

Kurt Kretschmann

AND YOU ARE STILL ALIVE? A GERMAN PACIFIST REMEMBERS 1914-1949

Childhood and Apprenticeship, 1914-1933

I was born in Berlin in 1914. Even then I did not care for that city of four million residents. After only three days my family moved to Tangermünde, a town on the Elbe river, often likened to Rothenburg, in the province of Brandenburg. My mother's parents had a tiny house there. Typically, one has but scant memories of one's first years. I still distinctly remember a few events, and even they touched on politics.

During World War I, French prisoners of war were marched by our house every morning. It was a fine spectacle: they wore uniforms with red pants and capes, even as they were taken to labor. Everybody cursed the French—arch enemies of the Germans—including my parents. “It's they who ruined us,” people on the street could be heard saying. I watched these disgraced soldiers regularly from the window, and their presence hastened me to perform a heroic deed for Germany. Once, I leaned wide out of the window and spit onto the soldiers. Abruptly, the entire column stood still, then made a murderous clamor and threatened me. The incident scared me mightily and I never again did such a thing.

Three, perhaps four years later, I had the interesting experience of visiting my father in prison. There were people who used to meet regularly in my parents' apartment. What they discussed I do not know; I was still a small lad and was sent off to bed when they arrived. Later, I had the occasion to see them again, this time in prison. I was not allowed to speak with my father; all the same my mother lifted me up to a peep hole, and there I saw him and his friends—the very same people who had held long discussions in our living room—in the cell. They were communists, people who had tried to start a revolution in Tangermünde. Those were times of unrest in Germany, punctuated by numerous strikes and even some uprisings. As a result, my father and his friends resolved to arm themselves. In full daylight, they walked up to the police headquarters and disarmed the police. Once they had a few guns, they crossed the town square to city hall. There, they ousted the mayor and his

underlings and assumed authority over the town and county. They were but a handful of men, my father among them, and they all returned home, fetched handcarts, and walked down to the river port with its large warehouse, some 200 yards off.

People in the town were starving, and rumor had it that the warehouse was fully stocked. The revolutionaries took it upon themselves to storm the building. The warehouse owner was widely hated, and he was tied to the bag-lifting rope and pulled up and down a few times until the crowd's rage cooled. Still, the man survived. But the warehouse was emptied—everyone filled their handcarts. Thousands of cans of American corned beef were looted, but then had to be hidden. Most people buried their cans in backyards, to be dug up as needed. One could live on a single can for two weeks. Whenever someone asked, "Got some cans, too?" his neighbor would answer, "No, I for one did not get myself a thing." In reality, hundreds of people had stolen cans. Out of the blue, a rumor surfaced that inside a can a worker had found a Negro's ear with a ring in it. From that instant, nobody wanted to eat the meat any longer. "If you would like some," neighbors offered, "I have a few to spare . . ."

Shortly, thousands of soldiers arrived in Tangermünde, organized by Noske. Our handful of men did not put up a fight; they were arrested and incarcerated in Tangermünde Castle. There I could look at them through the peephole. A few weeks later they were let go. Nobody had been harmed in the spectacle. Our men had figured that once they got things rolling other cities would follow—that momentum would build and build until in the end Berlin would be overthrown. But that did not work out.

We were on friendly terms with a worker who owned the two volumes by Ernst Friedrich, *War on War*. The books were banned at the time, but our friend let me look at them. In them I saw what war was really like. I was eleven years old at the time. At home we had only two books, the Bible, and a book with wonderful illustrations of the 1870/71 war against France which Germany had won. All the illustrations showed the French soldiers on the run, and the Germans as victorious. *Others were the losers*. Once I saw these volumes—with some 250 photos and legends in three languages: German, French and English—I was so moved that from then on I opposed all war. I have felt the same ever since.

When I was eleven years old, my parents divorced and I returned to Berlin to live with my grandparents. My grandparents treated me well. When I was

fourteen I became an apprentice. My father was a tailor in my grandfather's shop; he gave me ten cents and told me, "Buy the morning news and look for an ad. You should be strong enough to hold a sewing needle." No wonder I was delicate—born in 1914, I only knew war food. I found an ad: "Seeking a tailor's apprentice." I went to the shop and met the master. Apprentices were running about and he employed another learned tailor. The master asked, "So, you want to learn in my shop?" "Yes, there was this ad in the paper." "Sure thing," he said. "But do you know the eighth commandment?" I was admittedly not strong in the subject, but by chance I knew that very commandment and babbled it. To that he answered, "You can have the job. Some four, five fellows came to see me. All wanted to learn in my shop. None knew the eighth commandment. But you, I will take you into my shop." With that I had an apprenticeship. I had to be at work by 7:30 in the morning. Each day, the master sat on the table, legs crossed, and read the Bible to us. Then work started. He told me, "For my letting you learn with me, your parents owe me three dollars a week. You also ought to bring your own lunch." This somewhat odd character allowed no lunch break for employees; apprentices ate on the side. Three days into the job my father asked, "How are things over there? When do you have lunch break?" I answered, "We have no lunch break. We eat our sandwiches on the side." "Why, that's a fine shop," he said. "At once, I will pay a visit there."

Afterward, he took me out of the shop and gave me another dime. I bought another newspaper, *Die Morgenpost*, where I found an ad which said: "Seeking an apprentice for cutting-out." This was not customary. As a rule, one first became a tailor and then took classes to advance into cutting-out. I went anyway. It was a small Jewish shop: Lewy & Son. When I told the owner that my parents were divorced, he took me in. He even paid me twenty-five Deutsch Marks per month, in the second year thirty-five Deutsch Marks, and forty-five Deutsch Marks thereafter. That, of course, was vital to my family. I trained in the shop for three years. Around the corner was the Parochialstrasse with Ernst Friedrich's *War on War* museum. I often looked from outside at the place. Herr Friedrich had filled a few helmets with soil, planted geraniums in them and suspended them from the house. He had a large shop window with a fairly spacious room behind it; even so, the house itself was actually quite small, tiny really. Inside Herr Friedrich kept anti-war documents he had collected from all over the world. One Sunday I went inside, and with nobody else about, Herr Friedrich gave me the tour. For me

it was special to get to know the man who had published *War on War*. I was deeply impressed by his endeavors. Herr Friedrich, for example, pointed out pictures in one book, where on one page titled "For a German Victory!" a German priest blessed the weapons of German troops. On the page opposite, a French priest blessed French weapons for victory. When I saw this I said to myself, "If the church does such things, I will get out of the church." I went to the diocese, where the official told me, "Now see, if you cannot pay the church tax, we will exempt you. You do not need to part from the church because of that." I answered, "I can afford to pay, but I've learned that the churches of both sides blessed war weapons. I cannot accept such things." He did not say anything else, and I was out.

