had to rely on being able to supply some commodity of value to get what he so often urgently wanted. Often the prisoner had tea, coffee, cocoa, chocolate and cigarettes sent out in private parcels and Red Cross parcels. He could use these items singly or in mixed groups in his barter to obtain cheaply things of greater value. Ginger and I oft times needed brushes and paints for work in the prisoner's theatre. The shopkeeper would not sell brushes for money and would swear blind that he did not have any but if cigarettes etc. were offered then in some strange way brushes became available. At one time I had trouble with my teeth and I got first class treatment from a local dentist just because I had a small packet of tea in my possession.

It was not always necessary to supply English cigarettes in any of our deals for some Germans liked French or Turkish cigarettes and they were quite happy to take them in a barter deal.

There were times when we were quite happy to pay over the odds for something of importance to us. My mother once sent me some strong shirts which I loved but they were sent to a laundry in the factory and when they were returned the sleeves were damaged. We had a Kiwi tailor with us and he altered the shirts to provide me with two pairs of shorts and cut them out and made them ready to be sewn. Unfortunately we didn't have a machine so I spoke to my boss in the factory and he arranged for his daughter to do the work for me and I paid her with a small packet of tea. She did an excellent job and gave me a dozen eggs as well as the shorts. On another occasion I was eating some raisins and Kampa asked me what I was eating. I gave him a few raisins thinking that he too would enjoy a bit of a change but he carefully wrapped up the raisins to take home. I gave him the few remaining raisins and the next day he came in to work and handed me a parcel of cakes with my raisins in the mix. He had a small child at home and was so pleased to be able to give her some raisin cake. I found that kindness begets kindness and he and I got on well together. Various articles were of great value to people who were living on the border line between hunger and having enough and prisoners in general were better off than most.

In many camps the fencing was of strong steel or timber verticals to which mesh panels were secured often by other wire ties. One night in Cosel several would be escapees had just emerged from the camp when two guards came upon them. The escapees and the people in the camp began calling each other names and the guards just passed by and went into their toilets. Danger over, the boys then walked off while the people in the camp quickly re-fixed the fencing, and then went to bed. The following day the Germans discovered that they were a few men short and so an appell was called.

The Uffz then asked the English to tell him what time the men had escaped, so that he could punish the guard who had been rather lax. The Prisoners regarded the Hun as a bit of a comedian and laughed even more when he asked how the prisoners had escaped. He in fact was standing with his back up against the fence

through which the prisoners had escaped and the repairs were still of a temporary nature. The fence was made higher but the Germans never found out how the escape was made. The guards were a mixed bag of good and bad. By now all of the guards were worried about having to go to Russia and one poor old Czech went into a posten box (sentry box) and shot himself. Some of the guards were willing to allow prisoners to go out for sex if they were paid in cigarettes for turning a blind eye. I know of one particular English sergeant who, when told that the Germans were doubling the guards, donned his dark suit and vaulted over the wires and then followed guards up and down the wood yard just to prove that he could beat the guards. I had friends among the Polish girls but never ever got involved with any of the women in the factory. I had a regular girlfriend at home and I never let her down. Not all so called escapees really tried to escape. Some men went out for a break so that they could feel free while others were living with German women and still feeding in the camp and swanning around during the day. I knew of one man who did this for several months and returned to the fold when he and his fancy woman fell out. It was rumoured that Titsy had taken her boyfriend from the camp to a hide out in the forests of Poland where he had joined the Polish underground but he never seemed to have left the camp and I am sure someone would have had a few words to say had he done a bunk from his mates. One Kiwi shouldered a spade and walked out of the camp and was never seen again. On the march to the west at a later date lots of people were supposed to have escaped but for my part I stuck with the column as long as it was heading in a westerley direction.

Among the prisoners were a number of funny characters and I am reminded of one by the name of Jones. Jones (or Jonah as he became known) and Schupik would have made a wonderful double act in a concert Hall. Both were overflowing with talent and while Schupik knew no English, Jonah knew no German but together they were absolutely perfect. I remember one slanging match between the two over the word ‘Kaput’ and the word ‘Geputst’. The German asked Jonah why he had not cleaned his shoes and Jonah said his shoes were finished. The two men just could not stand each other purely because both were thick. We had another rather backward fellow who brought a few smiles to his mate’s faces. When we marched this lad was always the only man out of step no matter how many times you changed step. It was not only that he could not

keep in step, he could not write his own letters. Often he would come to me and tell me that he was engaged to be married because he had a letter from some girl in which she had sent him her love and kisses. He also got letters from his mother and he would copy these letters and sign them your loving mother Fred. We tried in many ways to help but if you spoke to him in earnest he believed that you were lying. He worked with the blacksmith in the factory and got very annoyed when the smith swore. Fred would throw down his hammer and go off to the loo. I would then have to chase Fred and try to tell him that the Smith had not been swearing at him, but about some iron which was either too hot or too cold. Fred and Harry often had arguments and because Harry was so much brighter than Fred there was often the likelihood of a proper quarrel. Harry was a fat heavy man with a lot of hair on his shoulders. Often when Fred got a little steamed up Harry would stand in his longjohns and, with his fists doubled, would threaten him. He would demand to know what Fred had been saying about his girl friend Ermintrude and demand an apology. Fred would apologise if Harry said that he was wrong to say things about Fred's girl friend Anastasia. Now if we sound to you like idiots then perhaps we were idiots. In the schlosserei alone there were about twenty Brits and I am sure that we were all a little bit eccentric but then we were living among eccentrics and the conditions in which we lived were rather strange. When you were in the bag like us you were always looking for some way of finding relief and it is a difficult problem to be normal among abnormality.

In the schlosserei there was a joinery shop and an electrical department. Not all of the workers in the schlosserei were joiners or electricians but we were a united force and soon made ourselves felt in the area. Some of the boys were quite learned and had worked in banks, architects offices and some had actually done the jobs they were now being asked to do. As prisoners of war we missed the freedom which we had been used to and had we not had a great sense of humour life would have been unbearable. We therefore looked for ways of having fun and confusing our guards while making sure that we did nothing which could bring trouble to us and to prisoners generally.

Working in the electrical department were two people known to us as Percy the Egg and Peter Bartlett. Both were Londoners and both were just a wee bit

strange and full of fun. Neither of the men wanted to work too hard for the Fuhrer and one day they were leaning on their shovels and having a rest when they were accosted by a character called Ober Lieutenant Berclay, a German who had been wounded during the fighting in France. This character did not like Englishmen and so he set about the two who were still giving their spades a bit of a rest. Both were put out by this and took the cane from the German, walked a few paces away, laid down the offending stick and did a Highland fling over it. The Hun was almost beside himself and accused the two men of trying to kill him in France. He then threatened to go back home, change his clothes, get his revolver, and then return to the scene of his troubles and shoot the two men concerned. They returned his stick and off he went to change into his uniform. By the time he returned the Commandant at the camp had been informed and when the Officer did come back to have his revenge, he found that the officer from our camp was not friendly. He confiscated the revolver and told the German that he no longer had the power to attack the prisoners and that if he lifted a hand and interfered with prisoners again then he would go to prison. When the local Germans heard what had happened they were delighted for they had no time for the man concerned and liked the two British boys.

A short while later the same two electricians were involved in a strange and to us funny incident. The chief of the factory, a well versed and well dressed man, owned an Airedale and because it was getting rather scruffy decided that the dog just had to be trimmed. Peter Bartlett who knew nothing about dogs in general and Airedales in particular volunteered to do the trimming with a pair of nail scissors. To make sure the dog did not bite him, nor get free, he and Percy spread the dog out to four pieces of wood driven in to the ground and then Peter got busy with his scissors. When Peter had finished, the dog was set free and slunk away to recover from its wounds and to recover some of the fur which it had originally had before Peter performed his total strip. The German was a little put out by the state of the dog and blamed it all on the poor scissors. Peter told him that he was a trained dog stripper and the German accepted that any gashes in the dog were because of the inadequate instruments which Peter had been forced to use. Peter then went to work on four sheep owned by the same man. The results were the same and we never knew if the sheep and the dog ever recovered from the shock.

At one time I had to go to work for a plumber, a good craftsman but a rather nasty Nazi. We did not get on at all and there was quite a bit of fun when the same Nazi drove an electric powered vehicle at John Stanger, a friend of Peter Bartlett. He suffered defeat when John whipped him off the vehicle and hit him at the same time. There was no repeat attack.

While Schupik was still with us I had rather a frightening experience. One day he took a spot of leave and that day I spoke to the Machine Meister about our days off, as shown in the Geneva Convention. I explained that prisoners of war were entitled to one day off per week to allow them to do their washing, repairs etc and he said he would speak to the company officer for his ruling. The Officer was having a spot of leave that day and so a rather thick Uffz was sent in his place. This character was not quite with it and rushed in to the Office and stuck a revolver in my midriff. He yelled "I am going to shoot you for causing a riot". "What riot has he caused?" said Herr Adler. "He has asked me a question and all we want is an answer". The Uffz then put me in clink and said I would be punished when the Officer returned the next day. On his return the Officer set me free and the Uffz was sent away never to return. Our ten days back leave was also granted.

Over a period of time in the factory there were a number of accidents. A young Pole was killed when he was trapped between a four ton and a three ton roller. An Italian engineer was seriously injured when he was trapped in the same machine but was lucky because he slipped through between the end of the rollers and the bearings. He had his arm crushed. A Dutch boy also lost a thumb when a band saw snapped and a piece of the saw sliced through the joint of the thumb. We strapped up the wound and rushed the boy to hospital in Cosel where his wound was dealt with. We rarely bothered with the German medics in the factory. They were so slow, particularly when they had to put on their uniforms before they could do anything for the injured person. There were at least three cases where death resulted from failure to get treatment in time.

There were some five working machines in Lager 2 and in addition we had two machines on standby for special work. Most of the machines were kept going by

forced labour, mainly Polish, Russian, French and Romanian workers. Close to this area were the bleaching area and the schleiferei where wood was ground down to make pulp. Nearby was the Wurster, a machine like a large grinder or mincer. This machine was fed with waste paper and then the machine minced this paper to make pulp. In the machine two worms revolved in rifled casings, just like they do in household mincing machines. The waste paper was loaded into the top of the machine. This machine worked rather spasmodically, for often bolts mixed in the waste paper got in between the blades of the worm feed to the machine and broke the teeth of the worm. This damaged both teeth and rifled the body of the Wurster and since no new parts could be obtained the parts had to be repaired by the welders. The parts would be built up by the welders, then ground to the right profile ready for reuse. This was a slow and time consuming job. On this floor were also the copper sieves and drying felts and on the upper floor were the Hollanders. These machines were like flour grinders. They were round and about a metre deep. Inside was a large round millstone which revolved, ground and mixed sheets of raw material to which dyes were added and when properly mixed ran to sieves and felts for spreading and preparing to pass over the heaters for drying and finishing. There were several types of machine on this floor varying in size and usage but the machine which took pride of place was a British built machine which had a battery of heated rollers. It turned out large quantities of brown paper and greaseproof paper. I worked on this machine doing repairs to damaged rollers and also as a greaser when the usual greaser was off on the sick. On entry to this part of the factory, and on the right hand side, was a smaller machine which specialised in the production of soft toilet tissues for use in handkerchiefs and bandages. This machine had a single large roller drier and had a direct drive from an electric motor. I was ordered to work with a fitter from Siemens who was replacing the electric motor which had been overworked. The fitter just could not get the drive level and direct and burned out some three motors before he was replaced and another fitter given the job.

One great thing about working in a paper factory was that we never ran short of toilet rolls and crepe paper. When the Sister of Mercy was alive we used to take sacks of rolls, crepe paper and paper bandages, handkerchiefs etc to the surgery and give them to the good lady and she was over the moon because no one else

helped her. We also exchanged paper rolls for beet sugar from another British party and in this way never ran short of sweeteners in lieu of saccharin.

