

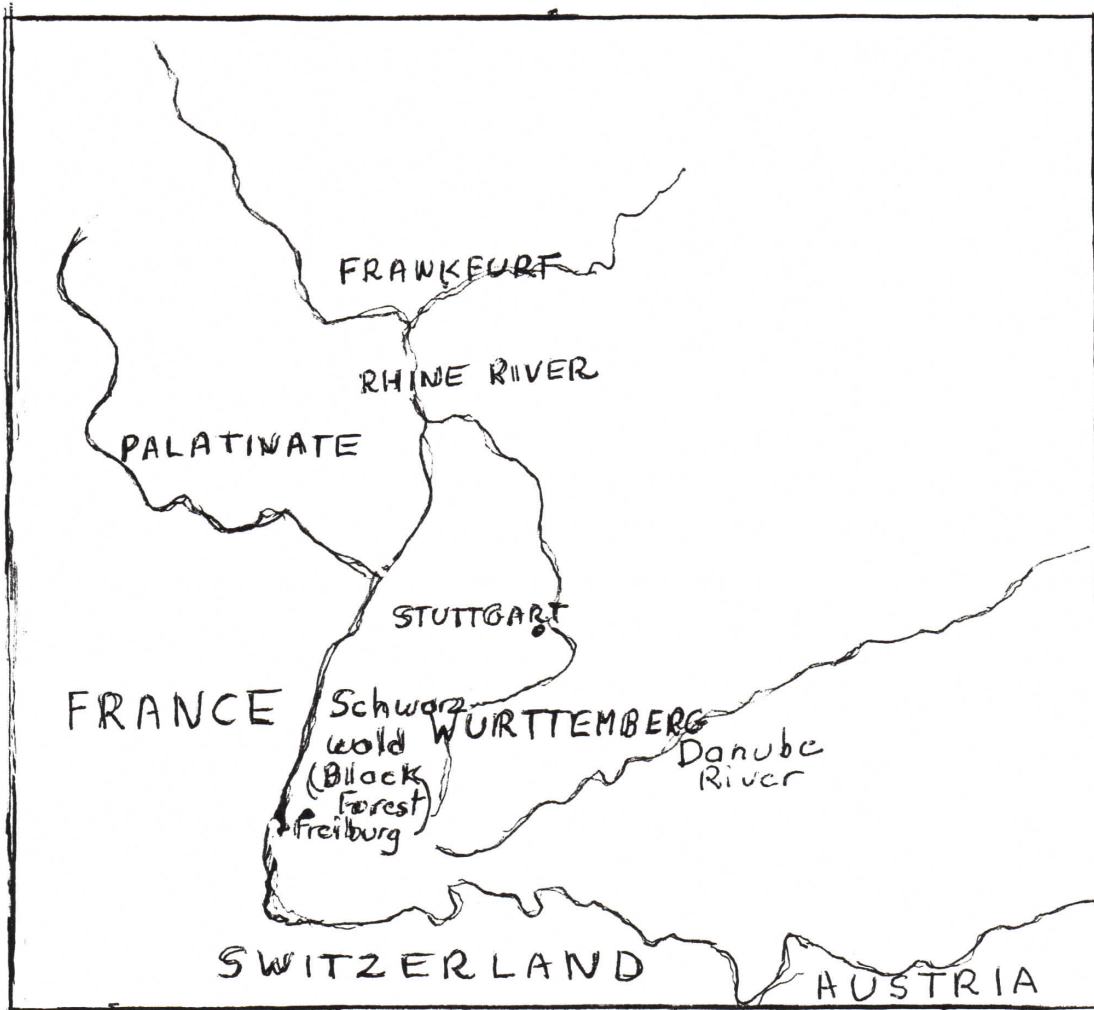
MY WAR

World War II, 1939 - 1945

James G. Leslie

Brant Historical Society
57 Charlotte Street
Brantford, Ont.
N3R 2W6

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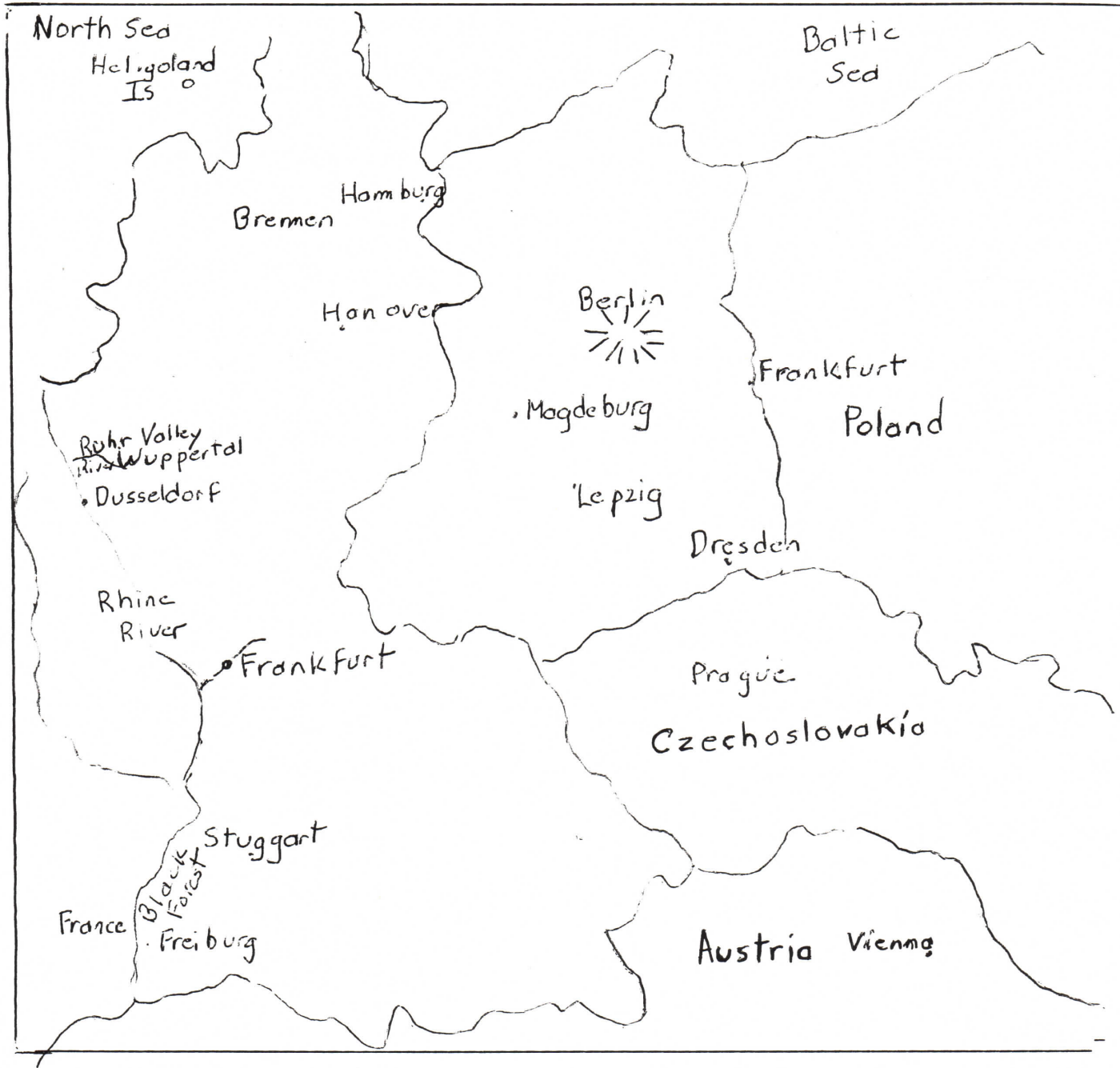
SOUTH WEST GERMANY- THE AREA WHERE I BECAME A PRISONER OF WARSTUTTGART

Stuttgart is a city and capital of Baden-Wurttemberg, on the Neckar River, about one hundred miles south-east of Frankfurt-am-Main. Although the centre of Stuttgart was almost completely destroyed by bombs during the war it was rebuilt after 1945. Several medieval churches, two royal palaces and several museums were restored after the war.