Before and During the War, 1933-1945

In those years, on my way to work I passed Bülowplatz and the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus, seat of the German Communist Party. Editions of "The Red Flag" were on display there so one could read the paper without actually having to buy it. I made it a habit to be there a few minutes early and to read. I also often joined rallies on Bülowplatz and took part in many demonstrations. I was the only one from the shop who marched in May Day parades. Anyway, we were not paid on the first of May. Things continued that way until 1933. I worked in the shop's cutting room for two more years, at a wage of twenty-five Deutsch Marks per week. That was top pay. The seamstresses fetched twelve, maybe fourteen Deutsch Marks per week on special occasions. With six million people unemployed, worker exploitation was rampant.

Soon, the Nazis were in power. In April 1933, well before the first of May, SA men came to the shop and said, "Men's clothes? We have no use for those. We need uniforms. Reorganize the shop. Right now." The boss said, "But of course. I will do so." What else could he have said? He had no choice. The SA was true to its name: its detachments were ready to strike, and had real practice. Consequently, the shop was reorganized. All the while I sat wearing a badge made by Ernst Friedrich: two fists holding a broken gun. I wore it on my lapel, in opposition to war. Suddenly, I was to cut out uniforms. It came as such a shock, and I was speechless; I did not know what to do. Promptly the next day, fabrics were delivered along with a sample uniform; the transition was complete. My boss instructed me, "Put on the uniform, please. You have the right build. Now we are making uniforms."

The shop had thirty employees; it was a small shop. All at once I was in a quandary: What should I do? I had to make up my mind, now, one way or the other. Once I got ahold of myself, with the boss still looking on and trying to pass me the uniform, I said, "I will not touch the stuff and I will not put on the uniform. I quit." To that the boss replied, "Are you mad? In four weeks you will be on your knees, begging me to take you back. Six million people are out of a job!" "I will say good-bye to my colleagues," I answered, and with that I was out.

Admittedly, I had in all privacy made plans to quit the shop for some time, if only later that fall. I had saved 300 Deutsch Marks, and had set a target of 500, but did not get there. My friend Herbert Marquardt had inherited a small hut with twenty beehives in Bernau, by Eberswalde, from his uncle. I jumped at the opportunity to join him and left the big city for a hut in the woods. We lived like cave men. I should add that I had been a strict vegetarian from the age of seventeen, and for years had explored ways to get by on three or three and a half Deutsch Marks per week. My friend Herbert was vegetarian as well. We went mushroom hunting and planted some lettuce. For two years we lived in peace; Hitler was busy with the unemployed and with war preparations. In those years a third friend, Josef Novak, joined us. He was a fervent Buddhist. If somebody was ill, Josef would pick medicinal herbs and offer them as a remedy. He accepted no money—people gave him bread or a bag of potatoes for his work. He had no belongings. When a gnat bit him, he tried to set the gnat free. He tried to safeguard all life like Buddha did. I was impressed by this. We stayed in the woods and took remote paths so villagers would not spot us. All the same, Josef one day met a village official who said, "Heil Hitler!" My Josef said, "Good morning." The official looked him over, "Where do you stand on Adolf Hitler?" My Josef, who was totally oblivious to politics and who took all his cues from Buddhism, replied, "Where I stand on Hitler? Why, I am neutral." "Aha, neutral, aha. Alright," the official said. "Heil Hitler," Josef said, "See you later." That was enough. Josef received a postcard: "You are to report at 6:00 a.m. to the railroad station in Biesenthal." We were shocked, of course—it was a bad deal. What should we do? We went along with Josef, but before we reached Biesenthal he instructed, "Stay behind." He was ten, fifteen years older than the two of us. "I have a strange hunch. Stay behind." In our naïvete, we would have gone to the railroad station with Josef. We had no idea what was about to happen. With that, Josef vanished.

Mayors simply sent for a certain number of people they personally disliked and these people vanished. About five months later we received a postcard from Buchenwald. The Nazis called it a camp for retraining, for education, a teaching camp—they came up with wonderful terms for these atrocities. Josef was in the quarry at first; later he mended socks for the other inmates, ten hours from dawn to dusk, for a year, and it saved his life. The camp issued special postcards with an attachment folded on. As long as he behaved, Josef got such a card every two months. The recipient could tear off the attachment, write a reply, and it would be returned to the camp. But who writes under such circumstances? We had many people visit from Berlin who were of diverse persuasions. After Josef vanished, every time the gate opened and somebody came to see us, we were frightened, “Now they’re coming for us!” But the Nazis did not care. They probably reckoned, “Those two kids will go to hell when we send them to the front. There they will be destroyed, and that will be the end of them.”

Day in and day out, we pondered over whether to write to Josef. My friend said, “No, I will not write.” Another friend said, “No, thank you. KZ papers? Next thing we know they’ll get us as well!” Eventually, I resolved to write because I thought, “Josef has no family; he is alone in this world. If we do not write to him he will be broken—it will be his end.” So I wrote that it was difficult to understand that he of all people was in Buchenwald—he who had always helped others. His cards all bore the same message: he was doing well. It said always the same; things were swell. So I responded in similar terms, and repeated the same every two months. Two years and some months later, Josef returned. One day in 1938, out of the blue, he stood in the door. I was alone; my friend Herbert was already with the army—and here my Josef was back! We walked through the prairie, through a large patch of bell-heathers. I walked him right to the center and said, “Now Josef, we’ve heard this and we’ve heard that. How was it in the concentration camp?” To this he said, “If you want to be my friend, you must never ask about that. I signed a statement that I was treated well. You know that I have to report once a week to the sheriff in Ladeburg. To make it short, the subject simply does not exist.” Later, when I was in Zehden, I tried the same question on someone else, a communist who also was let go in 1938. By then the Nazis had discharged a certain contingent knowing that with the coming of war they needed space. The communist reiterated Joseph’s answer: “The subject does not exist.” So

frightened were people who had gone through this; they knew very well that talking about it meant their end.

At this point I have to go back a bit.