Close to Lager 2 was the boiler or kessel house. This provided all the hot water supply for the factories and a high pressure steam supply for recharging the small steam engine. This engine went round the factory delivering materials and collecting things for export and which was used by us to transport the things we had liberated back to our billets. This was a nifty little machine. On the front was a type of no return valve, and this was attached to a high pressure nozzle. Sufficient steam at high pressure went into the boiler of the engine to allow the engine to run around the factory buildings for over half an hour. The train was driven by two Kiwis, and quite often it was used to carry geese, and chickens, from the factory to our billets. We often used the engine to move liberated electric motors for use by some of the workers and for this we were paid in food. The engine was serviced by Paul Jonca and my pal Ginger. When it was being serviced in the Schlosserei it was parked over an engine pit and Paul, Ginger and friends used to gather in the pit and drink bottle after bottle of the local Weberbauer beer and Paul used to throw ball bearings into the office to upset people sitting there. Not far away was the ausgabe where we collected special tools. This was run by a rather severe but not ugly woman, very unlike the woman in the next office, and known to us as Frau Kukenbacker although that was not her name. She was a fat slob with many double chins, and she did not like anyone other than Nazis. Here too was the entrance to the classroom. Here the would-be fitters did their studying and final test piece. Some of the work was very well done and to look at a set of wrenches was very interesting. I worked for a time in this school and I was a much better fitter afterwards. No German tried to influence me, for we had made it clear that we were English and proud to be so and in any case we did not like the teacher Neubert.

At one period I was teamed up with a rather bizarre character by the name of Wilhelm. I do not know if that was indeed his proper name but it was apparently O.K. When I first saw him I just could not believe my eyes for, to put it mildly, he was grotesque. He was ugly, fat and mishapen with a big belly and oversize bottom. He had a round head with a mass of hair on top, he had small eyes, a retroussé nose, thick lips and two or three double chins. He used his large

stomach to hold a large ladle for carrying molten white metal. This was a work of art and took a great deal of strength. Strangely Wilhelm was a very good natured man with a wicked sense of humour but he was above all a very, very good workman who got on with his work and bothered no man. He seemed to bear no malice and we got on very well together in spite of the fact that I was in no way as capable as he was. I suppose he took into account that I was not as used to hard graft as he was and of course at the time he was much older than I was. In the factory there was a shortage of spare parts and Wilhelm was there to do the necessary repairs and adaptations. It was necessary to replace bearings with bearings of a different type and material and this genius of a man set to work and did just that. Wilhelm taught me how to set up the bearings which were to be repaired and he poured the metal into the moulds and then they were all allowed to cool before being stripped, bored where necessary and then carefully fitted into the various shafts. They were then replaced in the differing machines. I, at the same time, gradually picked up ideas which I was able to use on my return to England where my father was very glad of my help. My father, who was a cabinet maker, had a rather interesting workshop and so I was able to renew all the bearings and save him money.

The smith with whom I worked was a good friend of ours. This man was called Urbitchek and he was well over six feet tall. He was very thin and rather miserable looking but this was not the case. I believe he had been a POW although nothing was ever said. It is a strange fact that we very quickly decided who was trustworthy and who was not. Certainly, we who gathered in the corner where the engine pit lay, were all of the same mind. There was one Russian in the group. He had worked in Spain and France and he and his wife were on their way home to Russia when Hitler decided to invade Russia. Tom and his wife were caught in the net and both were forced to work. At one time Tom, a German, a Pole a Rumanian and a Kiwi all worked together and got on quite well in spite of the fact that there were language difficulties.

For a while I worked with one of Black Bess's brothers. Bess was neat, tall, vivacious and obviously over sexed. Her brother, on the other had, was very backward, a little thick, not much physically and was never entrusted with anything other than the simplest of work. He had knock knees and what we

would call 'splatter' feet. When he walked his head seemed to nod. When I asked him about his brothers and sisters he said that there were six in total, all like him. This led me to saying "one set of brains, shared by six". Eventually Karl was called up and a fortnight later was killed in Italy. I felt at the time that he should never have had to go to war, for he knew not what it was all about.

In all the time that I worked in Germany I must admit that the work was for my benefit. Lots of prisoners stayed in Stalag and vegetated but I had no desire to sit on my bottom in a place I detested when I could be doing something of use to me and at the same time be in relatively interesting workplaces. It was obvious that I would not be able to continue my studies but at the same time I felt that whatever you learn is of some use and I wanted to learn.

Among the characters in the Schlosserei was a Hungarian who had got his daily wash down to the minimum. He rarely went near the water and always wore a hat, a scarf and a balaclava type helmet and always wore glasses. When he had donned all his clothes and head gear, he could be prevailed upon to go and collect some hot water for us to use and at the same time to wash his hands and face. Two fingers on each hand were carefully dipped into the water and then, when all surplus water had been removed, the fingers were moved carefully round the spectacles and under the nose. There they were gently allowed to travel past the mouth and under any portion of the chin which had not been covered up by the balaclava. Ablutions complete, the man then ambled away allowing other more worthy types to do a good job of face and hand washing. This was the only time I met a man who never seemed to remove his clothes and take a bath and we always tried to keep well away from him for he was quite ripe.

I think I should at this point tell you a little about the factory at Cosel Hafen. The Oder is one of the main rivers in the Eastern part of Europe and at one time with the River Neisse formed part of the boundary between Germany and Poland. British troops were stationed along this line and, according to people with whom we spoke, they left a few children of Scottish and German parentage. The factory in which we worked was close to the river and the main buildings were divided by the main rail line to the east and Lager 1 lay on one side with Lager 2 on the other. The road past the factory did not seem to be very important, but the river

itself was navigable and barges plied regularly between towns and ports on the North coast and Cosel itself. Most raw materials came in either by boat or train and all finished work was sent out the same way. We did not normally work down by the river but at times we were obliged to work over the water. I had an accident when I actually fell into the drink after I fell from girders which jutted out over the river. I fell in once and did not repeat the trick. The railway was quite busy and got busier when the war with Russia hotted up. At first troop trains and ambulances were the chief travellers on the line, but then came the traffic to the concentration camp at Auschwitz and the loads of Russians and Ukrainians going to working parties. When the horse boxes carrying the Jews and their families to Auschwitz passed through Cosel the doors were open. The people in the boxes seemed to be unaware of the fate in store and they seemed quite cheerful. When the American bombing increased, attempts were made to destroy the bridge over the river, but as far as I was aware no hits were scored. Cosel itself was a bit like Durham city for both were on oxbows and were quiet little places. Cosel was, I gather, a protected hospital town and a centre for the severely wounded from Stalingrad and the rest of Russia. The hospital, known as the 'Abessinian Lager' was a low hutted complex divided into two main parts, the British and French area and the Russian area. There was a surgical ward for mainly minor operations and several general nursing rooms. The highest ranking officer was a Serbian Colonel who vetted the work done by the staff at the hospital but did little of the work himself. He was, nevertheless, an important member of the team. The bulk of the work was done by a Captain Webster from one of the North Country regiments. He was ably assisted by Captain Foreman, a Kiwi and by Captain Rose, an Aussie. There were two French doctors and other officers who came in to help from the Stalag. One of these was Lieutenant Gibb from my old company and a Major Lawson who came from Newcastle. There was also a full complement of English nursing orderlies.

The Russian part of the hospital was not so well looked after for it appeared that the Germans used the prisoners as slave labour and that as soon as their usefulness diminished then they were of no further consequence. This area was struck by the typhus plague and there were many deaths. I saw men stagger out of the doors of the huts and collapse on the ground. They were very emaciated

and it was said that there was cannibalism in the wards. Dr Foreman did a great deal of work for the Russians and was himself ill with typhus.

The hospital was the focus of all working parties and day after day parties of sick prisoners rolled into the grounds of the hospital for treatment. Work in the area was varied, some people worked in the mines, some in stone quarries, some in paper factories and others on farms. Not all were ill physically, some were depressed and some just needed a break from the tedium of everyday working. All were cared for and it was a pleasure to talk to Captain Webster for he always seemed so cheerful. When we, in Cosel Hafen, marched down to the hospital we always followed our dog (we had adopted a dog in the camp) through the outskirts of the town and he always chased anyone in field grey and of course any strange dogs. Everyone knew the dog and the dog had friends in the hospital. The Captain was a cat and dog lover and was often to be seen with the animals. The chief German doctor and Captain Webster worked well together and on one occasion the German asked the British sick to limp and stagger as they passed his window. He would then know that they were sick, unlike those who whistled and sang as they passed by.

Not all people got on as well together as the German doctor and Doctor Webster. I was in no way a member of the medical staff and I went to the hospital to help when we had language problems or when I was ill. Prior to the trips to the hospital we had been forced to visit a German Doctor who was a civilian and all his patients were sent to the Army Doctor if the owners of the factory thought that anyone was swinging the lead. Previous to this we had to go to the Sister of Mercy in the area and because we were her favourites we always got preferential service. She was a grand lady and when she died we collected over five thousand marks for wreaths etc and for help in her work. The authorities allowed us to spend only twenty five marks on the wreath and the rest of the money we had to spend on false teeth and new glasses. For this I had to take patients to Neustadt where there was a German Hospital.

When we travelled on the railways we were supposed to sit in a specially converted carriage so that we did not meet up with German citizens and particularly German maidens who fancied the Brits. On one occasion we went to

Neustadt and the special carriage did not turn up. We therefore went into the normal carriages and the poor old guard, who suffered from barber's rash, did not know what to do especially when two of the boys spotted likely maidens in a carriage with only two seats occupied. The two lads were slung out of that carriage while others made the most of the problem and chased other girls. As soon as we got to the hospital the Doctor there played war with the old man for not having divulged that he had barber's rash. The poor old man never ever got the job again. Needless to say the situation from then on was very strict and there were no more thrills for the lassies!

Cosel was a very good camp for us and the people for whom we worked were keen to allow us to have sports and drama etc in our barrack block at Kukles Muhle. We also had a theatre, made from liberated materials and I went to collect the paper for the backcloths. I also helped Ginger to paint the scenery. Ginger was a very good artist and he painted and displayed some of his work in the billets. Twice, to my knowledge, he was taken to task by the Germans for posters which he had painted. In one case he had done a poster with the 'Masters Voice' logo as the chief feature and a prisoner known to us as Doggie Martin also came into the picture. An English speaking Hitler Youth reported this to the Officer at the Company H.Q. in Cosel and cooked up a story about the reason for the poster and some stupid story about the meaning of the gramophone and Doggie Martin. The poster was withdrawn but Ginger was not punished. It was Christmas time when the second furore erupted. We had a Jew in the camp, as I mentioned earlier, and he was rather obese. Ginger did a painting of Harry with a goose popping out from his overcoat and grabbing the German Under Officer's nose. The likeness was so good that several German guards had a laugh about their boss. He was not amused and grabbed the poster and sent it post haste to the C.O. in Cosel. He wrote to Ginger and asked if he could keep the picture for he thought it was a wonderful piece of work. Ginger agreed to give the Officer the painting and the Uffz was removed from his position in the Camp.

I was studying architecture when war began and had not done a great deal of picture painting and Ginger often begged me to do a bit of art. At the time I was far too shy and in any case I was the one who had to speak the German or the French as Ginger was not good with foreign languages.

Ginger and I went out into the town of Cosel and armed with cigarettes and chocolate we were able to obtain paints, brushes and other little bits of useful material at a reasonable price. All the electrical materials came from the factory and it was said that if electrical bulbs, wiring and so on were needed at work then it had to come from the Brits. All sports gear came from the Red Cross and my one complaint was that, as I was still a university student, I was never able to obtain books to help me to study in prison camp. Much later I found that my parents had sent books but these were creamed off for people in the Stalag. By the time I found this out we were being forced to move out of the Stalag and the books had to be left for the Russians. At times we prevailed upon the guards to take part in games with us, but after one or two games of cricket and rugby, the guards complained that the games were too hard and that was the last we heard of cooperation. We had a garden in our camp and grew lots of things like lettuce, spring onions, carrots and tomatoes and the seed was I believe sent by the Red Cross. We, like the Germans, also stole things like tomatoes because they were available in reasonably open spaces and large quantities. In front of the main offices there was a large area where onions and tomatoes were grown. When all was ripe there would be a raid on the plants and this raid involved Germans and British and not a word of protest was spoken. We had boxes full of tomatoes for weeks. Next door to the Schlosserei was the orchard of Herr Tiefel. The Hitler Youth, for a few cigarettes, would collect the fruit from the orchard and bring it back to the engine pit. The young boys would crawl through the windows into the orchard and quietly detach the fruit from the trees. This was then deposited in wicker baskets which would then be pushed back through the windows. The fruit would then be loaded onto the engine in the factory and taken to the prison camp and transferred to the cook house. If any questions arose about the smell of apples we claimed they came from the orchard situated next to the cook house.