FREIBURG

Freiburg is a city in Baden-Wurttemberg State, at the foot of Schlossberg Mountain, about eighty miles south-east of Stuttgart, and about forty miles north of Basel Switzerland. Most of the old section of Freiburg was destroyed during World War II. French troops occupied the city in April 1945; it was thus part of the French zone of occupation.

OTHER GEOGRAPHICAL PLACES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT OF "MY WAR"



Ruhr River

The Ruhr River in West Germany flows into the Rhine River. It is about 144 miles long. The Ruhr Valley was an important mining and industrial center.

During the final two years of World War II Anglo-American air fleets conducted repeated large-scale bombing raids against the Ruhr, which resulted in the destruction of about one-third of its industrial facilities. The Allies provided for the destruction of all plants that had been engaged in the production of war material.

OTHER GEOGRAPHICAL PLACES WHICH WERE BOMBED AND MENTIONED
IN THE TEXT OF "MY WAR"

BERLIN

Berlin is approximately 163 miles south east of Hamburg, West Germany, and 300 miles west of Warsaw, Poland. Most of the famous museums, churches, institutes, and theatres were destroyed or damaged in World War II. Berlin remained in ruins for more than six years, but by the mid-1950's rebuilding and new construction were well under way.

DRESDEN

Dresden is a city about 100 miles south of Berlin and 65 miles south-east of Leipzig. In February 1945, during the final phase of World War II in Europe, three-fifths of the city was all but obliterated by American and British air raids. In May, Dresden was shelled and taken by the Soviet armed forces. It was later included in the Soviet zone of occupation. Much rebuilding had been completed by the 1960's.

FRANKFURT OR FRANKFURT-AM-MAIN

Frankfurt is a city in West Germany, located in Hesse State on both sides of the Main River, about 85 miles south-east of Bonn. It is a major river port, railway centre and international air port. During World War II, the city was heavily damaged.

HAMBURG

Hamburg is a city state of West Germany, 178 miles north west of Berlin. It was a submarine base and center of the German war effort during World War II, Hamburg was the target of frequent Allied air raids. British troops occupied the city-state in May, 1945.

HANOVER OR HANNOVER

Hanover is a city in West Germany, about 78 miles south-east of Bremen and about 158 miles west of Berlin. During W.W. II, Hannover was a frequent target of allied air raids. The city was captured by United States forces in April, 1945.

HELIGOLAND (ENGLISH) OR HELGOLAND

Heligoland is an island of West Germany in the North Sea about 40 miles north-west of Cuxhaven. The island is about one mile long and less than one-third mile wide, mainly a rocky eminence. It served as a major German submarine base during World War II. After the collapse of Germany in May 1945 it was surrendered to the armed forces of Great Britain. British naval personnel razed the fortification on Helgoland on April 18, 1947, by the detonation of 3500 tons of explosives that blasted away part of the cliffs. Helgoland became part of West Germany in 1952.

MY WAR

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be accorded the opportunity of speaking to you today about the War and perhaps my insignificant and undistinguished part in it.

Well, November 11th has just passed -- a day to end all Wars, to remember old ones and to forget none. But the world will not let us forget as it forges in its insatiable crucible of hate the hydra of new conflicts and unspeakable death. Perhaps this is nature's way of telling man he is not yet master of his own destiny.

Fifty years ago at this time, the world was engaged in a most desperate struggle and six months later it was all over. Fifty-five million people had died, twenty-five million Russian, ten million Chinese, six million Polish, four million German and two million Japanese. The losses of the remaining protagonists were numbered in the hundreds of thousands. And one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse is still with us.