Hitler was as early as 1935 building up the military. My friend and I were born in 1914 and were among the first to be drafted. I got my draft letter but had seven days to present myself. I did not eat any food all week, something I did anyway once a year. I drank only water. I went to be mustered in that condition, fretting of course. The doctor there had us undress and listened a bit to our hearts and lungs and graded us. He asked for ten knee bends. During the knee bends I collapsed: the exertion and fasting had weakened me. To that the doctor said, "Deferred for one year." "Aha," I thought to myself, "next year I will fast even longer." The year passed and I was mustered once more. Once again, I fasted. Only this time around the doctor simply did not care. We stepped forward, and the doctor announced, "Fit to serve, infantry or machine gun." There was no concern whatsoever whether or not men were fit. Their condition would declare itself soon enough. And now I was in the army as well. Hitler was clever about the conscription, and said initially, "One year." So everybody thought, "Oh well, just the one year; no big deal." Eight days before the end of that year, Hitler gave an important speech: "Germany must be defended. It must be two years." Thus, everyone stayed put for a second year.

I was dispatched to Landsberg/Warthe. Before leaving I submitted three petitions. They were based on my owning a patch of garden and I presented the matter as if the food supply of the German people would suffer if I could not tend to the patch. The sheriff came, clapped his hands, and laughed his head off. That did not get me anywhere. The army had already been informed that I had tried to dodge the draft. I reported to the unit in Landsberg on a foul day—an awful storm raged that evening. The officers greeted me: "Aha, Kretschmann, glad you made it. We are going to make a fine soldier out of you." Once all the men had gathered, we went downstairs to eat. That again was one of the Army's tricks. The Nazis served great food for the first eight days—big chunks of meat with every meal. Everyone had to write home during these first days. The sergeant stood by while everyone wrote, "Terrific food. Everything is wonderful." Afterwards the portions slackened a bit, but men nevertheless always had enough to eat. The company, eighty to ninety men strong, ate in military style: a sergeant in a helmet stood by the kitchen, and everyone got their helping. All sat down, including me, to a plate bearing

a big chunk of meat. I was unsure of what to do next. The comrades to my left and to my right began to take notice: "Why don't you eat?" They gobbled down their food—they loved it. I waited a bit before I took my plate and went back to see the sergeant. "I am a vegetarian, out of ethical considerations. I do not eat meat." He looked at me as if I were from the moon—this response was totally beyond him. I went back upstairs without eating.

I served there for five months and consequently ate no lunch the entire time. I ate occasional plain potatoes and the like, but no dishes with meat, not even gravy. It took a great deal of stamina. Three days into my protest, I was taken to the company doctor. Throughout the rest of the war, I never again met such a fine doctor. He was an obstetrician, a very reasonable doctor. He said, "I hear you've been refusing the food. Are you a vegetarian?" "Yes." "I will let you have four weeks. You have to adjust to the conditions here. The service is tough. You cannot make it without the food. It will not work. Please get used to it, gently." His reasoning made sense. I said, "I appreciate that you put this to me in such terms. But I cannot change." "They suspect you are trying to make yourself unfit for service," he answered. "That is punishable by imprisonment. Weigh that carefully." Even this he said in a restrained voice, without shouting or yelling. "I doubt I can change," I said.

Following this discussion, the Army decided they had had it with me. The company was made to line up, and a sergeant paraded in front of us. He stopped in front of me and said, "In three days you'll gobble food from my paws." I answered him loudly so the entire company could hear: "Only dogs gobble food from paws, not German men!" He was furious. It was a technique I often tried, turning their Nazi catch-phrases back on them.

The next day we were called upstairs to receive our uniforms. When it was my turn, the sergeant directed, "Wait. Sit down until I call you." I sat down while he distributed used uniforms to the other soldiers—used clothing, used boots, everything returned from the front. The package included one uniform for daily duty and one to wear out, but that one was hardly in better shape. Once all the men had been given their stuff, the sergeant called on me. "Come over here," he said, and gave me a shining new uniform, assembled from the finest pieces, top to bottom. He and the captain had planned it that way, to sway me into better service. When I returned to the barracks, the other soldiers were astounded: "Hey man, look at that hat! And those boots! Everything is in terrific shape." "If you like them," I said, "we can swap. They mean nothing to me." The other soldiers traded pieces with me and I

ended up with the most fantastic rags. A few days later I ran into the sergeant. "What did they do to you?" he inquired. "The comrades envied my uniform, so I let them have it in exchange for theirs. This is good enough for me."

Admitting the exchange did not help my situation. I was forced into hard labor and harassed every imaginable way. I was even commanded to pull a loaded ninety pound metal sled uphill and down while wearing a gas mask. I was under a sergeant nicknamed Nero; when he screamed, bubbles came from his mouth. Calmly, I would tell him, "Sergeant, Sir, I can hear everything. There's no need for you to shout." I always remained in control. This made the Sergeant furious. He was widely feared. Yet evenings he would emerge from his den saying, "Sunday I went to town, in Landsberg" and boast about his escapades with the ladies. I regularly retreated to my locker and took notes: "On the 17th . . . the Sergeant . . . spoke of having accomplished such and such deeds"

Before I was drafted, I had traveled throughout Europe, all the way into Italy. In Germany alone I walked about ten thousand kilometers. As late as in May 1939, the very year the war began, I paid fifty pfennigs for the train from Berlin to Nauen. From there I took off to the south, walking the five thousand kilometers to Sicily. I planned to hike down Italy on one side and return on the other. Trips like this introduced me to the marvels of nature, to the mountainous regions of central Europe, and to the beautiful alpine mountain ranges. All the while, I entertained the idea that I'd leave Germany. I had no illusions: Hitler was making military preparations day and night. War was certain. I regularly told my friends, "It will take him ten years. He won't be ready before then." But Hitler got it done in six. I arrived in the Kaiserwald and war broke out. That was in 1939.