In our room we had a professional pastry cook and so that he could continue his work we adapted the stove in our room to become an oven and after we did a bit of bargaining for white flour and having liberated fruit etc he was able to provide us with some lovely apple, cherry and plum tarts. The cook, who came from Liverpool, was only too pleased to keep his hand in and we, his victims, were quite content to encourage him as his pies and tarts were delicious.

Other people were keener on drink and all over the place the smell of hooch was evident. Everything went into the tub where fermentation took place and then, when the time was right, the still came into effect. The still stood on the hot plate in the kitchen and for some unknown reason no one said anything about the worm, which started as the oil feed, on one of the standing engines in the factory. The hooch was powerful stuff and there were several incidents when the effect of the drink was worrying. In this camp were English, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Kiwi, Aussie and other nationalities and all seemed to like a small nip or a larger glass of the stuff. Most certainly this drink was not for beginners and we had one warrant officer who was plied with the hooch, undiluted, and ended up making everyone call him Bulky. Our bedroom was next door to the sick bay and there were two Kiwi medical orderlies who not only drank the hooch but also drank a type of chemical known as Dravinol, a crude anaesthetic. One Welshman in our room drank too much of the hooch and dirtied his pants, not on his bed but on someone elses. The pong was awful and permeated the room and the corridor. When the Kiwis had their session the result was just as devastating. One dashed into our room shouting "Ooh, Ooh, smell my breath" and then he collapsed onto the bed where his stomach started working like a concertina. This time we wanted no repeat of Taff's problem so we carried him back to his room. Later we heard "That's a good boy, bring it up for daddy". The next day all members of the hut walked through the room chanting "That's a good boy, bring it up for daddy". He swore that never again would he touch the hooch but the very next day he was absolutely blotto. Some folk never learn!

I must give you some idea of the people who gave the orders in the Factory. The chief executive was seen only on rare occasions, but he was a genteel type and we had no problems from him. He was the owner of the dog which Peter Bartlett trimmed and he also owned the sheep cut up by the same man. He must have had a fair sense of humour for, in spite of Pete's efforts, he still did not cut up rough. I wonder what the dog and the sheep felt! There was then a Herr Tiefel who unwittingly fed us with his fruit and he was followed by Herr Docopil the engineer, who had, I gather, lived in Lancashire for the better part of twenty seven years. I met him pretty frequently and he spoke fluent English and above all he loved the English. We now move from the main offices to the factory or rather the schlosserei and here we met up with Herr Adler the Machine Meister,

an old man, getting feebler, but with twinkling eyes and always happy to speak with us on matters of common interest. I felt for the old man because he had lost his wife and son in-law, the latter in Stalingrad, and was kept alive by the work in the factory. His deputy was Herr Neubert, the Jew hating man, who lectured me every day about Jewry but who liked us because, unlike his workers, we were mostly Protestant and he went out of his way to help us. I think he was a Prussian, always smart and well dressed, but he was known to us as Swivel eyes because he could not look you straight in the eye. Few Germans liked him as a man but admired him as a worker, for though strict, he was fair. These were the people we had to deal with and we were exceptionally lucky for we never really got any trouble from them and, as I have said previously, we could not have found a better working party. Trouble, when it came, was from the Americans who in June 1943 began bombing the I.G. Farben works at Blechammer and Oderthal close to Cosel and upset our peaceful world. The first raid took place in daylight and there were some five hundred heavy bombers in the raid. The Huns had around a thousand guns of various sizes firing at one time and the sky was full of smoke and shrapnel. The Americans suffered heavy losses and the oil refineries stopped work for a month. We now had to dig slit trenches and prepare for future raids. A month to the day, the factories started work again and that day the Yanks came back in force. It soon became a daily routine to have raids. At about nine thirty in the morning a recce plane passed over the camp and about an hour later the first wave of bombers struck, followed by a second wave in half an hour. We listened in to the German warnings and as soon as the Nieder Donnau was mentioned we prepared to go to the shelters. Sometimes there was no warning. One day I was caught out when working in the wood yard doing repairs and got my right thumb caught in a chain feed to a small plant. The young lad I was working with did a bunk and left me till the raid was over. Luckily no bombs were dropped and I was freed as soon as the all clear sounded. At this time the Reich was under the hammer and since the start of the Second Front there was apathy among the Germans. This was to be expected when one saw the now enlarging lists of Heldentodt in the hall in the Schlosserei. Cosel had seen its fair share of pain and loss. Having had the young men of Alt Cosel killed in Stalingrad and young women killed in air raid shelters, the people were naturally a bit down and hoping for peace. Young Hitler Youth who were now in the army and coming home on leave often came to us and openly told us how

unhappy they were and were afraid for the future. Some of these boys had been so cocky and had looked forward to the battles, but now all the cockiness was gone and they were really afraid for their lives. We still got our letters from home but Red Cross parcel delivery was very patchy and gone were the days of frequent cigarette parcels. It was in fact near to Christmas before I got a parcel of two hundred cigarettes and most of these went to Ginger, my mate, who was a chain smoker. The fifty remaining cigarettes I exchanged for cod liver oil and malt, something to do me good.

When D Day arrived on 6 June 1944 I was working in the paper factory in Upper Silesia. The day began for me at eight in the morning when I went in to work. The Hitler Youth were paraded in front of the Brown Shirt leader who raised the German flag and then told the boys what a lousy lot we were. The boys then returned to the schlosserei and told us what the leader had said about us. Soon the deputy Machine Meister Neubert came to me and started on his favourite topic of the Jews and Jewry and soon the smoke was belching from our loo, while all the other loos were smokeless. This spiel generally lasted some thirty minutes. Normally at ten thirty each day the Americans bombed the oil refineries but today there was no raid. At approximately twelve noon I decided to have a snooze on one of the work benches. Soon, I was awakened by Paul (Pauluk) Jonca who said ”Wake up, Kenneth, we have landed”. I asked “Where?” “In Normandy, so the B.B.C. says”, was the reply. “We have established a bridgehead and are now pushing inland”. When I heard the news I jumped over five feet high. “Please tell Ginger and all the other boys and any other Englishmen you meet”. Paul could scarcely contain his great delight, for he felt that now he and his countrymen would be set free by the allies. I told the boys in the schlosserei and they then told the Irish Warrant Officer and he then sent word to the hospital in Cosel. There was much whistling and singing and before long I was asked to visit Herr Adler the Machine Meister. He said “Will you please ask your boys not to whistle. I know that we appear to be losing the war but until your troops come to collect you, then you are still my prisoners”. Larry, who was well over eighty years of age, always treated us well and we rather liked this man. I am sure that Larry, as well as Paul, had been listening in to the B.B.C. because the German radio did not release any news for over a week and then only very briefly. We all hoped for quick victories and an early return home.

About this time Ginger had a repeat of the tinea which had troubled him for some months and which he had managed to suppress by using the fluid which came from the electric drilling machine and flowed on to the work being drilled. His hands were now red raw and causing him a great deal of pain. I too had my problems. The factory floors were heated by steam passing in pipes below the screeds and finishings. This heat dried out the leather on the soles of our boots and the heat affected me and my stomach, where I suffered great pain. I was taken to the hospital at Cosel and operated on for appendicitis. There were complications and in August of 1944 we were both sent back to Lamsdorf which had not improved since our last visit. The huts were gaunt, in fact it was amazing that none had fallen down. We were sent to Hut 25 and settled in there. We both occupied the upper bunks and avoided sleeping on the lower bunks which more often than not were affected by water which came in through the roof, the non existent windows and from the front door which was about six inches above the actual floor to the hut. We soon found that the beds were by no means as comfortable as those which we had vacated in Cosel and that one was totally dependent on the strings which held the palliases. The bunks were totally without bed boards and sagged in the middle. In August conditions were not too bad except for the bugs which at night came out from the woodwork and ravaged the would-be sleepers and left their marks all over the necks and shoulders. Sometimes we took the bunks to pieces and burned the bugs at the stake and then rebuilt the bunks, filling up with soap any gaps in the framing of the bunks. After this was done the bugs came back to life and made the sleepers night absolute hell.

Many of the huts were in a dangerous condition, few had any windows or window frames and glass was missing in all but a few cases. When one went into a hut it was possible to see that many of the structural timbers had been removed to be used in the Dutch oven in the hut and it was a miracle that no one was hurt or killed by collapsing roofs. The oven was supposed to give out sufficient heat to keep all the occupants warm, but so few brickettes were supplied to each hut that little heat was generated. Normally there were ablutions between two huts and in these ablutions a totally inadequate water supply ran through glazed earthenware channels. The water was only available at certain times and was not sufficient for

all the jobs which had to be done. Bread rationing was none too good at this time and since the loaves were irregular in shape and in size, to sort out the rations was a work of art and patience. The person dishing out the food had to be really honest for hungry prisoners were never very forgiving if someone decided to do a bit of cheating. Prisoners had to collect their own potatoes etc and any cooking done by them was done on a blower which could boil water in a very short space of time but took quite a time if there were several people sharing the food. Everyone seemed to be using blowers to cook their food. We, who had for so long lived in a proper camp, had relied entirely on our cook house staff to conjure up meals for our delectation and had forgotten how to cook for ourselves. Now instead of being fed by other folk we were having to do everything for ourselves and were finding it a bit strange and tiring. I am not saying that we were too thick to do things for ourselves but certainly there was very little leisure time. The fact that blowers were so much smaller than the cooking range meant that more time was needed to provide the quantities of food we required. Blowers in themselves are interesting and there were many variations both in size and output. In many ways they were, and are, much more economical to run but in general the cooking was done in small units. As a result when at night one came into a compound one was made aware of the vast number of blowers at work. In some ways the compounds looked a little like Blackpool illuminations. The origin of the blower was the forge and the blower was, I suppose, to allow folk to carry minor forges around. This also meant that more weight was added to the already overweight soldiers pack. Of course new materials and new ideas helped to keep the extra weight to the minimum. I personally prefer the cookhouse in a static situation but having seen the Russian version of the blower I agree that when on the march the blower has certain advantages. Oftentimes, as we marched along through deep snow and in bitter conditions, it would have been terrible trying to provide a hot meal using the cookhouse principle. The Russians all carried large tins through the sides of which they had punched holes. They then packed the tins with hay, straw or some other type of slow burning material. They then put the food they wished to cook into the tin and set fire to the flammable material. As they marched along they swung their tins and bit by bit the food was cooked and what is more kept hot. The blowers in Lamsdorf were really sophisticated and some were multi-fire and blown, so that several ovens were working at the same time. It was easy to see the trades of the owners of the blowers for some

were delightfully done and some were designed by men who were in the top ranks of designers.

There were now several of us in our syndicate. There was Ginger, Flash, Ben, Robbie, Yorky and me and Flash was the man who did all the repairs etc, while we each took a turn on the blower. Washing of small clothing was done in the ablutions and the wet clothes were either hung up in the hut as near as possible to the Dutch oven or hooked up to the barbed wire fencing and left there to dry. Clothes were not 'Omo' white and since we wore a lot of woollens they looked very grey even though they were quite wearable.

In general in the winter time, because the rooms were draughty and cold, people donned all their extra kit just to feel comfortable. When windows were broken snow used to come in through the empty windows and formed ridges of snow opposite each window opening. When the snow melted the floor was awash and the room was filthy. Toilets were normally of the 'forty holer' type so that if at night any one was taken short or was ill there was a large metal drum in the flash porch of the hut and people had to use this, for it was verboten (forbidden) to go outside at night.