When I went to Britain at the end of 1942, I found a dark and despondent land. Dieppe just three months before had been a bitter and disastrous experience. Our troops anxious for action were spending their days in routine training because we had no foothold on the continent. The brunt of the War, therefore, had shifted to bomber command and American Eighth Air Force.

My particular role at that time was as a lowly bomber pilot flying with 35 Squadron, one of the Pathfinder Group. It was an entirely voluntary group although an arm of bomber command but a bit riskier since we were employed to locate the target and then drop our 250 to 500 lb flares called target indicators for the main force following to bomb. I might point out that we rarely went directly to a target but took diversionary routes called dog legs in the hope it would divert the enemy from the real target. At each dog leg, we would drop a flare designating the place where the main force of bombers should change course. It was, however, not really a successful tactic since the German was always waiting for us.

At this point, I might pay tribute to Sir Arthur Harris, Chief of Bomber Command, who has been so unjustly castigated and maligned in that infamous fabrication *The Valour and the Horror*. Harris was not an ogre bent on killing German civilians; he was a man with perhaps a great ego, but who had to perform a most extraordinary task, the destruction of the enemy war industry.

It was in September, 1943 that Harris announced his policy of the total destruction of German cities and that policy was made clear to all air crews. It was total war from the German point of view and we were returning with total destruction. My own feelings at the time were that Harris was wrong, not in his tactics but in his philosophy which was based on his belief that bomber command could win the War by driving a wedge between Hitler and the people and with the destruction of their cities, revolution would be the result. It is true that some sixty or seventy thousand died in Hamburg and Dresden but it made no difference to the German resolve to carry on the War. Let me say that there were no innocent civilians over the age of twelve. Women worked in the war factories turning out guns, armaments, ammunition, tanks and aircraft. Boys and girls were drafted into the Hitler Jugend and the Volksturm. I well remember being guarded by a 13 or 14 year old boy who was far more frightening in pointing that rifle at me than any German soldier would have been. As far as those under 12 were concerned, Germans could have sent them into the country for safety as did the British during the London raids.

On November 18th, 1943, the Battle of Berlin began. It was the heart of Germany and Harris was determined to decimate it entirely. He had attempted to persuade the American Air Force to join in this battle in their daylight raids but General Eaker, the American General in command of the 8th Air Force adamantly refused. His air crews were almost rebellious morale was so low. They had suffered appalling losses in their two raids on Schweinfurt when they had lost 148 aircraft. On the other hand, we were losing at at least the same rate with 108 lost over Nurnburg and 78 shot down over Leipzig, but the morale of bomber command remained amazingly high.

I had done targets such as Frankfurt, Magdeburg and Heligoland and others, but the three raids I did on Berlin were unquestionably the most unnerving. The city had an area of almost 900 sq. miles and to get to the target we had to fly through 150 kms of the worst hell man could devise. Shells exploding all around the aircraft, the sky lit bright as day with the blinding search lights and the parachute flairs floating down from above by the German night fighters ready to attack, together with the flak exploding around made me think on one occasion that you could get out of the aircraft and almost walk on it. Berlin was the most heavily defended target in the Reich. Between November 18th and March 30th, 1944, bomber command lost 2,800 aircraft, and over the War, we lost some 22,000 shot down and badly and fatally damaged. Every other Canadian who flew in air crew died. We sent some 20,000 and over 50% did not return. The losses of bomber command were second only to the losses suffered by the German Kriegsmarine U-Boat Service, which I think was calculated at some 85%.