As early as 1936, before I was sent to Landsberg, I had undertaken many trips and seen a great deal. Despite my exhausting daily punishments in the Army, I spent the evenings telling my roommates—the seven men with whom I shared the room—about my travel experiences. In doing so I tried to imbue them with a feeling of resistance. Five months into my storytelling, a lieutenant called me from my room to follow him. "A general is on his way to interrogate you," he told me, as we made our way to a central office. We arrived to a dozen officers sitting in the room. In the middle was a little table, and I was made to sit down. Suddenly the door opened and the general swept

in. They took his huge cape—I had never seen such an apparel—and he took his seat across from me. He was an elderly gentleman, a general with red stripes. He addressed the officers: “Well, now, here we have this special case, and you are to observe how this is handled. Maybe this will guide you one day.” Then he turned to me and in a friendly way said, “We have a few issues to clarify. How about we start by having you talk about yourself? Just talk about your life.” I began by saying that I came from the north of Berlin, Gesundbrunnen, and described the places I had lived in recent years. I told how I spent the first five hundred marks that I had earned to buy books—used books, books of world literature and philosophy. The general listened to my story, and then said, “Tell me something about Nietzsche.” I told him what I knew about Nietzsche . . . then Schopenhauer . . . Suddenly he asked, “Do you know Karl Marx?” “Yeah, Marx has written great works,” I answered. “I don’t know them directly, but I have an inkling of what he is after.” “And what is he after?” “He wants to reduce to a reasonable degree the sharp discrepancies between rich millionaires and the poor who may lack even shelter,” I answered. “Well, well” said the general. I had to get him on my side, to somehow defuse the tension in the room. “Well, and how does Marx view religion?” the general finally asked. I said something to the effect that Marx opposes religion. “Yes, you are right there.” With that I had him. Then he asked—and I knew this all along, that they wanted to get me for this—“Yet you were member of the communist party?” “No,” I said, and went on to explain: my father had not let me join the party. He had told me, “When you turn twenty-one, you are independent. Then you can do it, but not before.” I fought with him over it at the time, but his decision saved my life, for the very reason that I was now able to tell the general no, I was not a communist. The session went on for an hour before the general said, “Go out, into the hallway, and we will call you.” I knew that my life depended on their deliberation, and performed breathing exercises in the hallway. “Be calm, calm, calm,” I told myself, “be careful what you say.” Ten, perhaps fifteen minutes later, they called me back in. “You will still be taken to a psychiatrist in Tempelhof,” the general said. “He will render an opinion. But as for this interrogation, you are excused.”

We regularly had to march with heavy machine guns. Seven men would hold a ninety-pound gun, and two others carried two boxes of ammunition each; seven more held another gun, two more the ammunition, and so on, alternat-

ing. The last man did not carry anything until ordered to “switch over.” With that, the last man took the lead, and marching resumed. One day, on the way back, a new order was given: “Switch over. Kretschman carries the rest of the way.” We still had a steep climb up to the barracks ahead of us. I stopped the sled, and walked to the front. Three sergeants came after me, and I marched with the ninety-pound gun plus all the ammunition, which weighed another hundred pounds. I turned at one point and told them, “I am not yet about to collapse.” They shook their fists at me and I continued. We finally arrived at the barracks, where the sergeants ordered, “Stop! Equipment down!” I stood still with my load. “Why, is that all?” I asked. They ripped the load from me and blood shot from my shoulders. The burden had been so heavy that in its absence I felt like I was going to levitate.

In some ways, the sergeants respected me, but of course they would not admit it. As early as my first week there, we were to jog three kilometers, about eight times around the barracks. I was fit from running long distances every morning, and so I ran one lap with all the troops and then passed them by, and carried on ahead. In the final lap, two soldiers came up from behind and outran me. They were sneaked in from behind and, because they were fresh, outran me and sprinted to finish first. I raced them and beat them by three or four yards. Right away a few officers approached me. “You ought to compete at the Regiment games,” they said. “I don’t run for records,” I answered. “I just run for the fun of it.” They shook their heads, disappointed that they couldn’t bait me for their cause. When it came to sport, nobody in the barracks outdid me. The Nazis respected men with athletic ability, and the sergeants talked about me among themselves: “This one doesn’t eat lunch, but it hasn’t gotten him down so far. On top of that, he excels in sports. He clears the wooden horse easily.” That was something in my favor, after all.

Five months later I was taken to a psychiatrist in Berlin. There was a fellow with hydrocephalus in our company—he couldn’t keep things straight on the machine gun. He was obviously ailing. So a sergeant took the two of us to Tempelhof, to visit the psychiatrist. First, the doctor led the fellow with the hydrocephalus to a large map and said, “Why don’t you point to Leipzig and Dresden.” The fellow looked and looked and did not find them. “Point to Berlin.” He looked and could not locate it. *Fit for duty in the horse stable*, the doctor wrote. I couldn’t help myself: “Captain, Sir, are you going to ask me where Berlin and Dresden are?” I asked. “No,” he said, “follow me.” He took me to an adjacent room, and instructed me to take a seat. He asked me

a handful of trivial questions, to which I gave trivial answers. Finally, he became frustrated: "Now, this will get us nowhere. Tell the truth! You don't want to be a soldier?" "Captain, Sir," I answered, "I just want my spade back." "Why," he asked, "do you want a spade? What are you talking about?" "I have a garden," I said. "I want to keep gardening. I like to reflect on nature, on the principles that govern the earth." This proposition was new to him, and it compelled him to write a ten-line medical opinion. Then he called for the sergeant, and we returned to Landsberg.

It so happened that four weeks earlier I had been assigned to work for the company doctor. I swept the examining rooms, weighed and measured the soldiers, passed out tea, and performed other simple tasks. The morning when I returned, the medical opinion was open on the doctor's desk. The doctor liked me and had specifically left it there. I read through the opinion, scanning the psychiatrist's comments, and the final sentence caught my attention: "Private Kurt Kretschmann must be considered a threat to company morale." The company doctor came along shortly, took the report, and locked it in the safe. He did not talk to me about the evaluation, but he clearly had meant for me to read it.

Soon thereafter I was dismissed. I had just enough time to write to my grandmother and ask her to send my hiking outfit with the Bavarian suspenders. On those suspenders I had attached tiny flags representing the countries I had hiked through. The day I left the company, the sun was shining bright. I walked out of the barracks and down the long staircase to the railroad station. I looked back several times, disbelieving that I had really been let go. I reached the platform still fearing that at any minute someone would come down from the barracks and pull me back. But the train pulled in and I boarded it, a free man at last.

Later, I had the opportunity to read the following entry in my conscription papers: *Discharged as sole provider of a large family*. It was the only situation that guaranteed discharge, but I had not so much as a girlfriend! They really kicked me out because I had done "harm" to the minds and morale of my fellow soldiers, and I reckoned it wouldn't be long before I was arrested and placed in a camp for my resistance. But at that time, in the spring of 1937, war was still two years away. I undertook several long journeys, wondering ceaselessly how I could escape Germany. But as the son of workers, without foreign language skills, connections abroad, or much money, my prospects were slim. I did not succeed in getting away.