Outside the huts were staggered trenches for use in an emergency but only once did I see them in use and that was when we went to see one of the Andy Hardy films and, right in the middle of the film, the aerodrome next door was bombed by the Russians and every one jumped into the trench in case we received a hit on our huts. We were lucky but never heard what damage had been done to the Luftwaffe. From these trenches we were able to view the American raids on the I.G. Farben works and we were able to watch without worry the whole of the action, the planes blowing up, the mass of ack ack fire and the vapour trails of the fighters above the bombers. The Americans lost a lot of brave men each and every time they came into Silesia.

In all the Stalags I visited one thing remained constant, something very useful indeed and though it might vary in size, number and finish, it never altered its purpose and was used by young and old, rich and poor, and was a source of

blessing and relief to all. This was the 'forty holer', the place where people with shattered nerves and frustrated ideas could sit and cogitate.

You may ask, "what was a 'forty holer'?" A 'forty holer' was a lavatory, a bog, a loo, normally made of wood and sitting over a concrete cess pit. The bog was normally two sided, with a wooden division in the middle and with largish holes, the size of a loo seat, along each side. In a battery of 'forty holers', there would be twenty holes each side and each loo had a hinged lid. The whole structure was substantial and capable of supporting, not only the sitting tenant, but also many more people who, in winter weather, kept their feet warm by standing on the top of the bog to keep their feet off the ice and frozen ground.

Not only were 'forty holers' used as toilets, for on occasions they were used by people who were trying to escape from the Germans who were out to destroy them. Why these people went down among the rats, I do not know, but I know of one man who was shot dead as he came up from a 'forty holer' to collect his Red Cross parcel. In general prisoners liked to avoid these rats for they believed that this particular breed of long haired rodents enjoyed biting certain parts of a man's anatomy. The rats did not like noise, firesticks and, above all, they hated poison. This was not available in the Stalags and so it was politic to set fire to a sheet of paper and drop it down through the lid of a loo, or to use a spear to try to impale the rat there, or just create a great deal of noise to frighten the rats away. Some people used a Klim tin cut away on one side to cover up a man's testes, so that the rats could find nothing to bite.

Some comedians used to scare people by tickling their posteriors with sticks, thrust down the hole immediately behind that on which the intended victim was sitting, and it is said, that by doing so new world records were set for sitting jumps.

Loos were none the less useful when in the night the Germans called an appell and it was necessary to go out on parade dressed only in night attire and slippers. The Silesian winters were very cold and so the Brits walked round and round over the tops of the 'forty holers' in an effort to keep their feet warm and clear of the winter snows. From time to time it became necessary to clear away any effluvium

in the 'forty holers', and for this purpose the Germans used a cart pulled by a horse and looking like a petrol tanker. This tanker had a charge in the top which, when fired, sucked up all the effluvium and sounded like someone sucking up soup. When the tanker was full the horse would pull the load away to some out of the way spot where it was discharged and the whole process gone through once more.

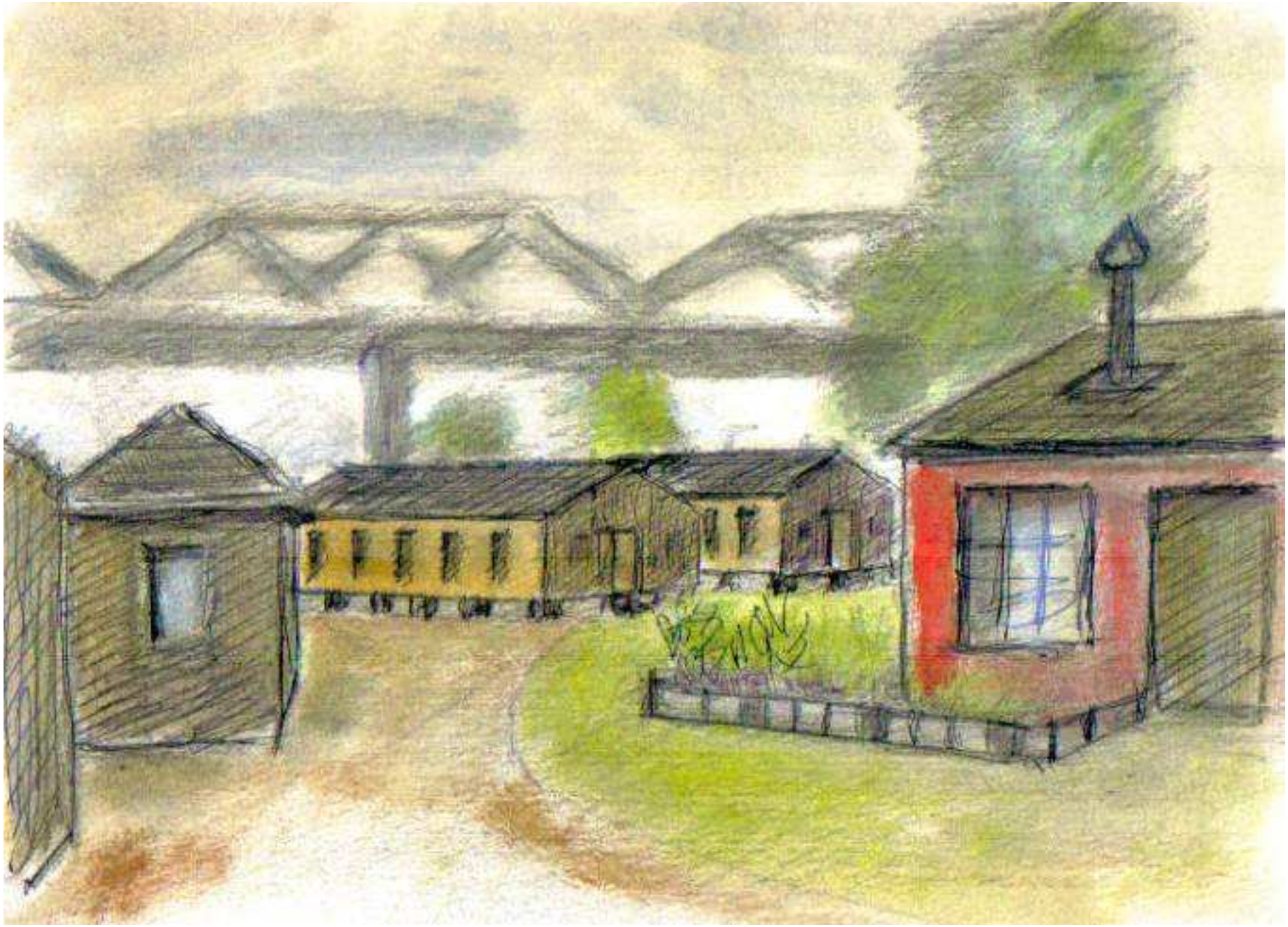
I remember one incident which happened when a tanker was being driven away from the loos in Lamsdorf and happened to pass over an area where people were tunnelling. The ground was not sufficiently strong to bear the weight of a full tanker and the back wheels went through the top of the tunnel and ended up in a position where the horse was suspended in its harness. The tanker was left with the front wheels almost level and the rear wheels sunk in the tunnel. The horse had to be released and then the tanker hauled out and pulled away by a tractor unit. It was hard lines on the tunnellers who had done a great deal of work and had it all ruined. Sometimes the prisoners were rather naughty and stuffed several Klim tins in the open end of the pipe to the tanker and when the charge was fired the tins jammed in the pipe and caused a lot of trouble for the Germans. One tanker actually collapsed when this sort of sabotage was done.

Now back at Lamsdorf we did not meet with the approval of the medical officer who was intent on getting us back out to work. We dodged work and cooked, talked and packed our gear for the march which we knew was imminent. We managed to get our shoes repaired and strengthened, our socks washed and darned and special bags, similar to the bag packs of today, were improvised from pillowcases. American bombers formed up over Lamsdorf and we could see all the action over the oil refineries. It was terrible to see so many bombers blow up over the target and also to watch stricken planes fall like leaves out of the sky. So many brave young men were killed needlessly.

We now waited for the order to move and made all our own arrangements for the great day and wondered who would finish the trip. December 1944 had arrived along with heavy snow, food shortages and the heavy bombing raids by the Americans and the thunder of guns from the East. Working parties came in but strangely working parties still went out. In the windowless huts there was

feverish activity. Any surplus food we had was carefully laid to one side in case of emergency. Those of us who had already experienced forced marches like the one from Dunkirk to Poland looked fearfully at the new prisoners. They were young and vulnerable and had not yet come to terms with POW life and were innocent of the roguery to which all of the longer serving POWs had been forced to resort.

On Christmas Day one of our many contacts offered us some rabbit. This delicacy was cooked and eaten. We then discovered that we had partaken of cat. We were not put off by this and would gladly have eaten more!



Cosel Hafen

The long march home

Our march to the West began one cold snowy and windy January night when we were issued with Red Cross parcels, one between two people. We marched out of Lamsdorf at 10.30 pm and left behind Flash and Ben who were going to another camp for senior N.C.O.'s. In our party were Ginger, Robbie, Yorkie and me and we were loaded up with everything that could keep us dry but, as on other occasions, we were a little short of food. Then at midnight, having formed up in columns of some two thousand men, we set out in the murk and plunged into a foot or more of snow. The Russians were by now very close and were fighting at Oppeln and stukas were operating from the air field at Lamsdorf. Our first day's march lasted till the evening and then we sheltered under an overhanging roof of a bungalow type dwelling with our heads above the snow line and our feet out in the snow. That first night we did not feel the cold and we slept well. The next morning we dined on a piece of bread and frozen salmon from a tin. We then set off in a north west direction and discovered that we were heading for Breslau where a real battle was raging. On the first day of the march things went reasonably well except for the fact that I had what I presumed to be a frost bitten tongue. All through the march I used rock salt to alleviate the problem but it did not heal until I got home to regular meals. We now pushed on by the side of Wroclaw and could hear the heavy artillery and machine gun fire from the town. This firing went on for approximately fourteen days. The noise increased as we got nearer to the battle and then reduced as we marched towards the town of Gorlitz and its neighbouring town Bautzen. Both towns were very busy with lorries etc loading up and heading towards the battle zone. Our stay at Bautzen was rather short but we were at Gorlitz for several days where the roads were under at least six inches of mud. During our time at Gorlitz we were forcibly deloused although we were absolutely clear. The delousing equipment went wrong and we had to stay in the drying room in the altogether for several hours. We had to pummel each other to stop freezing up and the air was filled with curses about the so and so Bosches. When I read that the Germans used this 'breakdown' ploy in their gas chambers I wonder if we had a lucky escape!.

Soon we were off again but this time my pals Robbie Robinson, Yorkie and Ginger were on the way out of the march. Robbie had dysentry, and Yorkie had a very sore throat. Ginger, my mate, was suffering from dysentery, frostbite and septic chilblains. For a few days he had been getting worse and I flogged a brand new pair of boots to get him some milk. When I returned I found a guard beating Ginger and I tried to get him to leave Ginger alone but he then turned on me and gave me a beating. Soon all my pals were gone. Two of the group had gone into sick bays. Ginger was forced to pull out of the march and he was eventually sent to a camp at Fallingbostel. Because I was still reasonably fit I was forced to carry on. For a short while I joined forces with a young Cockney but he ate all his food in one go and then stole from his mates, something which just was not done, and so he had to go. Two very good Yorkshiremen joined me after the Cockney departed. One was called Tommy Barr who came from Redcar-by-the-Sea and the other was a farming type from Helmsley and I will call him Yorky for that is the name I knew him by. The march carried on. Food got scarcer, we became wearier and thinner. Many people dropped out because of sickness, many died and some were shot. Each day we averaged between 16 and 20 miles but there were times when we did more.