Now what is it to be like shot out of the sky at 4:00 in the morning in the middle of winter over a hostile land and you cannot speak the language of the enemy? I must tell you it is somewhat of a shock to the system. On February 19th, 1944, the squadron had done Leipzig and we had lost 4 aircraft out of 14. I lost my Flight Commander Squadron Leader Sayles on that one when his parachute did not open properly and he broke his back on striking a house. The following night we did Stuttgart. And again, we lost 4 aircraft. My crew and I did not return from that one. I remember dropping the sky marker at the dog leg for the main force behind us to begin their turn when a German night fighter attacked. Suddenly the sky appeared where the ground should have been and the aircraft in a spin was completely out of control. I bailed my crew out and shortly after left the aircraft.

At this point, I should say a few words about my navigator. He was a Flight Lieutenant and had been a chartered accountant before the War. On every trip he was sick and I don't think it was because of my questionable flying ability because it was only when we crossed the enemy coast that he became ill and could not control it until he returned to England.

Even with that handicap he would not give up. He later became the Chief Accountant for the Ontario Government.

When I bailed out with the sudden jerk of my parachute opening, my left flying boot fell off. I found myself hanging from a 100 ft pine tree in the middle of the Black Forest. Disengaging my chute and climbing down I found the lowest branch to be about 40 feet from the ground. It was mid winter in Germany, bitterly cold, and the forest was covered with snow. Jumping from the lowest branch, I landed in 4 to 5 feet of snow. At that point, I took out my pocket compass and decided the obvious direction to walk was southeast. Plodding on for a few minutes, I realized I was in trouble with only one boot, when I suddenly came upon a clearing in the forest and encountered a house. On approaching it, however, I was confronted with a figure I could not believe. It was an Icon, life size Christ on the Cross. I was both shocked and captivated and it was almost another moment of terror. Walking around the building I was faced with another identical Icon. I later learned that many houses in that area bear an Icon as evidence of the occupants' devotion to the Roman Catholic faith.

There was no evidence that anyone had been near the place in weeks and so the obvious thing to do was to break in. I broke the cellar window and entered. The basement was deserted and I remained there for a couple of hours and with the dawn, wrapped my left foot with my Mae West Jacket and left to plod through the snow into the wilderness. I found out, however, very shortly, that I could not continue for very long in snow that deep. Returning to the house, I lit a fire in the basement to dry out my clothes and at that point felt it was necessary perhaps to introduce myself to the occupants upstairs. Armed with an axe, which I found in the basement, I crept up the stairs and happily found each room deserted.

Feeling a certain freedom, I now began to assess my position or should I say more properly, my plight. Removing all my insignia from my battle dress I split the collar and sewed into it the money from my escape kit. All air crew were issued an escape kit which

contained a small knife, needle and thread, silk maps, money from several occupied countries, a razor, and some tablets representing food. One small tablet each day was supposed to contain the equivalent of a reasonable dinner and so it could sustain you. It was at that point in searching the house that I found up in the rafters of the basement, a pair of skis. Fortunately I had learned to ski and, therefore, was no stranger to the art. These were a beautiful pair of cross country skis with the underside lined with coarse animal fur to prevent one sliding backward.

I slept there that night and awoke the next morning on my straw bed, clutching a dead mouse. He no doubt had starved to death. Tying my left foot with the Mae West wrapped around it to the ski, I left my sanctuary the next day and for the next three days plodded through that forest, stopping to sleep in small open shelters which I found along the way.

We were shot down on the morning of 21st of February and on the 25th I skied right into the arms of a German Border Patrol. It was my birthday -- some present! They escorted me with little persuasion at that point to a hamlet in the mountains called Hinterzarten. I will never forget the beauty of that hamlet, high on the crest of a hill below which lay the whole panorama of the Schwarzwold. A tearful old German woman offered me soup and black bread and some two hours later, two Gestapo Officers arrived in their black car. They welcomed me as if I were an old friend. A most disquieting moment. After a journey of a couple of hours, I found myself in a cell more resembling a cage, under the railway station awaiting a train. We boarded the train for Freiburg and the Gestapo men talking to each other saying, "execute", drawing their hands across their throats. They did not believe I could not speak German, but I had an idea what they meant by that gesture. There were several times in Germany when I fully expected to be shot but I must tell you that I am most pleased they employed better judgment.