In 1940 I was living east of the Oder River, in Zehden, helping a friend build a new settlement. There, I was mustered once again. It was a comical setting: the county supervisor and all the local dignitaries sat around tables, watching 200 nude young men parade in front of them. The officials were poking fun at the kids while deciding on their assignments. The war was churning by then, and everyone was jubilant. Germany was occupying several countries and was set on conquering the world. When my turn came, I presented myself to the mustering committee and told them that I was vegetarian and that I couldn't shoot at people. At first they took it as joke. Then they took me aside. "Where have you been? Haven't you heard that we took all these countries by surprise—we took Belgium in a fortnight. Why are you talking all this nonsense?" But they did me no harm, and let me go for a short time.

I was eventually summoned to work underground in the ammunition factory at Hohensaaten. I wrote to the mayor and the county prefect, "I can work only in the service of life, not of death." Following this, I was instructed to report to the airport at Königsberg (Neumark), on the other side of the Oder River. I arrived on a rainy day in October, in summer clothes, and presented myself at the office. I asked the warden in charge about work clothes—I had noticed that all the other men were working in capes and rubber boots. The warden dismissed me unceremoniously: "We've been given orders to destroy you through labor. No work clothes for you." I stayed in a barrack with some twenty other men, among a cluster of about fifty other barracks. Subsequently, I learned that all my fellow workers were volunteers from jails and penitentiaries. We were to build a road at the airport. The warden regularly assigned me to the toughest jobs, which included filling lorries where the ground was loamy, full of mud and muck and otherwise difficult to dig into. I was made to work in icy temperatures wearing sandals and without a rain coat. I was fit but regularly performed worse than the other men. The warden barked at me all the time. There was a fellow in my barrack who while out poaching had shot the forest ranger. This man was I guess twenty years my elder, and I was by his side when we marched to work and back. He was an irascible fellow. At wake-up call, he often roared, "Off we go, mad dogs!" At his shout, we all rushed out to work. He took a liking to me, and as a result protected me. All the men were scared of him, except me—I was in his good book. He showed me how to weave baskets, and eventually I crafted a small pannier. He would get very edgy whenever the warden barked at me or gave me a hard time. While digging up the ground,

we often came upon large boulders. My buddy had a twenty pound sledge hammer and would walk a few times around each boulder and break them to pieces. He was strong like a bear. One day, when the warden (who incidentally himself was placed in the camp for disciplinary action) gave me a hard time, my buddy got so mad that the blood shot to his face. He took the sledgehammer, swung it at the warden and yelled, "I'll beat your brains out if you don't let go of the kid!" How that warden ran! That's how my buddy took care of me.

One day, six months later, I was given orders to report to the administration at once. I walked into the office without a clue about why I had been summoned. An official with a typewriter sat by the desk. "Kretschmann!" I reported. "You are accused of preparing a riot in the camp," he shot back. I laughed out loud; clearly they were doing this to intimidate me. "How can that be?" I asked. "That's impossible." "Come, sit over here," he demanded, and brought out a voluminous file. "Gestapo," he informed me. "Now, let's see," he said, "do you know . . ." and he gave a name, "this man?" "No," I answered. "You do not know him?" "No." "Well, I'll give you a minute," he said, "Think hard." I thought hard. I didn't recognize the name. I said, "No, I do not know the man." "You do not know him? Well, why don't we open your file." He took out a piece of paper. "Come now—here is a letter you wrote to that man. Title: *What is freedom?*" "Ah," I said, "yes, now I do remember. I had no intention to lie to you. I have walked ten thousands kilometers in Germany, and met so many people. This is a young man who studied to become a Catholic priest. But I have had no news from him for two years. I had completely forgotten his name." Of course that was a disastrous lapse, but I truly did not intend to lie to the officer. He interrogated me further. He even showed me information from my file: "Look, here's what we have on you. Admittedly, some stuff in it is nonsense," he said. "Like people reporting that you eat grass and that kind of stuff." He took notes throughout the session, but I had no clue what he put down. At the conclusion he said, "Well, your measure is full. I should put you into a concentration camp, and I guess you know what that means—you're as good as a dead man! I will let you off one more time. But the smallest thing and you're finished. Heil Hitler!" and he was off. I returned to the barracks. A few days later I received orders to report to the army at Stahnsdorf—that was his idea of letting me off.

I stayed about six weeks at Stahnsdorf and again had all kinds of problems. The worst was an interrogation by both the captain and the Obersturmbannführer of the SS. Of course, they all had access to my file, and asked me questions like, "How dare you act the way you do? What do you want? Are you against our Führer?" and so on. And I could only answer, knowing that it might bring my death, "I have studied the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi regarding nonviolence, and I feel that all men should aim to live by his ideals, the military included." They pondered my reply, and the Obersturmbannführer asked, "You know what happens if we pass this information on?" "Yes," I answered. A few days later, they dispatched me to Krossen.

When I reported to the first sergeant at Krossen, he told me, "I will get you where you belong—on the gallows, that is. You should be hanged. You are a traitor, a scoundrel!" Thus, I was immediately well received. Also, I was to be vaccinated like all the troops for Russia. At the time I opposed vaccination, and I knew that a World War I general had lost his son through a vaccination. The general was president of the German association against vaccination. I was not a member but knew of its existence. For the vaccinations, we were taken to another barracks. When it was my turn, I said to the doctor, "I refuse the vaccination. I am opposed to vaccination." The doctor—his nickname was Knochenkarl (Charles the Bones)—was feared. He said, "You refuse the vaccination?" Three men jumped upon me and held me. He took the syringe and prepared to vaccinate me. I said, "Please punish me!" He stopped. Once again I was put under arrest. I had to spend a few days there anyway, so I drafted a letter to Herr Conti, the secretary of public health. In the letter I stated, "If members of the German Army do not drink, smoke and if they refrain from sexual exploits, there is no need for vaccination. That is my opinion and accordingly I refuse the vaccination." Everyone waited for the captain's response. He commented, "Well now, I am curious how that will fly." Two weeks later, I was ordered again to be vaccinated. The sergeant had to watch over me closely, and the first sergeant told him, "If he tries to escape, you shoot right away. Load your gun." The doctor was already waiting. Again three men rushed towards me. They were to hold me down. I said, "I still refuse the vaccination!" He said, "The secretary of health has sent orders to vaccinate you." I said, "May I read the letter?" The letter was on the doctor's desk. Conti had written that I posed a risk for the troops, that I could spread an epidemic: "In the case of Kretschmann, you must use force." The men came to me, and the doctor readied his syringe. I said, "You don't

need to hold me down. You can vaccinate me like anybody. I am not scared.” They held me down all the same, and the doctor stuck me with a vengeance.