By this time we were approaching the city of Dresden and were struck by the beauty and character of the place. It was a real treat to march through areas of imposing buildings and on the way we met French prisoners who gave us cigarettes. It must have been early in the day for after we had gone through the city we marched along by the river and admired the boats plying backwards and forwards. We sat down and admired the view and in particular the red banks of the river. We smoked a cigarette or two and then continued our march until in the late evening when we were marched into a brick works and were told that we would be sleeping on the beehive ovens. That night there was heavy bombing and the following day we were forced to stay in the brick works. A few days later we were supposed to stay the night in a small village but it appears that the village was bombed on that day. We came across dead and bloated cows and still burning houses and the village still had unexploded bombs lying around. There were no signs of casualties either civilian or military, friend or foe, and we were left to guess why and when the bombing had taken place. At first sight it appeared that the bombing had taken place earlier that day or the night before as

the unexploded bombs had been made safe. I felt that the bombs had been jettisoned by a plane which was being chased and had been attacked and damaged but made good its escape as there were no wrecked planes in the vicinity. Whatever had happened seemed to have been quick and devastating and had to happen in a place where we were to have spent the night. We were told to carry on marching and we eventually stopped for a rest about midnight and all our muscles seemed to seize up for we could now only limp along. We stopped marching about breakfast time and filed into farm buildings. I know that I was out on my feet and flopped down beneath a horse rake and went off to sleep. When I eventually wakened I was in agony for every muscle in my neck, legs arms and body had gone into spasm and I have never felt anything as bad in my life. I had a roll of blankets round my shoulders and when I fell down this roll had made it impossible to lie comfortably. Hence the agony! We did few miles during the next few days and never ever got going again. We were not aware that our march was drawing to a close but noticed that there were signs of very heavy bombing and it was not possible to miss the burned out trucks on the motorways and the riddled engines and destroyed signals on the railways. One night we were fast asleep in a byre when we heard a burst of gun fire and saw the light from a burning aeroplane as it plunged earthwards. There was a deafening noise as it exploded and all the tiles shattered and fell off the roof, leaving us looking up at the sky and the blaze where the plane had been. When the farmer came in he was not very polite about the awful bombers but we thought only of those brave men who had died for us and our way of life. The following day we were back on the roads and heading to a place by the name of Chemnitz. This place had obviously been bombed on more than one occasion and was in some places razed to the ground.

Day after day the march went on and day by day the marchers grew less in number and with less energy. We reached an autobahn. The worries now were about bombing and strafing. We were lucky and got off the autobahn in time but a column marching behind us was not quite so lucky. They were shot up by the fighters.

During the next few days we marched via Zwickau, Gera, Erfurt and Eisenach to Bad Hersfeld and then we were told to smarten ourselves up for we were going to

a Stalag at a place called Ziegenhain. The towns I mentioned were in varying stages of disrepair and had been bombed time and time again. I think it was Eisenach which struck me most forcibly for the factories, road and rail had all been destroyed and the place was a shambles. No traffic now travelled on the roads during the day and there were many grotesque engines lying on the railway lines, some looking like pepper pots. It was noticeable that any lorries moving up to the front sheltered in secluded spots until darkness set in and then they moved carefully on the motorways. Shot-up lorries lay all over the place and once I saw approximately three or four tracked vehicles lying beside a shot down American plane. Towards the end of March 1945 we came to Ziegenhain and as we marched in a reasonable manner a voice shouted, "You're Pommie bastards aren't you?" We answered "Yes we are, but how could you know that?" "Easy" was the reply, "for had you been Yanks you would have crawled in". The march from Poland to Bavaria had taken around three months to complete with very little rest and we normally marched from six in the morning until six at night.

We now settled in to our billets in the large marquees which had been prepared for us and we found the beds of fir boughs very relaxing. On arrival Thunderbolts shot us up but when they realised that we were friendly they waggled their wings and flew away. Food was very poor and all we got was half of a fifty cigarette tin of dried vegetables and weevils plus a very small portion of bread. The weevils were spared on the first occasion but when it came to the second dinner time they went the way of the vegetables. Dysentry was now rife and there were approximately four deaths per day.

There were a number of new prisoners in the camp and for a while Yanks and Brits were kept apart but soon it was decided that all prisoners who could march were to be sent out towards the east. My pals opted for this move, but I did not intend to move again. I reported sick and told the M.O. that I had come as far west as I could go and I would rather risk death from artillery fire than from hunger. I prayed and hoped he would give me a bed down chit and allow me to stay in Ziegenhain and fortunately this he did. On 29th March 1945, Good Friday, we saw tanks moving outside the wire and along the hills. Soon it was possible to see that they were Sherman tanks and early in the afternoon tanks appeared at the corners of the compound and soon Americans appeared inside the camp. As

the Americans got out of their tanks I was astounded to see the crewmen wearing Stetsons, smoking cigars and their leather boots were fitted with spurs. To us it seemed like a scene from a western film. The senior officer from this unit came in to see for himself the state of the British POWs. He was so upset at seeing so many skeletal figures that he told his troops to deal harshly with any German POWs brought in.

That day the dead walked and things happened that I didn't believe could happen. We were all ill from hunger and dysentry but we all determined to survive. My new mate was a Kiwi farmer and he milked the cows in the area, flogged some of the milk to the Yanks and we then opened up a potato clamp, killed, cleaned and plucked a chicken and then made a chicken meal which we ate and enjoyed but which made us very ill. We spent all night in the loo and decided to stick to milk and fruit. Ours was the first Stalag to be liberated and we became the centre of attraction. We had radio people asking a lot of questions and at last we could mix with the American prisoners. One prisoner was so keen to have a jacket that had seen a forced march that he swopped his new windcheater for my old worn and torn jacket. German prisoners were now being brought into the Stalag and sometimes we took over from the Americans. We were, on the whole, quite fair with the prisoners. The young boys were completely bewildered and responded to kindness. The SS men and women found us far less lenient and anyone who stepped out of line was sure of rough treatment. These types were still inclined to think they were the world rulers and that others were untermenschen.

Of the original 2000 men who started off from Lamsdorf (1250 RAF and approximately 750 Army) some 750 remained (500 Army and 250 RAF). In all we had been marching for close on three months and had covered 900 - 1000 miles, passing through Jena and Meissen and skirting other places such as Erfurt, Gotha, Eisenach and Glogau. Treatment by the Germans varied from fair to wicked. Just how many POWs were shot I do not know but I saw several deliberately shot down. Russians marched alongside us in a separate column. When we slept in barns the Russians slept in the 'attic'. In the middle of the night when they needed to relieve themselves they urinated over the British

POWs below and sometimes a German guard also got soaked. When that happened there were a few less Russians the next morning.

British Warrant Officers in general were detested for they often took for themselves and their cronies the rations which were meant for the whole column. Needless to say there was a great deal of trouble and I am still waiting to go on a 'charge' for calling an RSM a 'thieving so-and-so'.

The worst problem on the march was the shortage of food and the bitter weather. Had food been adequate and regular the march would have held no great terrors for us. However, if you go as long as five days without food a lot of stamina is lost. Repetition of this soon weakened even the strong men.

At this time the poles were suffering as much as the POWs and I appreciated all they did for us. They took many risks for us and I have always held them in great esteem. Paul Jonca, who had fed us with hot meals every Sunday was 'liquidated' by the Russians soon after liberation. He was the bravest and most loyal friend we had at Cosel.

I must, in fairness, admit that not all Germans were bad. Some were very kind indeed and I hope that we, in turn, treated them in a like manner. We could not hurt the children and I would like to feel that the efforts we made on behalf of Ukranian, Polish and German children were to some avail. Certainly by our example the Hitler Youth at the paper factory at Cosel were converted from enemies to friends. I was responsible for at least one German soldier surrendering to the British and as far as I know, he became a naturalised Canadian.

The things I learnt from being a POW were:-

- War is a rotten business but there are times when it is necessary
- Freedom is a wonderful and essential thing. Only those who have known captivity or slavery understand the terrible fear of knowing that the day of freedom may never come
- There are times when death is better than perpetual captivity

- Christians at times must stand up and be counted for there are times when it is necessary and proper to sacrifice oneself for others
- Hatred is an awful thing. There are times when one can hate ones so-called friends as deeply as ones enemies
- In times of real hardship, rich and poor become equal. In the words of Robbie Burns “A man’s a man for a’ that”.

Returning home

Over the Easter time we had the various Church services for around 13,000 people. Planes flew overhead to act as an umbrella to prevent any action by the Huns who did not appear at all. German night fighters had landed at Giessen but had been bombed and when later we visited the place to try to fly home there was no possible chance that we would be able to take off. On 8th April 1945 we were told that we were flying home and a fleet of lorries arrived at the camp to pick us up. We were taken to a field on which a metal sheet runway had been laid and in due course eleven Dakotas arrived to fly us back to the United Kingdom.

When we were boarding the planes at Giessen I was astonished to see American soldiers carrying their souvenirs to take back to America. During my spell as a POW I had made a collection of pipes of various types to take back to my relatives. Some of the pipes were made of wood and carved and decorated. There were also some Meerschaum pipes that I had bargained for. We had been searched before boarding the planes and anything we had, including the blankets my parents had sent me, was confiscated. The Americans were allowed to carry helmets, machine guns, light and heavy, and I am sure that had it been possible a Tiger Tank as a souvenir would have got through their search! It appeared to me, as an Englishman, that the Yanks were just a little too keen to claim that they had done all of the fighting and that they, therefore, should get all the spoils.

I was the only British POW on my plane and the crew were all from the North East. All the other passengers were either Kiwi, Aussie or Canadian aircrew so travel by air was commonplace to them. When the crew knew that I was from the North East they decided that I should get a good view of everything and so I went into the front part of the plane. The flight went well and soon we crossed the White Cliffs of Dover and landed in Buckingham where I was chaired off the plane and carried to a hangar full of food where a W A.A.F. was waiting to see that I got my full share of the goodies. Sadly I had to explain that my stomach could not cope and so we then drove to Beaconsfield. Here I was rekitted, paid, given my ration cards, was medically examined, and had a very quick dental check up. My medal ribbons were sewn on and finally I was given a travel warrant and a telegram form to send to my mother to let her know that I was

back in England. All this completed I then went to bed and slept the sleep of a happy man. Early the next day we rose and had breakfast and then went to catch a train to London Bridge station and then to Kings Cross and there I boarded a very full train to Darlington. The journey was a long, tedious and uncomfortable one but at last we reached Darlington's Bank Top station and were helped by a Yank and two civilians who carried our gear to the bus for Bishop Auckland. On arrival in Bishop Auckland we learned that the last bus to Durham had gone. We went up to the Police Station where we met a couple of well upholstered Inspectors who listened to us and arranged for a car to take us home. They wished us well and gave us cigarettes and off we went. On arrival I had my kit taken to the door and then I knocked on the door and entered much to the delight of Patch, my dog, who went wild and would not leave me alone. Mum and dad embraced me and gave me the kisses I had missed for so long. I went in and sat down but before long the house was full of well wishers and their presents. Mrs Gray who lived a few doors away had seen my arrival and spread the news around. When I did get to bed I couldn't sleep for the bed was too soft so I slept on the floor, much to mums disgust. The next day I started on my forty two days leave and Patch celebrated my return by haunting me wherever I went.

Not long after arriving home I passed two German POWs wandering around the local streets without guards. They were making rude comments about British civilians and military personnel. I have never seen two people so stunned as they were when I replied in German to their crudities. I cursed them in German and threatened them with the bunker. I had no intention of reporting them but it certainly took the arrogance out of them. Both eventually became naturalised Englishmen.

Ken - Second row, first on the right

⦙ Red Cross Parcels ⦙

During the five years which most of us suffered in Germany we had things made a great deal easier by the supplies of Red Cross Parcels we received from time to time. In the early days of our captivity any parcels sent to prisoners were sent to the individuals concerned and were actually addressed to the individual prisoner. When we arrived in Poland from France we met with prisoners who were in receipt of the addressed parcels and these people also received Bermaline bread in metal containers so that each and every loaf of bread was fresh. As the numbers of prisoners increased it became impossible to send out individual parcels and the Bermaline bread was also suspended. We had to rely on the rations of black bread we received from the Huns and parcels were delivered by the lorry load to correspond with the numbers of prisoners to be fed.