After an unpleasant week in a military prison in Freiburg, and in solitary confinement, I was then taken to Frankfurt to await a train to the interrogation camp at Dulag Luft.

Waiting in Frankfurt station, surrounded by three guards and a sergeant, I was suddenly spat upon by an enraged German hausfrau after which a mob began to gather. She kept screaming at me calling me "terror flieger" and it was not long before someone brought a rope and tried to tie it around my neck. I had heard of the lynch mob and now I was in one. It was only by the quick thinking of the sergeant telling the soldiers to fix their bayonets that I escaped that unhappy fate. The sergeant then took me to a cell in the basement of the station to await the train. I learned later that a mob had hanged 9 American air crew from the girders of Frankfurt station a few days before. It was at this point I wished I had done a better job of bombing it on the two occasions I had been there.

Dulag Luft was the main interrogation centre for all captured air crew, American, Allied and RAF. It was here that interrogation became serious under Oberst Killinger and Major Junge. I had been questioned by the Gestapo for the two previous weeks but that was largely because I had no identification except my dog tags, and they kept calling me spy, knowing full well I was not.

There was no brutality at Dulag Luft; the concentration was on the mind. The cells were individually heated for a purpose. Thrust into the cell which was about 5 ft by 10 ft and completely soundproof, you found a bunk and a light hanging from the ceiling with a bare bulb. The light never went out. The temperature was suddenly raised to some 120 degrees, almost suffocating. The small window was closed. After about two hours, the heat was turned off and the interrogation would begin, and then back to the cell which by now was freezing with the window open. Two or three hours later, the heat was back to 120 degrees when it became unbearable. This continued for several days with intermittent sessions of interrogation. I remember on being taken to the Commandant's office and standing outside for a few minutes, I heard a German Corporal screaming at a young American whom he had dragged out of the cell. Apparently the boy had put down on the questionnaire the names of his crew as Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and various others and the Corporal had taken it to his superior. The GI was hauled out of his cell for what one might term a proper interrogation.

My own interrogations before the Commandant, Oberst Killinger, were not only unpleasant but decidedly unnerving. "You will not complete the questionnaire?" He opened a file. "Well you are aware that nobody knows you are here. We can dispose of you as we will and no one will know the difference." His hand is on the luger on his desk. "We will give you time to think about it." Another day -- another session before him. Again, the hand and fingers toy with the Luger. "You give us no choice since you will not answer, but I will tell you your crew beginning with Flight Lieutenant Stephens are just behind that door and I will shoot them, one by one, until my questions are answered."

When your own life is threatened, that is one thing -- the life of another, however, creates an entirely different situation. Either you believe him, or you do not. He obviously knew a great deal about our squadron from the information contained in his file, because he mentioned to me several names of officers who were still flying with the squadron. His questions were never answered and eventually, I was shipped to a prison camp on the border of East Prussia and Lithuania in a locked box car. It was winter, no heat and no food, except the rations that they gave at some stations, and the journey took some five to six days. The worst of it, however, was the most frightening night I ever spent in Leipzig station, locked in the box car with bombs exploding all around as our own air craft bombed the city.

I spent four months in the first camp, and on D-Day, June 6th, the Russians launched an assault on Lithuania and then I found myself in Poland. From there, a few months later, I was on my way to Prague, Czechoslovakia, when the train was bombed off the track by Russian aircraft. You can imagine the consternation. A German guard opened the door of our box car, which was half off the tracks. Jumping out, I saw in the distance what appeared to be British soldiers working on the September Harvest. You know, there is a certain madness in man at times which compels him to do strange things. I ran down the hill and said to a British Army Private, "if you will exchange jackets with me and take my identity, you will not have to work, and I will possibly have the opportunity to escape." "Not bloody likely, Bloke," he said, glowering at me and that ended our unprofitable

exchange.