In the winter of 1941-42, a comrade and I were dispatched to Russia. We were taken to East Prussia first, where it was already frigid. In Russia, temperatures were forty to forty-five degrees below freezing. Winter clothes were being collected in Germany, and we were taken to the gathering heap. Officers had the first pick, taking furs and the like; next came the senior sergeants, the sergeants and so forth—we privates were last. The best stuff had been taken, yet we were the ones who would be out in the mud. My comrade and I found barely a sweater each. We were loaded onto a train for a trip of three days and nights into Russia, in a freight car in cruel cold. As we pulled into the train station, shells were detonating all around us. The Russian artillery was notoriously good and greeted us promptly. We escaped from the rail road depot and over to the runway. Our company had sleds and horses—the horses had been stolen in Poland. We were instructed to transport grenades to the front line. First, three divisions were sent out. We were to cut a corridor through enemy lines and link up to units that were surrounded by the Russians at Demjansk. Up to that point, it had been Hitler who had excelled in trapping large contingents and taking millions of prisoners. But at this site, the Russians had trapped a hundred thousand German troops who were out in the cold without heat or food. We slept in the snow, dug holes in which to cower, and then attacked. After three days we had cut an eight kilometer long corridor which was some five kilometers wide. Now I was inside the trap. Our path was lined by crosses made from birch wood—a ghastly number of men had been killed in action. Of our three divisions, one was obliterated within three days. Most men were not shot, but froze to death, instead.

I spent one year inside the circle which was, I guessed, fifty kilometers wide. The Red Army surrounded us. (As soldiers we were not privy to much information.) Eventually, they moved to crush us, shelling from all sides, and we moved out. In wild panic, German troops ran for their lives. On their way out, they planted mines as instructed. It took the Red Army in their tanks eight days to catch up. In those eight days we were once more armed and ready. Each of us was attached to a base that housed twenty soldiers; about eighty yards further was another base, and so on. That is how the front looked: a bit odd, without any trenches. The Red Army attacked with tanks,

and their first attack stopped directly in front of our base. I was in the back of the base to secure the exit. I saw twenty troops dashing off, and realized, "The Russians have broken through. This is the platoon from the next base, fleeing." I joined them, thinking, "Now or never!" As I ran along, I realized that they were not part of our company, but intelligence officers and radio operators. I had to sneak back to base during the night. When I arrived, I was found out: "A straightforward case—desertion! You will be shot in the morning in sight of all twenty troops on the base!" I had five hours to live. Then the Red Army attacked a second time, and all of our men were killed. The entire base was blown up. Only two of us escaped. I pulled my companion, who was severely injured, through the snow on a Finnish sled. We came under gun fire, but I pulled us through.

When we made it back, we both were handed casualty slips; I had gotten hurt as well. The Army gave green slips for light injuries and red slips for serious injuries. We were given green slips and moved away from the front. I went as far as Letland. From there, I was dispatched to the front once more. Again, I was injured and taken this time to Riga. In Riga, I contracted such a bad case of malaria that I wrote a farewell letter. At a medical check-up we all paraded in front of a doctor who merely said, "Fit to serve, fit to serve." He was under orders to send a certain number of men out. Accordingly, he examined nobody. When my turn came, he once again said, "Fit to serve." "Major, Sir," I said, "I just survived malaria. I feel still awful." The doctor looked up for the first time and asked me, "In which theatre did you serve?" "Two years on the Russian front." "What? *And you are still alive?*" The average soldier was expected to last eight weeks on the front—by that time one was either dead or wounded. "Well then, four weeks in Denmark to recuperate."

In Denmark I ran into problems with a captain. He delivered long tirades about our Aryan blood, about how we were the best people on earth with our pure blood. I had not had any home leave in seventeen months; every soldier was supposed to go on leave once a year. I went down to the doctor, who looked through my pay-book and said, "Yes, indeed. You should go on leave." Thus it was with official sanction that I took the train home to Bad Freienwalde.

Desertion, 1945

During my leave I discussed with my wife the possibility of deserting the service. After exhaustive deliberations we settled on digging a trench under a small hut in our garden in which I could hide. To this end I carefully lifted the floor boards and excavated about three cubic meters of soil. I had to work at night and without any light, and I had to take away the dirt and camouflage it. The smallest hint might have provoked suspicion and led to my arrest.

I dug feverishly for several nights, as it was difficult to get the soil from under the boards. I had to dig lying down, squatting or stooped, one scoop at a time. Once I finished, I brought in boards and tar paper and used them to enforce and insulate the cavity. Then I placed blankets into the one meter deep, two meter long space. I moved into the grave-like trench in February 1945. Outside lay deep snow, and the thermometer fell to ten degrees below freezing. It seemed impossible to survive without heat in the bunker. Still, I had to press on. I had a fair stock of provisions, but light and heat remained more complicated issues. During the first week, temperatures hovered at five to eight degrees above freezing inside my tiny space, and on severe days the temperature fell still further. I had to endure. To help me through the ordeal, I recalled the horrors of warfare in the winters of Russia. It would not have been as bad if I could have moved about, but that was out of the question. Only at night could I get out for half an hour to breathe fresh air and do some gymnastics. And even that opportunity was threatened when German troops occupied the area and established artillery and machine posts in the surrounding hills. Suddenly soldiers were swarming the area. I sometimes heard the voices of men as they walked across the planks above my hideout. Their presence forced me to be extremely cautious to avoid any encounter. It was tricky to unlock the trap door, to lift it up and climb out over the rummage inside the hut without making noise. When I slipped out of my hideout by night I often heard whispering nearby. Attracted by the warm March weather, soldiers were engaging in romance with their sweethearts.

During the month of February, I lived in complete isolation. In those freezing nights, only my courageous wife came to see me. She brought me food and news of the war. We had to take extreme precautions—our apartment was on the other side of the road, about hundred yards from the garden. After she left the apartment she walked first through a wooded area and took several other detours to get rid of or confound potential informants trying to

follow her. The police had actually already inquired once, but had given up after my wife and friends assured them that I had taken the train back on time.

To further put off police inquiries, I instructed my wife and children to evacuate Bad Freienwalde along with everyone else and take up residence about 150 kilometers to the west, towards Hamburg. We hoped this would give the impression that I was hiding in that area. The police had already talked about suspected desertion, but they had no proof. We had to render any additional investigations difficult.