There were several sources of supply - Britain, America, New Zealand and Canada. Food in bulk was sent by the Argentine with cigarettes from France, Turkey and South Africa. All excellent as far as we were concerned but never frequent enough to make life easier. We also had about three private clothing parcels from our parents each year and often we received from our various friends and relatives, cigarette parcels which were ideal for the purpose of barter. On one never to be forgotten period Ginger and I received in the region of fifteen thousand cigarettes from England, America, Canada and Australia but this figure was never repeated although we still did very well for cigarettes.

In the period between 1940 and 1941 there were few cigarette parcels and my first parcel was a New Testament, a blanket, and a small amount of bacon or macon from Switzerland. Small amounts but very welcome at the time.

The quality of the parcels varied a great deal and the American parcels, though more varied than the parcels from the other countries, were not as popular as the parcels from Canada, New Zealand and Britain which contained larger amounts of the more important food stuffs like tea, butter, coffee and things like bully beef and bacon. To the rather hungry prisoners food was the chief interest and without the topping up process the food supplied by our captors was very poor and lacking in interest. When we received bulk issues of food from the Argentine

it meant that we received large pieces of cheese, tinned milk, biscuits (normally of the cream cracker variety) and tins of bully beef all in quantity to last for several weeks.

Though we complained about our conditions we had to admit that the Germans were little better off than we were and that the food on which they and their children lived was not only lacking in appeal but was also so meagre that the children were to our eyes underfed. Certainly the children enjoyed any tit bits which we at times gave them and to receive even one square of chocolate was to receive a Kings ransom. My boss came to work with what we called diluted water. The milk in the water scarcely coloured the water and the children got exactly the same treatment. We had the Canadian dried milk which was called Klim and this was quite a useful powdered milk and we usually got a tin per parcel and it went quite a long way.

Parcels of one type or another were a great source of power and when we cooked some of our bacon and made our coffee on the forge in the Schlosserei all the Germans came round to see what we had got that day and it must have been very depressing for them to see how we the prisoners lived in a state, to them, of luxury and they lived in a state of despair. Often we were accused of living on propaganda but secretly they knew that the Reich was losing the War and they did little to upset us because they feared the consequences when they had to surrender.

Typical contents of a Red Cross Parcel:-

- Quarter pound of tea
- Tin of cocoa powder
- 1 bar of chocolate
- Tinned pudding
- Tinned meat roll
- Tin of processed cheese
- Tin of processed cheese
- Tin of dried eggs
- Tin of sardines/herrings
- Tin of jam/marmalade
- Tin of margarine
- Tin of sugar
- Tin of vegetables
- Tin of biscuits
- Tin of soap
- Tin of tobacco/50 cigarettes

Back in England

When my relatives in Romaldkirk heard that I was back home and a little bit on the skinny side they wrote and asked if I would spend a fortnight with them. I was only too pleased to accept their offer and duly arrived in the village. My weight had gone from around 12-13 stones to 7 stones during my time as a prisoner. Roy, a butcher and farmer, suggested that we go out and kill a calf so that there would be ample flesh to eat. Off we went and the calf was killed and Mary, his wife, set to work to prepare food for some thirteen people, all servicemen and all related, staying in the cottage. She then showed me all the goodies she and Roy had put by during the war years. Roy had learned his trade during a spell of imprisonment during the First World War and he was determined that we would not go short of any type of food. He had beef, mutton, pork, sides of bacon, hams and things like sausages and black puddings. Mary had made pork pies and various stews so that variety was there. We ate like lords and in the evenings went to the Kirk Inn or the Rose and Crown in the village for a drink. All of the Raines family seemed to be in the house but Billy, the one person who had helped with the farm, was gone. He was killed on his first bombing raid over Germany. He had only been married for a month and I was sad because he and I had been good pals. I know Mary missed him and felt his death was very much indeed too soon. When the end of my leave came and I had to catch a train to Bishop Auckland I had to carry home with me a side of bacon carefully wrapped in stout brown paper. One of my fellow travellers looked at my parcel and said "you look as though you are bringing home the bacon". How right he was and how lucky I was to have such kindly relatives. All of the old familiar faces have now gone but the love they bore me still lives on and will do so until I too leave this earth.

Leave over I was sent to Fenham Barracks where the control was not too bad and where we did only one parade per week, always on a Monday. One day I saw several Boy Scout hats in Newcastle and soon I saw five Kiwi pals from Cosel. There was quite a bit of backslapping and I was pleased to hear that all had survived their forced march although it was a little different from ours. They were all younger than me and they were great lads and the best of the colonials.

VE Day 8 May 1945

On the day destined to be V.E. Day I was on my way in a train to Grantham to meet my friend Ginger Rutledge and was blissfully unaware of the significance of the day. When I eventually arrived at Grantham station I found that it was seething with army personnel, American and British, who had become aware of the importance of the day. I was very disappointed to discover that Ellen, Ginger's wife, had gone down with jaundice and that Ginger would not be able to meet me. For a while I swanned around hoping to meet someone I knew. At last I decided to go for a train home and while on the station platform I met up with my cousin Bill who was returning to his Air Force station after several days leave. We were very pleased to see each other and stayed together till late in the day when I eventually went for a train to get me to Darlington and the North.

On arrival at Darlington's Bank Top station I was able to get a bus to Bishop Auckland. I then had to walk the next five miles home only to discover I had missed out on the bonfire, which I was supposed to light, to celebrate the end of the War in Europe. I was particularly sorry about this as the villagers had been absolutely marvellous to me for I had been regarded as one of their own. I have never forgotten their kindness to me.

Life goes on

After a month I was sent to Woking, my least favourite place. A party of ex prisoners went on a course to the town and all agreed that they did not like the attitude of the people in the town. We had not been in the same Stalag or working party but all agreed that many of our enemies had treated us with decency and even friendship and that in spite of constant bombing. At Woking we felt that the people didn't care and much preferred the Yanks and Aussies. We enjoyed the course but we did not like the cooking and the civilians and we were glad to leave and go elsewhere. I had just finished a course of typing at Woking when V.J. Day was announced and that night, for the first time during the war, I was sent on guard duty. On the day itself I was on the way to a place called 18 S. R. D. Steventon in the county of Berkshire. On arrival I was told, in true army fashion, that I had to man the telephone switch board and I was soon in trouble with the Adjutant for not answering his phone and giving his calls priority. I had to explain to him that I knew very little about telephone switchboards and even less about particular numbers. The Adjutant then suggested that I should be given some teaching before I was sent on the board a second time. When I arrived in the office I found that it was run by a lady officer and that there were, at the time, some four more lady clerks. This sort of upset me for I had not been out with a woman for about five years, a hell of a long time to steer clear of the ladies. Every day the local N.A.A.F.I. van toured the grounds and dispensed buns etc to the starving inmates to have with their tea. They then went to a room where civilian members of staff had made tea and for a while everyone was busy drinking, eating and chatting. That is, all except me. I was at this time completely tongue tied and awkward. Also at this time there was conflict in the rest room. Certain members of the N.C. Corps always tried to get their buns first and not in rotation as other offices did. This, of course, led to bitterness between soldiers who had fought and been wounded and others who had decided not to fight but still expected to be privileged in the camp.

We were doubly annoyed because at weekends these people were able to go to London on a special train. Soldiers were not allowed time off and often had to do work on the telephone switchboard. This special train from Didcot to London allowed the members of the N.C.C. to have every weekend free but for us such

trips would be deducted from our annual leave. Things got very bad when members of the N.C.C., who had their own toilets, started trying to commandeer our toilets and we had to evict them. This action led to the C. O. forbidding the use of our toilets by the N.C.C. and he told them so in very forceful language.

Soon a new figure arrived on the scene. This woman had been on leave at the time of the V. J. celebrations. She was part of a group who went off cycling and for some days took very little notice of me sitting there looking like one of the Glum family. I can't quite remember how we first decided to go out together, but go out we did – constantly! I am no singer but I do love music and poetry. My new found friend warbled and so we used to go into one of the spare huts and listen to music and just listen. We also used to go to places like Abingdon and Oxford where we enjoyed the places and the scenery. Later, abetted by the subaltern, I was able to go down to Bournemouth and spend a few happy hours by the sea and pay a few trips into the New Forest. This new friend, Eileen, was to become my wife.

We never did get a special train to London although I did not do too badly. I was able to cadge lifts to Bournemouth and get rations as well. I was still not too fit and any extra food was a welcome bonus. You can well imagine how happy Eileen's mother felt to have more food at a weekend. The extra rations I received from our C.O. were given to me because I was so weak and hungry. We certainly enjoyed the rations! Sometimes I managed to get a lift to Bournemouth on one of the lorries going to that area of the country. I was lucky to be granted a weekend pass and that made it easier for me to move around the seaside without interference from C.M.P. After my experiences in Poland and Germany it was a treat to be able to move around freely.

When I returned home on leave I visited Joyce's parents in Scotland and then Joyce and I had a reunion. I was then told that Joyce had met and fallen in love with someone else and strangely the same thing had happened to me. Joyce married a man from Bournemouth and I married a girl from Bournemouth. I was always grateful to Joyce for her letters and photographs during my days as a prisoner.

Out of the army

After several quite enjoyable months at Steventon, the time for my demob came round and in order to complete the relevant forms we were supposed to go to a place called Taunton in Somerset. The night before we were due to travel to the demob centre there was a party and a dance at Steventon. I was dragged along although I am no party animal and at the time I was not a dancer of any note. We first of all visited some water holes in Steventon and some of the more daring and drunker members of the party carefully removed the sign of the Fox Inn. We then proceeded to the depot where all the ATS girls were waiting to dance and drink. I paid for my ticket to get into the dance and after a few shuffles slipped away to my billet. I got no peace there for soon after I left one of my mates missed me and came along to haul me once more onto the dance floor. After a while more and more revellers began to drift back to their billets. One pair, who had been to East Hendred, had pinched a couple of chickens which they then set free in the billet. The birds naturally kicked up a row and flew all over the place, leaving little parcels wherever they went. People who wanted to sleep complained and eventually the chickens were set free in the camp grounds. One of the girls was very drunk and was staggering around outside and threatened to tell my girlfriend that I fancied her. I would have been very stupid to fancy her as she had thick blubber lips and was certainly not my cup of tea. One of the boys was totally inebriated and when we moved out in the morning he had to be carried out as he was still incapable of any movement.

The demob ceremony at Taunton was an absolute farce. There were few suits left and it became necessary to decide what type of suiting you fancied and then they told you it would be sent to you in a few weeks time. My own preference was a pin or rather chalk stripe but all I managed to collect on the day were socks, shoes and a trilby hat.

When everything was sorted out I then took a train for Bournemouth and arrived rather late that night at Eileen's home. I had no desire to keep wearing my uniform and soon went out into Bournemouth and bought a two piece suit from Dunns shop. For the first time in six years I began to feel like a civilian and it was a lovely feeling.

Marriage and work

When we first married we had love, untried love, for in the early days of marriage love and passion vie for a place in the marriage but it is in times of trial and hardship that true love starts to blossom. It may be that because I had been a prisoner of war for almost five years that I was less demanding and more inclined to share than other people. Whatever it was we shared our worries and pleasures and because we had little in the way of luxuries we enjoyed anything given to us and were grateful for small mercies.

We started off with about two hundred pounds and for some time lived in an hotel, then we moved to furnished rooms from which we had to move because my wife became pregnant. We then went to live in an attic bedroom with shared facilities and finally to a room with a widow who was a bit of a tartar. I then went to work for the Local Authority and was able to move into a flat at a proper rent. This was the first flat for which we had to get furniture, a bed, carpets and finally a real washing machine which proved to be one of the best buys of our married life. For some years life was really difficult and improved slowly but we did love each other and enjoyed having a lovely boy. We then had a very pretty girl and another boy, a bit of a pugilist at birth but a lovely lad all the same. These were followed by another girl and, a few years later, another boy. We were a bit green when it came to doing everything for the first baby and we later felt that we had maybe not fed him properly for he whinged a bit more than his brothers and sisters. Wages gradually improved but we had little to spare and we had to be good managers to keep within budget.