Later I found myself back in Germany in Hanover and on January 10th, 1945, in Berlin on my way to Stalag Luft Three Sagan in Silesia. In Berlin I was taken by three guards by streetcar across the city, to the subway to Potsdam, where we boarded a train for Sagan. On a cold winter morning, I was herded into the prison camp in front of a German bayonet with ten other officers when I heard my name being called from inside the barbed wire -- it was Peter Valachos from Brantford. I cannot say that he was expecting me, but he evidently was glad to see me.

Then came the long march, called the Death March, from Poland and Silesia back into Germany. The Russians were advancing and we were evacuated with Peter going to Northern Germany while I went back to Berlin. The March of six or seven days was a harrowing experience; the cold was unbearable and we slept in abandoned schools and barns at night. Those who fell by the wayside were left to die. After the March, I was taken by train to Lukenwalde, just south of Berlin, where I remained until I escaped just before the end of the War.

Well, that was my War -- just one of the hundreds of stories which enables truth to vie with fiction.

Now if I may be permitted this short epilogue. Oberst Killinger and Major Junge our tormentors at Dulag Luft were tried as War Criminals in 1946 and each sentenced to five years in prison. At the trial, Killinger testified that the number of air crew shot down and being interrogated through his camp had increased so dramatically that he was not able to maintain control of interrogations. For example, he pointed out that in 1941 there 500 shot down; in 1942, 2,000; in 1943, 8,000; but in 1944, 29,000. This will give you an indication of our losses during the Battle of Berlin.

And now, a few thoughts on war. Here is Winston Churchill. I give you his comment on

the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 between Oliver Cromwell's Puritans and the Royalist Presbyterians of Charles I. "Both sides confidently appealed to Jehovah and the most high finding so little to choose between them in faith and zeal must have allowed purely military factors to prevail."

John Ruskin. "When I tell you that war is the foundation of all the arts, I mean also that it is the foundation of all the high virtues and faculties of men. It was very strange for me to discover this and very dreadful but I saw it to be quite an undeniable fact. I found in brief that all great nations learned their truth of word and strength of thought in war that they were nourished in war and wasted in peace, taught by war and deceived by peace, in a word that they were born in war and expired in peace."

But there may be another view. Those who have read Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazoff* will perhaps remember the most thought provoking passage in the book. The old man is saying to one of his sons "if there is no God, there is no right and there is no wrong".

There are some 50 odd dictators now across the world who can rationalize their maniacal brutality on that creed.

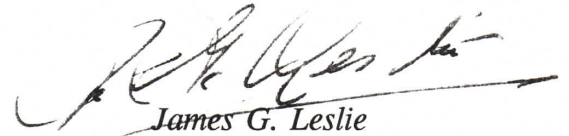
If there is no God, there is no right and there is no wrong. Perhaps Shakespeare 400 years ago said the same thing through one of his characters, "nothing is wrong but thinking makes it so".

In Nazi Germany there was no God. Perhaps that was why there was no right and there was no wrong.

Perhaps this is why Joseph Goebbels in February 1945 drafted a Decree as is recorded in his diary "every allied and American bomber pilot is to be taken from his prison camp immediately and shot". The Decree had to be signed by Adolf Hitler. I am inclined to

believe that Hitler never signed it.

And now, with your permission, you will be pleased when I follow the best advice that Winston Churchill ever gave when he said "when you have said what you have to say, sit down"!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James G. Leslie". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

James G. Leslie

November 1994

The story of Walter Flamm

By James G. Leslie

Walter Flamm was a rococo figure from the Age of Reason, lost in the madness of a 20th century war, when I met him in the German prison camp of Lukenwalde in February, 1945.

He would have been at home in the world of Maria Theresa or the Court of Poniatowski — the typical courtly officer correct beyond criticism and faithful beyond duty.

He had been a major in the Polish Cavalry when the Nazis invaded his country in September, 1939. The romance had suddenly fled from war when his cavalry faced the Panzer tanks and the slaughter began. When Poland fell and with all future resistance futile, he escaped to

the Balkans and then to the Middle East. Returning to Italy in 1944, he fought with a Polish unit until captured by the Germans and sent to Lukenwalde.