I had to pass my days in isolation. In the first few days I was still exhausted from my time on the front and spent the time sleeping. That changed quickly; I felt no more need for rest and with eyes and senses wide open I spent hours lying in my rough den. I had taken plenty of books into my dugout, but it was very dark inside. My wife tried her best to get me candles and petrol, and spared no cost to provide the light sources so vital for my sustenance. Despite her attempts, the small quantities she could get ahold of did not go far. Out of twenty-four hours, I had to spend eighteen to twenty in the dark. I made light in the den for meals, and then read. During the entire ten weeks I never ate a warm meal. Bread, marmalade and small quantities of fat and raw vegetables were my only sustenance.

The darkness was the hardest thing to take. I could never have lasted those months were it not for my hope that a military collapse was imminent. Unfortunately, it took seventy-five days before this occurred. How could I shorten my days? Day in and day out I listened to the roar of heavy artillery, to the tick of machine guns, to carbine shots. The front was only nine kilometers away, but it seemed like the Red Army was reluctant to advance, to take me over in a storm and set me free. My patience was seriously waning. At night, I would slip like a cat through the hut window into the open, looking at the sky and the stars. I often sat on the ground and gazed over to where occasional flashes of fire highlighted the front. The garden was on a hill and I could see far into the wetlands of the Oder. What was going on over there? Why did the Red Army not cross and put an end to this darned war? Only eighty yards off stood a lonely house. In it, a few soldiers had taken up quarters and secured the surrounding area for defense purposes. Soon more and more troops arrived. Tanks and heavy guns passed on the street nearby, and eventually soldiers installed an anti-aircraft battery close to my hiding place. I awaited anxiously, as my wife planned to visit me every two weeks as long as possible despite the severe travel restrictions. Finally, at the end of 346

long hours, I listened with an uneasy heart for the signal on which we had agreed. I heard her three soft but determined knocks on the outer wall of the hut.

I had passed many sleepless hours, wondering if she would make it on time. She had promised to come, unless she was arrested, or all train or car transport was ceased. I explained to her that if I was discovered she would die, for it was obvious that I could not have survived so many weeks without help from outside. She was ready for the punishment and so was deliberate in her actions. She even planned to openly admit her complicity so as to protect my friends who were known for their political opposition. Now I opened the trap door and drew her into my hole. She told me first that the fronts were engaged in extensive local battles, and that the Russians were still holding back along the Oder River. Increased bombing focused on towns and on vital transit stations in the center of Germany. But more time was still to pass before the final grand blows from east and west. My wife spent about thirty hours with me in the cavity. If the war had still not ended, she planned to return in another two weeks. In the meantime she would try to get hold of more candles and petrol. She promised me more bread as well.

In those two weeks my surroundings became more lively. German soldiers built three sequential defense lines and transformed the hills above the Oder wetlands into a military bastion. One night I was on my back under an elderberry tree, escaping for an hour from the narrowness of my cave, when I heard two soldiers and their girls come up the hill. I had noticed them too late, but remained motionless and silent. They settled in a depression only about four meters from me; there they were protected from the wind. I was forced to listen to how they passed their time talking and joking. The weather was very mild by then, there was an earthy smell in the air; spring was about to bloom, and the pleasant air had drawn the young soldiers into the night.

A far greater threat for me than being discovered by the soldiers were the police dogs who might be tracking my scent. I constantly feared their intrusion and puzzled about how to protect myself against it. I had to interfere with my scent so that the dogs could not detect my presence. I figured diluted carbolic acid might do the trick. Accordingly, I placed a tree spray in the hut, and every night I sprayed the area around my hiding place. The acid had an intense, penetrating smell that served me well. I even sprayed the paths I walked on until the soles of my shoes were soaked by the brownish fluid. The garden fence was largely torn down and stray dogs often came close to my

hideout. They ran, barking loudly, around the garden and the hut. They scared me, naturally, because I could not look out from my bunker and tell what sort of beasts they were.

In the beginning of April, fighting on the front became more tumultuous. Low-flying airplanes razed German defense posts. Anything moving on the ground was attacked with heavy salvos of fire. Sirens hooted from dawn till dusk to warn about airplane attacks. Then the shelling set in. Light and heavy shells flashed through the air and made a loud thump as they hit targets in the wooded hills. A Russian attack on Berlin appeared more and more imminent. Our defenses vigorously returned fire upon Russian positions. Despite the turmoil outside—occasional pieces of shrapnel shot through the boards of my hiding place—I was at peace and hopeful in my heart. After all, in hiding I had realized a plan I first conceived during my home leave in 1943. At that time, I had already resolved not to return to the front. With the consent of my young wife I built a similar bunker under the floor of another hut. On the last day of leave, as I tried to retreat into hiding, I discovered that because I failed to reinforce them adequately the walls were buckling under the surrounding soil. I gave up, and for better or worse, returned once more to Russia. But now I had accomplished my goal. I was elated about not having to serve the German military. I was glad even though my plan came to fruition so late in the war.

My wife came to see me one more time. She brought good news: the Western allies had crossed the Rhine river and were advancing into central Germany. My draft board in Bonn, which had once before by telegram instructed the Freienwalde police to find me, had to move to different quarters and hence was too preoccupied now to investigate my absence. The newspapers reported on Russian preparations for attack along the Oder River. German intelligence sighted large formations of tanks, trucks, and infantry companies on the march. These reports were confirmed by my own observations of increased artillery fire and air fights. The end was in sight. My underground imprisonment was not to last much longer.

Once I was by myself again, something unforeseen occurred. One afternoon, there were loud knocks on the locked door of the hut. At the same time, someone tried to force the window shutters open to get inside the room above my hiding place. Several men were cursing and furious about the difficulties they encountered. I could clearly make out their voices and understood them to be troops from the heavy artillery gun who planned to spend

the night in the room. The hut was locked but the soldiers were set on getting in. My friend, Dr. Loose, a veteran Social Democrat, happened to be in the garden and feared the worst. By then he knew about my hideout, and every three days he brought me water. "Let me arrange the hut so that you can get inside and build your beds," he told the soldiers. I heard him knock gently in warning and I escaped quickly. Under cover of his garden hat and jacket I walked by the soldiers, busy digging trenches. A blue sky stretched over the garden in full bloom. Bright sunlight flooded every path. Blinded and stunned, I puzzled at this miracle. How long was it that I had not seen daylight? How long had I lived underground by now?