In 1946 I left the Army and after a period of leave, some one hundred and forty eight days, I decided to return to University. I was not looking forward to this return for I was having difficulty fitting back into the existence I had known prior to the war. This perhaps had a great deal to do with my inability to find any happiness at University and I found that I was often at cross purposes with people and their ideas. I was perhaps a bit of a loner not because that was the way I wanted to be but because that was the way I was pushed by my tutors. Not all were bad but certainly in the younger brasher types and in particular those who were trying to curry favour with the Professor there was little attempt to

Ken - in civvies

encourage students. There was little effort made to help ex-servicemen to get back into normal life and all efforts were directed to the younger element in the studio. Unfortunately for me my elder brother, who had done so well in university, had crossed swords with the Professor who now ruled the roost and when I came on the scene I inadvertently discovered that my brother had been right to query the fairness of the man.

Prior to the outbreak of war my brother completed a series of measured drawings which were mounted and deposited with the professor at the university. These were to be sent onto the RIBA by the professor but they were never submitted. My brother and the professor became enemies.

After I returned to university a friend and I looked for drawings which we had left behind when we went to war. My friend was looking through some drawers and he discovered all of the drawings that my brother lost. Unfortunately the professor came into the room and shouted at us and swore and forbade us to do anymore searching without a tutor. Shortly after this the annual exams were held and I found that so much work had been given to me that I was not able to complete it. I was then called before the external examiner and the professor. The professor wanted to fail me but the examiner asked how much work I had been asked to do. When he found how much work I had been asked to do he angrily asked the professor if he thought I was some sort of superman. I was then given a pass for the exam. The following year the same thing happened again when it came to the exam and again the external examiner helped me. When I spoke to the examiner later that same day he was concerned as he wondered what I had done to upset the professor. I explained about what had happened about my brothers drawings and how the professor was determined not to give me a mark for my work.

Things got so bad at the college that I lost all interest and was forced to leave. This was a very unhappy time for me, brightened up by marriage, and the fact that I took a job in the vicinity and there I gradually regained some of my former keenness. I never visited the University again and qualified externally in Scotland. It is a sad fact that there is a great deal of aggro among workers and even among ex servicemen. My working life began after the war and among my

mates in the works there were several who had been working at the place prior to the outbreak of hostilities. They, unlike me, had been in the territorials and when they came out were ahead in service and probably expertise. They, therefore, had differentials and all the while endeavoured to maintain those differentials even if it resulted in other workers being held back. There was also the problem of the Trade Union Shop and the idea that all workers had to be in a trade union and support the ideas of the union. "No Union, No work" was the cry. For those of us who had gone to war and had not joined a union this was not a satisfactory thing to say or do.

When I left university I went to work as an architectural assistant with the local authority and found that I was very much the junior in age though not in experience of life.

My first boss was known as Mr Cook and he was quite a reasonable boss, which is more that could be said of the boss of the office in which I worked. This man had gained his qualifications while other people were in the forces and he loved to show what a great man he was. His great forte was in the field of toilets. He would fuss around deciding just where the toilet had to be sited and wasted a great deal of others people's time doing so.

My real boss on the drawing board was a gentle old man by the name of Horace Young. Horace was a bachelor of some sixty years of age and he always had a pipe in his mouth. Horace was full of fun and had to go to meetings with the Chief Architect each day and Horace always stuck to a rigid timetable. If the meeting was not finished at twelve o'clock, Horace picked up his hat, put it on his head, nodded to his boss and then left. I liked this old man and was pleased when he started going for his holidays to Kitzbuhel, a place he found to his liking.

Most of the staff were OK but the bosses varied. The later ones were less likable than those I dealt with earlier. One boss drank too much and too often. The boss who followed was a bit of a Walter Mitty and the man to whom he handed the reins was even less pleasant. He certainly did nothing for the morale of the workforce. This man was relatively young with no great amount of experience. Her was inclined to do things the wrong way but kept in with the councillors and

he did very well for himself. He did not manage to gain the respect of his men and had things at that time not been so difficult he would no doubt have found his staff leaving him.

In April 1965 my mother became ill with flu and when I was visiting her on the Saturday night she lapsed into a coma. Early on the Sunday morning she passed away. Mum was 83 years of age and she and dad had been married some 60 years. The shock of her death broke dad's heart and he died ten days later. Soon after this double blow we nearly lost our youngest son when he had a very bad bout of asthma. Years later I suffered a very bad bout of shingles and was left with a weakness in my left arm.

Life went on quite happily with holidays around Britain and with the eventual marriages of four of my children and the birth of their children. These things were happy things but there were times when things did not go so smoothly and I regret that in 1980 I decided to retire. I was not well and suffering from diverticulitis and hypertension and I regret to say that I was going up the wall as the pressure got to me. Had I stayed at work I am sure I would have had a serious breakdown. It was a wise move and there was improvement as soon as I left.

There were five POWs in my village including myself. We all survived the war but the other four died in the first month of freedom. I alone survived but suffered ill health for many years. Although my GP agreed that some of my illness was probably caused by my life as a POW it would have been difficult to prove. No one was offered any form of counselling and we were expected to get on with life. Many years later we still suffered from psychological problems. I know that I was always unable to write my name with someone standing behind me.

For many years I used to watch my pal Ginger as he drew and painted and I wondered if I had any talent. Until now I had never managed to summon up the courage to have a go. I decided to start with black and white sketches and then try my hand at oil colours. Strangely I found that I really enjoyed painting and, though I may never be a Constable, I did at least prevent myself from being bored and unhappy.

In 1997 Eileen and I, just like the Queen and Prince Philip, celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary. We were not invited to Buckingham Palace for tea with the big wigs but we were not disappointed for our five grown up children organized a party for us. We both enjoyed every moment with them and our friends at the special do at the Old Barn near Lamesley. That celebration was only one of several for I celebrated my eightieth birthday in September and Eileen reached the age of seventy seven in October. Fifty years of marriage is always a bit of an achievement and when the fifty years have been happy then the achievement is really enjoyable. When we first met and married I don't think people thought that we would be together after fifty years for we met in the war and all omens were against lengthy and happy marriages. It does show, however, that if people are prepared to work together and show consideration for each other than there is a great deal to be gained and love can continue and mature. Our problems at this time were more to be connected with old age, for people do age physically and we are still human and forced to suffer the weaknesses of age and illness.

At Christmas time in 1997 we were presented with a video tape. The tape was a compilation of some old cine film that had been recorded during events at home and holidays some thirty years earlier. It was lovely to see on film our children enjoying holidays in Ireland and to remember how we felt at the time. Money was not as plentiful as it is today and whereas today we would go to a hotel with all mod cons, in the days of the films we were forced to stay in private dwellings because we could not afford the prices of hotels.

On my eightieth birthday I was presented with a computer and word processor and told to get on and start writing my book. I have done my best but my joints are not as flexible as they used to be. It is also not easy to recall the things which happened some fifty years ago. Funny incidents stick in the memory but sad things are difficult and names somehow seem extra difficult. There is a poem which talks about old faces look upon me and old forms go trooping past. Perhaps I remember the faces of my old friends and foes very clearly but sadly I forget their names.

1939—1945

When I was young and in my prime
With many thousands more
I put away my instruments
And went to fight a war

We were not keen for conflict
No warmongers were we
But we all loved this England
And hoped to keep her free

Some went across to Belgium
And at Dunkirk faced about
To halt the German war machine
And let our boys get out

And some of us saw Auschwitz
Some Dachau and the rest
And how the conquered peoples
By Hitler were oppressed

And when the conflict ended
There were no cheers for us
As round the Yankies and Cannucks
The civvies made a fuss

Now thirty long years later
The folk with whom we work
Just listen to our stories
Then sit right down and smirk

They think that we were idiots
To go to war to fight

And say that had the Germans won
We would have been alright

But they never saw oppression
And they never suffered pain
Nor have they known the hunger
Fed on cats & roots & grain

And they've never seen the children
Like cattle sold for gold
Nor maidens forced to whoring
Grown prematurely old

They've never known the sorrow
Which loss of friends can bring
Nor the haunted look in the young Poles eyes
When his dad has just been hung

K Latheron

LOW FORCE

Yesterday I sat beside the Tees
Absorbing warmth from sun and breeze
Watching the peat brown waters flow
Past Low Force to the bridge below
What balm, what peace was in the scene
With trees now bursting into green
Lambs gambolled round me in the grass
Scare noticing the people pass
I sat me down upon a rock
And of the sights around took stock
A lizard scuttled o'er my feet
And in the brown turf sought retreat
A dark skinned rabbit without care
Hopped round serenely in the air
Below the falls an angler stood
But while I gazed did little good
He used a fly rod, used it right
But never seemed to get a bite
Two ramblers with their fettered dog
Were seated resting on a log
We spoke and went our various ways
Remarking on the warmer days
Inside a pool, beside a rock
Some firefly frogs in chorus broke
Sunning themselves on stones they sat
All healthy looking, lean and fat
Lapwings wheeled swiftly overhead
And one cock pheasant swiftly sped
Into the blue unclouded sky
When noisily I passed close by

For hours I stayed, what joy was mine
On me the country acts like wine

No cinema and no dance hall
Can make me lose old natures call
Here I was born and here I will stay
And when I die would here decay

K Latheron

QUESTION

Have you ever asked the question why
People are born and people die
Why some are black or red or white
Why there is day and why there is night
Why people love and people hate
Why men and women need to mate
Are we on earth for one brief season
Plonked down here without due reason
I am no sage, no learned seer
To tell why we must sojourn here
I pose the question

K Latheron

LITTER LOUTS

There's litter here and litter there
A wide assortment everywhere
Each hedgerow and each grassy field
Will its share of litter yield
Here is a tyre still on its wheel
And here a pile of rusting steel
A ball of wire, a heap of tins
And plastic waste in plastic bins
Beer bottles found here by the score
And broken glass to cut and score
The beauty of the earth is scarred
By all the garbage we discard
And the wrappers from people passing by
Taken from their trash and piled up high
Their foolish actions make me shout
'Is everyone a litter lout!'

K Latheron

CHURCHES

Oft times as I pass on my way
Churches I see in sad decay
Some vandalized with broken stalls
Some even used as bingo halls
One church I know is now a club
Where temperance was once the hub
I often think of those who drove
To build an edifice of love
And often I am sick at heart
To see those buildings torn apart
Pleasure today is all the rage
In this a Godless sort of age
A Godless world with ne'er a thought
Of how our blessings have been bought
Not by the bookie nor the brewer
For nought they do will e'er endure
But by the sacrifices of these
Who sought injustice to appease
Who lived by youth and as they went
Prayers up to God their Father sent
In simple faith did they believe
Just as you give so you receive
And though we may have great powers
Their lives were richer far than ours

K Latheron

1973

Twas in the year of 73
That central government did decree
That in the spring of 74
Small councils into large should grow
The die was cast, the race begun
And greater power by some was won
Old masters left and new came in
Their empire building to begin
New posts were formed and advertised
New ways of working were devised
Small chiefs to major chiefs then grew
With small regard to what they knew
Some gained a lot and others less
Some an unqualified success
Geniuses came young and alive
With much to learn, not much to give
Stayed for a season in the race
Then sank from view without a trace
They got no blame when they had gone
For no one knew what they had done
The weeks rolled by, the big chiefs muttered
Desks with new rules and regs were cluttered
Large rises to the bosses went
The minions got one increment
The upper crust got greater power
The morale of the workers got lower
Those who had worked of hope bereft
Gave in their notices and left
Leaving behind a situation grave
With many chiefs and not a single brave

K Latheron

LIFE CHANGES SWIFTLY

Life changes swiftly as I older grow
I dream of all the scenes I used to know
And what enjoyment every memory yield
Back by the streams the valleys and the fields
When we were young we travelled every day
Out from the village in the woods to play
Trees we would climb, camps 'neath the bushes make
And by the bubbling stream our thirsts would slake
Turnips we'd eat, potatoes on the fire
We'd play at cowboys, fall flat in the mire
We were no angels, but devoid of guile
Each man our friend and greeted with a smile
The local farmer knew full well our childish pranks
And for his kindness we would show our thanks
By helping him at harvest time to glean
Pick his potatoes, keep his byres clean.
The village bobby was our special prey
We'd pit our wits against his day by day
Knowing full well that we must needs atone
For every foolish action we had done.
When we were caught, fair punishment was dealt
Over a five barred gate with leather belt
In spite of all, the copper was our friend
When we were punished that would be the end
Not all our time was taken up with fun
For every day some chores had to be done
Sticks were to chop, coals to be gathered in
Shopping to do, 'ere playtime could begin
These were the days for adults not so funny
For work was hard for very little money
Some boys had cash and some had scarcely any
And I was rich if I had got a penny
My parents, thank the Lord, were very good

