

# The Language Barrier

I have pondered for a long time to write about the impression I have had so many years ago.

I had to think carefully, and put myself into the minds of German people, who had believed Hitler, but realised too late that they had been lied to.

The believers looked up on Hitler like a God.

To be honest, in my work at the Telegraph Office in Leipzig, and in free time, meeting up with friends, I never took much notice of politics. When Hitler gave speeches, I felt embarrassed, because of his horrible shouting voice. I can't understand why he was judged to be a good speaker. His roaring guttural voice was to my mind terrible.

Of course living in Germany, I came across men and women belonging to the Nazi Party, some reluctant, because they might lose their jobs, or other really fanatical followers.

When I came home from the Labour Camp in April 1945, and had recovered a little from my ordeal, my mum took me to meet one of those Nazi women. I told her where I had been and what had happened, but she did not believe a word. Her mind and that of many others were totally over clouded with the belief that the Nazis glowed with goodness. The nasty activities in Germany and in other occupied countries were hidden for most people living in the countryside. In towns, it was more visible, starting with the burning of the Synagogues and arrests of Communists and Jews. Most people hung with devotion on to the promises and trusted the system.

People must have seen the way the Russian prisoners were treated. They had to work clearing rubble, in very tatty clothes and were beaten with rifle butts for no reason at all.

After the war we found that they had not been fed and could not wash. They had no water supply. We were not aware of this.

Posters appeared with photos of Concentration Camp inmates. It was dismissed by many as anti Nazi propaganda. Most of the German population did not believe at first what terrible things had been done to, one can say, all the Nations bordering Germany. They were named "Protectorates." Maps of this territory had been printed on green background, years before the war. I have seen a print of this in 1938, during a stay in a boarding school, when a Nazi lecturer came to talk and tried to explain the map.

After he went, we girls did not even speak about it, because it made no sense to us then, thinking it could only bring war.

I was first aware of the brutality of the Nazi regime, after seeing the Russian prisoners maltreated.

I had a terrible shock, when I heard on the radio, the very day in 1941 that the German Wehrmacht had invaded Russia. The atrocities which took place there were indescribable. Many Soldiers were forced to kill prisoners and civilians, and if not doing so, would be shot themselves. Nazi spies were placed into Units to report rebellious behaviour.

I had a letter sent to me by a German soldier stationed at the time in Romania. (I knew his family well. They owned a nursery in our neighbourhood. I bought flowers for my mum every weekend there.) He told me in this letter that the soldiers on the Eastern Front felt rebellious. Some deserted, because they were appalled by what they had to do, mainly the killing of the civilians. There is absolutely nothing these men could do, except being shot themselves if they refused an order.

I know through working in the Telegraph Office that many soldiers had deserted. Telegrams were sent out looking for soldiers absconding, or being caught on the Swiss border.

The soldiers, who were caught, were taken into prisons. My colleague from the Telegraph Office and I have found one of those at Torgau, where the Americans and Russians met.

When working at the Post Office, we had to work one night shift every nine days. After 3 months, we had three days off work.

Once in the summer, it must have been 1943 my colleague and I decided to rumble through the countryside straight after work. She decided to go to Torgau and thought the surrounding countryside would be a lovely place to see. We set off by train, and walked the stretch leaving at the train station before the Torgau station. I remember it well. It had been a lovely sunny day.

Just before entering Torgau, we saw a prison, and a little ahead was a large Hotel. We tried to book in for one night, but were told that there were no vacancies, because all SS man's wives and family came to visit their husbands to stay over the week end. It made me feel uneasy. I wondered who they kept in this prison.

Luckily we found a small Hotel in Torgau and booked in for the night. Coming down for our breakfast in the morning, we asked the landlord about the prison.

He told us how terrible it was. Deserters were brought there. In the night, all residence in Torgau, could hear the screaming coming from the prison, where the deserters were being tortured. All people in this little town were very upset. If you protest, you would be shot! The SS were ruthless.

Now I come to the point, where I would like to know what happened to those prisoners. Had the SS killed them all before escaping, or were they confronted by Russian or American troops, and not understanding the German language, were they allowed to go home after their ordeal? There must have been many injured and dead in this prison to realise what happened.

I have been watching commentaries about people being picked up in the street by Americans, put into Lorries and taken to various Concentration Camps. I'm referring here at the Camp in Buchenwald. (Wansleben, where I was held as a prisoner, has been a branch of Buchenwald)

The American commentator pointed out the hardened faces, showing no remorse, and one woman was laughing hysterically and talking to herself. The soldiers were of course upset by this, but had not put themselves into the mind of the population, but thought that they were all criminals.

The truth is that those people had still believed that C. Camps were propaganda, now they had their eyes opened at last and had a terrific shock. They were ashamed and frightened, because they had been told that they would be killed by the "enemy," but were better off to kill themselves first. Coming back to the woman who laughed, I am sure she did not know how to react. I think it affected her mentally. How could the commentator tell what was going through their minds, not knowing the German language?

How I came to this conclusion is because three months after the war, my colleague from the Telegraph Office came to see me. She had also been picked up by the Americans and was taken to Buchenwald. She had, while being shown through the Camp, a nervous breakdown and could not stop screaming. She had been taken to a mental hospital and had to stay for six weeks. She had a really hard time to be released from there.

But I am glad that the Americans did take the population to those Camps, or they might still deny that people were killed, tortured and starved there. At that time it had been thought that all Germans were villains. Out of this reason they must have misinterpreted the expression of their faces while marching them through the Camps.

I hope that I might put a little light on this situation.

(Co) Gisela Cooper 2009