Walter's family had been wealthy shoe manufacturers in Poland prior to the war and he had been educated at a Polish university and had continued his post-graduate work at a university in Vienna. He used to speak warmly and longingly of his days in Austria, skiing in winter and wandering the hills and woods in summer picking his favorite edelweiss.

I had joined three other RAF officers in a combine, pooling our little food and tobacco in an attempt to make it go farther. Each morning Walter would appear in his well-worn brown cavalry uniform and his major's hat, stand to attention, click his heels, and after saluting say "I wish you gentlemen a pleasant breakfast." The scene was comic since we would be trying to swallow an horrendous mixture of hot German mint tea but no breakfast. But Walter's visits al-

ways seemed to brighten a bleak day.

There is no privacy in a prison camp unless you offend the authorities and find yourself in solitary confinement. Walter did not appear to enjoy the company of other men and perhaps that is why he spent as much time as he could with the four of us. It was almost as if he had made a calculated decision to entrust to us his secret, but to no others. Walter was a Jew, a fact of which the Germans were unaware. That obviously explained why despite his usually cheerful manner he always appeared uneasy. It had been a long war for Walter Flamm. He was in at the beginning, and the end was now approaching. He had, however, become increasingly worried at the prospect of the Russians eventually liberating the camp, and he was now a very worried man. A worried man cannot think and he expected us to devise a scheme for his escape before the war ended. Two weeks later, with our assistance, Walter crawled under the wire to freedom in a war-torn land. We never knew what happened to him until...

I was at university in 1948 when a letter arrived at my parents' home from Austria. It was a cry for help from a desperate man — Walter Flamm. He begged me to write to his uncle, a Dr. Greenberg in New York, to do what he could to bring him to the United States. I wrote to Dr. Greenberg on three occasions with no response. I never heard from Walter again after writing him that I had received no reply from his uncle.

Five years later, in my last year of law school, I was at my parents' home in Brantford for the weekend, when a knock was heard on the door. I answered it and stood face to face with Walter Flamm. A ghost had suddenly appeared out of the ruins of 1945 Germany and I was facing the man I had never really known.

With him was a woman whom he had married in Austria and somehow they had emigrated to Canada. On his return to Poland, he learned his parents and sister had been sent to a concentration

camp from which they never emerged.

Walter and I stared at each other for a few moments, not knowing what to say, and suddenly embraced. I have never known a happier moment. In his hand he held a small cluster of edelweiss he had brought from Austria — an andenken, as he said in German — a souvenir of the many discussions we had of his days in Austria and his love of that flower.

Walter opened a small tailor shop in Toronto on Spadina Avenue, which I thought was strange since I did not think he knew anything about the trade. But the immigrant is probably the most enterprising and inventive of individuals and necessity recognizes only advantage.

I took him and his wife to dinner frequently on Sunday afternoons to the home of my aunts in Toronto who made them welcome. I had three maiden aunts living there together whose custom was to enjoy a rather elegant dinner each Sunday whether or not they had company. Walter's wife spoke German, French and

Polish, but no English. One of my aunts had taught French and English at Bishop Strachan and Havergal College and was able to converse with her in French. She, therefore, felt equally welcome.

I left Toronto in 1953 and returned to Brantford to practise law. During the next year I saw Walter infrequently and on a weekend in 1955 called at his shop, intending to take him and his wife to dinner. The shop was closed and empty. The only address I had for him was the store and he had left no forwarding address. I wrote to the Jewish Congress, expecting it must have some record of him, but received no satisfactory reply.

Walter Flamm had disappeared out of my life as quickly as he had come into it. I never heard from him again.

The edelweiss hangs in my library, framed behind glass, a memento of my days with that strange baroque man from another century.

James G. Leslie is a Brantford resident.

Source:

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