And kept us well dressed with ample food
But holidays were rare and journeys short
And few indeed the toys that we were bought
Yet should you ask if I would now prefer
To be a boy today, without demur
I would reply that were it possible to live again
I'd like my life to be as it was then
These things it taught me, no amount of wealth
Can compensate for mother, love and health
My children with their many marvellous toys
Ne'er seem to feel the pleasure and the joys
Which I experienced as a growing child
Out in the woods with nature, running wild
Indeed more often do they sit and mope
Unable, so it seems, with life to cope
Now I am old and living in a town
Where noise and dirt and traffic get me down
I yearn once more to roam among the trees
And listen to the bird's song and the bees
To breathe once more the pure untainted air
To gaze upon the hills and flowers fair
To lie full length upon some mossy bank
And dream again of every childish prank
The scent of pine, the gurgling of the stream
Are constantly recurring in my dreams
If Heaven be on Earth and it be fair
I thank you Lord for I have sojourned there

K Latheron

SUNNISIDE

When pressures on me grow too great
When things I've loved I feel I hate
I take a short car trip and hide
Here on the hills at Sunniside
This is no place of beauty rare
No paradise beyond compare
And yet it is a place of peace
Where worried souls find sweet release
Here one can see the flowers grow
The lowing cattle homeward go
The birds, the bees, the butterfly
The trilling lark climbs to the sky
I've been here often in the spring
Watching the lambs, hearing birds sing
I've been here in the summer too
Gazing with rapture at the view
I've been here in the Winter snow
When cold and icy winds do blow
Yet in the cold or in the warm
I've ever felt its healing balm
This is my love, this my Home
And though I often times may roam
Yet in my breast I hope and yearn
That here at last I may return

K Latheron

WORK

Some people struggle day and night
To do things they think are right
Hoping that by their work and giving
They will achieve a decent living
But as they stretch to reach the prize
There comes the moment of demise
And all the gains by labour won
Are in a last breaths moment gone

But other people too there be
Who live on hope and charity
Ne'er seen at work, they think it great
To live upon the welfare state
They are no masters of work and grind
New ways of cheating folk they find
Settling back in greatest glee
Living on fools like you and me

K Latheron

THE SKY

I lift my eyes up to the hills
For there my treasure lies
Not in the rocks beneath my feet
But glory in the skies
There fierce winds do buffer me
Soft breezes round me blow
And there I find contentment
In the warm clear evenings glow
At morn I see the sun arise
At noon I feel the heat
At eventide its myriad colours
Play around my feet

SUNDAY

Tis Sunday Lord and wondrous fair
With peace and quiet everywhere
Here as I sit upon the hill
The grazing beasts are calm and still
There are few sounds to break the peace
The balmy air, natures release
From pent up fears and working blues
From rising costs and dismal news
Here in this rich enchanted spot
Such transient troubles are forgot
Soothed by the beauty and the calm
With God's bright sun to keep us warm
I peer about and I enjoy
The mast of Pontop against the sky
Soft eddying smoke clear to the view
And broken clouds which scurry through

K Latheron

K PILKINGTON

Down on your knees, the preacher said
And pray for one who has gone
Down on your knees and say a prayer
For poor Kay Pilkington

Kay P was not dynamite,
Dynamic he was not
In fact some folk term him
A kindly sort of clot

Yet he was so reliable
So friendly and so free
No other men could ever attain
Kay's simple loyalty

And so his working master
Used K P to the full
Knowing so well that in a fix
His full weight would pull

But being old and steady
He no preferment found
And year by year he slipped behind
The other workers round

And year by year Kay Pilkington
Grew more forlorn and sad
And slowly from him oozed the faith
That he in others had

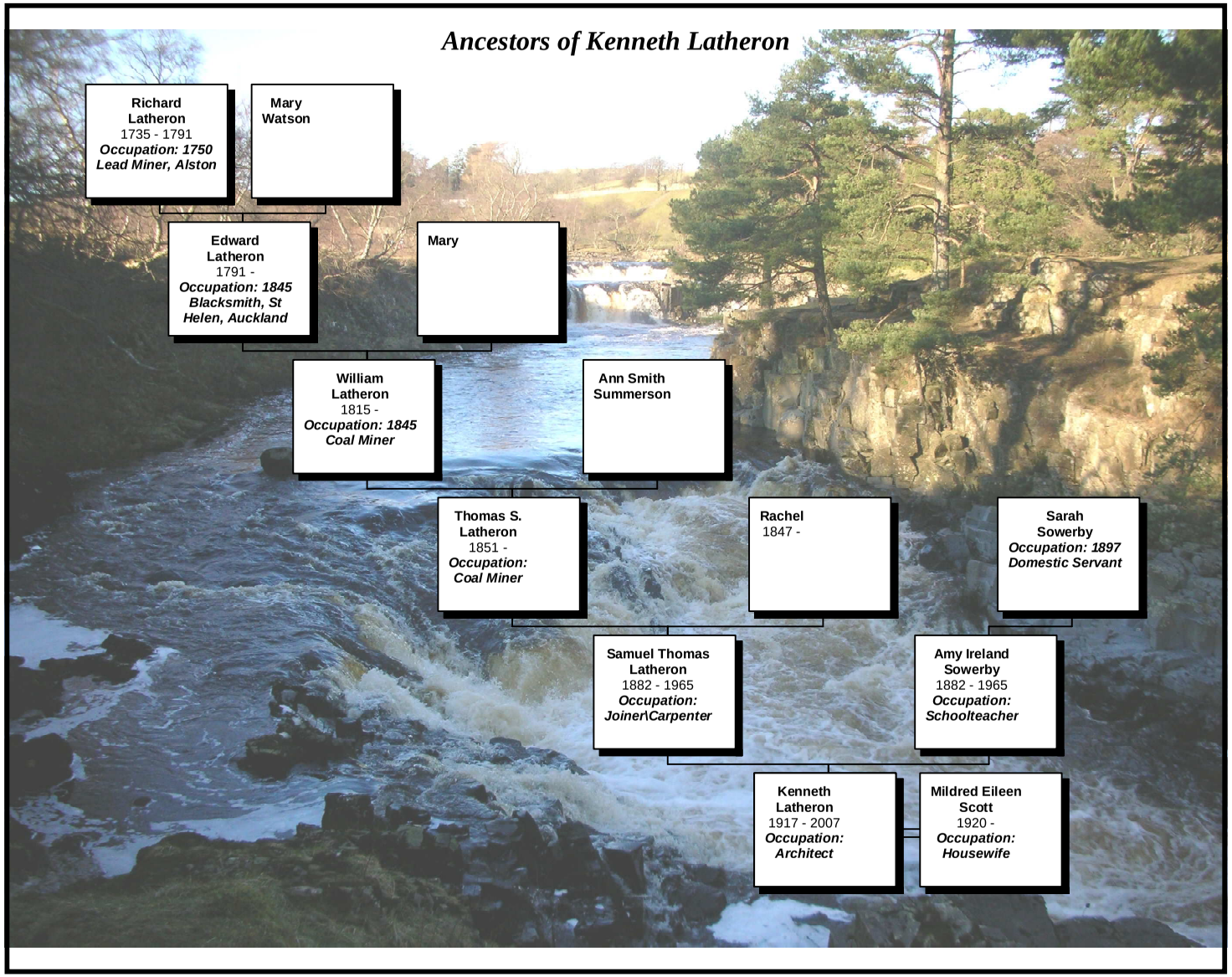
As he sat and watched the antics
Of those with whom he worked
It seemed to him that greatest luck
Came to the man who shirked

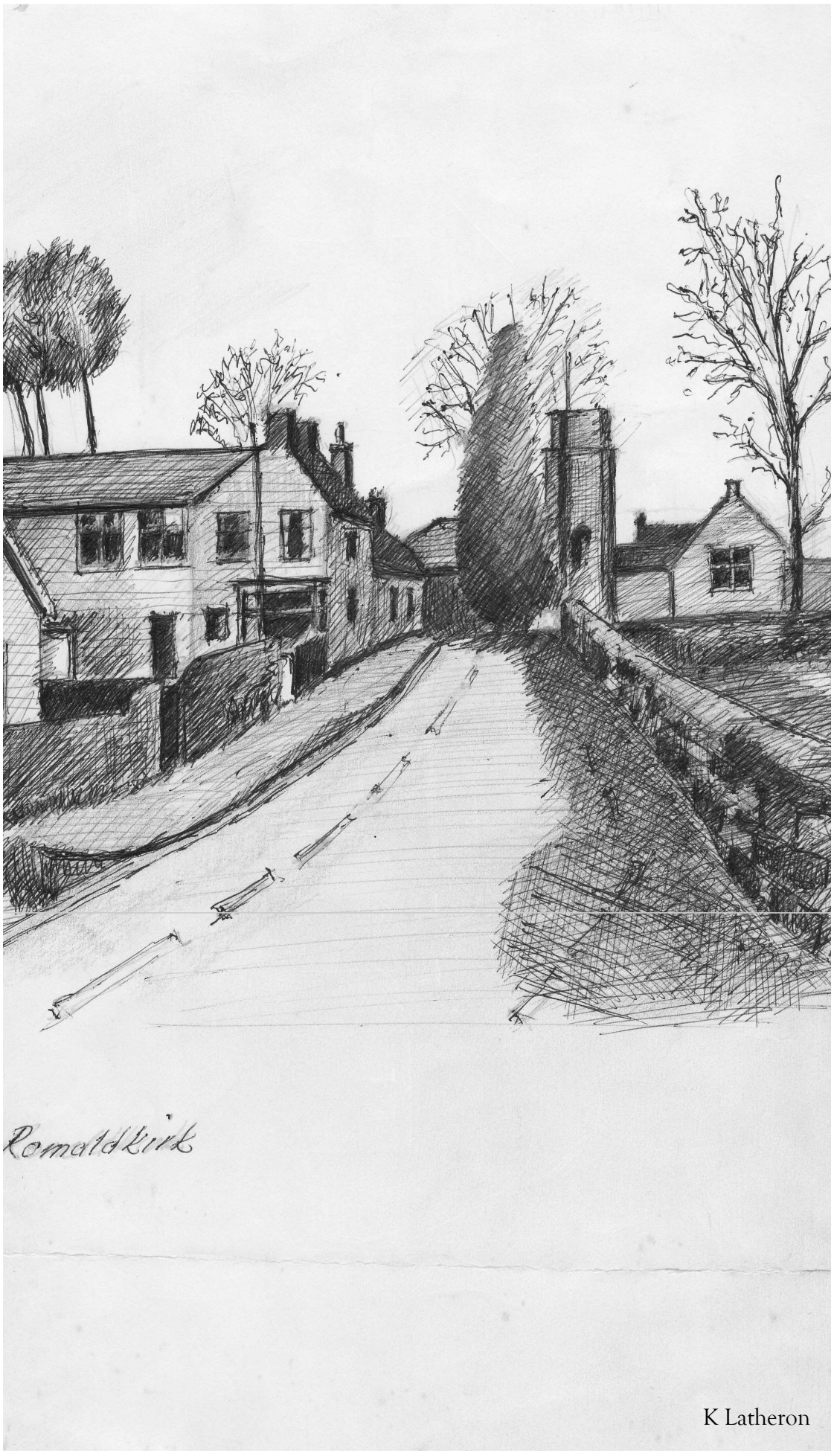
At times he was so miserable
He laid right down and cried
He felt that being loyal
He now was crucified

And his sorrow turned to anger
And he cried with all his might
Why is it always Pilkington
Who is shat on from a height

K Latheron

Ancestors of Kenneth Latheron





K Latheron