I pushed all such questions aside and tried to get away unnoticed. Unfortunately, after all the time I had spent on my back, my senses failed me in the bright light—I lost my balance and fell. I quickly got up, only to fall again a few yards on. I had lost all steadiness of gait and had to first get used to this sudden expanse of the world. Despite these handicaps I safely made it into a wooded area near the garden. There were trenches and posts there as well, but they were not occupied. I rested for few minutes there and decided to slip into the nearby house of Dr. Loose. I got inside the back of the building without problem and hid there until the next morning. During the night I pondered my next move. I decided to make another hiding place in the attic of the hay barn adjacent to the main house. The barn already housed wooden beams and boards, and I only had to improve upon it a little. In the wee hours of the next morning I cautiously worked on my new hideout. Unfortunately, I discovered that even this house was occupied by soldiers. But I had no choice—I could not move on and I could not go back. Soldiers occupied every road, path, and territory around. The massive occupation force was present to prevent the capture of Berlin, and troops were heavily concentrated in the hills overlooking the Oder River. I quietly arranged several boards into a smooth platform, put a bit of hay on top, and waited for things to come.

It was my good fortune that the attic of the barn was rarely used. I had made only minor changes which hopefully would go unnoticed. It came as a great relief that the roof window let in a bit of light and sunshine. But how was I to get food? The first twenty-four hours in my new quarter were calm. In the courtyard, soldiers living in the house dug man holes against attacking airplanes and put covers on the basement windows. Through the roof I could overhear their talking; they sounded cheerful and happy. The next morning,

our situation changed dramatically. With intense bombardment, the Red Army embarked on an attack that would eventually allow them to cross the Oder River. Guns of all sizes hurled deadly shells upon the German defenses. Airplanes swiped villages and towns in the Oder wetlands and sprayed German troops with gun fire. The town of Freienwalde, too, came under a shower of grenades. There was little response by the German artillery. They were short of ammunition, and were forced to ration. The Russian fire wall rolled closer and closer. Shells exploded all around, broke the windows of the house, tore shingles off the roof and uprooted trees.

I pondered how to protect myself. The space under the roof was increasingly inhospitable. Shells whistled over the roof top, and might hit any time. I climbed out of hiding and went downstairs to the rooms at street level. The house seemed deserted. All its residents and the occupying soldiers had rushed to the basement, where they remained behind locked doors for several hours. I was free to explore the rooms. In the laundry room I came upon a great deal of food. Delighted, I took enough to calm my hunger pangs and provide for the following days back up to the attic. The intense fire continued. It ebbed during the noon hours only to fully resume in the late afternoon. The following morning, the battle noise resumed. I could clearly make out the advance of the Russian front; it now passed by the town of Freienwalde. All heavy German guns and tanks had retreated the previous night. A large-scale regroup and a swift retreat had to be in the works. In the house below, the soldiers evacuated their hiding place. Eventually, I made out voices in the valley. Carefully, I slipped out of the house and saw a group of Red Army infantrymen inspecting German trenches and posts. Calling out, I approached, greeted them, and surrendered.

A New Beginning, 1945-1949

I was overcome; I could have kissed my liberators. The end of the war was in sight! The Russian soldiers looked on me triumphantly. The group leader spoke with the men, and instructed me to follow four soldiers. Only fifty meters down the road, they directed me into a depression and took carbines into their hands. Only then did I understand that they were a firing squad. "Are you mad?" I shouted at them. "Don't shoot a German communist! Long live comrade Ernst Thälmann, long live Stalin!"

At that they should have riddled me with bullets. But one of the soldiers

persuaded his comrades otherwise. They lowered their guns, and took me back to the other troops. There was another exchange in Russian which I did not understand. Then one soldier waved for me to follow him. We marched through town. The shops were boarded up, and soldiers were swarming all over. We passed the church and turned onto Eberswalder Street. A German soldier lay dead on the street, blood soaking his uniform. All of a sudden, an officer rushed out of a house, grabbed me by the chest and tried to drag me away. But my attendant held onto me. The officer hit him in the face. Still, the Russian private pulled me away. A few steps down the road he told me in German, "That was a Black one! He planned to shoot you with his pistol." I was so shocked about the incident, and could only get out, "Why, you speak German. What does that mean, a Black one?" "He is Polish," my attendant answered. "You have murdered millions of Poles. Therefore he shoots every German, out of revenge." Now I understood that this Russian soldier had been with the firing squad and that in the course of a half hour he had saved my life twice. He had understood my screams for mercy.

We arrived at the military administration, but no interpreter was on hand. We were sent back, and I was locked into a wooden shed. An old man was already in there. I told him, "When the soldier by the door puts his carbine through the wooden planks and pulls the trigger, it's over for us."

"The Russians will do us no harm," the old man said. "I live two houses from here, but they won't let me go back to my place. I have to feed my caterpillars or they will starve." I stared at him, certain he was mad. Then he told me that he was breeding butterflies and that he published papers in professional journals. The door opened. The guard held his pistol to my head, and made signs that he would shoot if I tried to escape. I was to follow him.

He took me to a lieutenant in a nearby office. A woman interpreter addressed me. "Tell us where you are from," she invited, then translated my reply: "I am a deserter who waited ten weeks for the arrival of the Red Army. Now I am glad you've arrived to put a triumphant end to this awful war." The lieutenant listened attentively. He smiled and in a friendly manner answered, "Now you will be mayor of Freienwalde and later we will send you to University." After that, he dismissed me. What could I say to such a surprise offer? I spent that night with fifteen elderly residents on the floor of the rail station waiting room. These were the few who had resisted an evacuation of Bad Freienwalde. The next day, everybody else was dismissed, but I was dispatched to Altlandsberg, where about 15,000 men, including many

officers, were housed in barracks. In this large camp I spent about four months, taking classes on Lenin and writing the camp news. I was dismissed in August.

In Küstrin I jumped a slow freight train to a Berlin bombed to ashes. I then traveled to Freienwalde by foot. There, Dr. Loose's wife opened the door for me. To see me shook her mightily. "Erna is in the cemetery," she told me eagerly. "She wrapped your dead boy in covers." I took off for the cemetery, where my wife stood with our young son in her arms. Our Friedhart, only three years old, had been taken by diphtheria. We placed him in a shallow depression and covered his body. This is how my country welcomed me back home. We went away quietly.

Translated by Konrad Schulze