

## Aftermath

I have been asked to tell about the after effects on people's minds and lives after the war. I can only report from my own experience. Other people might have different views.

When the war had at last ended, it was a big relief. Soldiers were not so lucky, as they were kept in Prison Camps for a few years yet. At first, they were kept in the open. It had not been possible to keep them under different conditions, as there were too many of them. They had to wait until proper Camps were created. In the beginning the Americans held, I have heard, three million German soldiers. If this number is correct, I don't know. They were defeated along the way from France, Holland and Belgium, and walked all the way from Russia. Nazis, who hid in these camps, had to be found. My brother had a friend who was in one of these camps. He told about the hardships they had to endure in the open. There were no latrines, so the soldiers had to dig ditches. The weather was very bad, it rained all the time. The men buried themselves in the mud to keep the cold wind out. Trying to relieve themselves was difficult. Some fell into the ditches and drowned. I have read that about 150 men died daily of disease, or exposure. All around those open camps, food in boxes had been stored to feed the prisoners, but very little was given by order of Eisenhower. He had asked how much a body needs to survive. He had not considered the state the soldiers were in, some wounded and walking from Russia to flee to the protection of the American troops. All were in an exhausted state of health and needed more food to recover. All were starving, and added grass to the thin soup they had been given. In the following hot summer they suffered with thirst, as there was no drinking water available.

The dead German soldiers were buried in graves near Remagen and all along the Rhine. The reason for this unusual predicament was the discovery of the

Concentration Camps and the inhuman conditions found. It had been a shock to find such terrible conditions, and of course the treatment of POWs would not be favourable, but harsh. At the time it was thought that all German soldiers were responsible, but they could not refuse any order, however gruesome, or they would have been shot themselves.

At home, husbands and sons were needed by their families who had lost everything, to help them get back to their normal lives. In Germany, a Voelkerwanderung had taken place. Foreign slave workers walked back to their countries, and German civilians tried to escape the Red Army. The ones they caught on their way were shot. Mass graves had later been found. The refugees walked, or went by horse and cart, or pulled just a little cart all along the Baltic Sea. There was a stretch of about 20 miles until they reached the very last ship leaving, I think to Sweden. People pressed on to the ones in front, and many were pushed into the icy sea and drowned. Others were left behind with nowhere to go. Some had shot wounds, and some had no shoes to wear. They walked barefoot through ice and snow. Just before the ship reached the other shore, it had been sunk by the Russians.

Refugees who escaped on another route, arrived in mid Germany, and were put up in schools. There were beds, but nothing else, no food, no sheets or blankets, no medical supplies or heating. I know this because a friend of mine, Rebecca, was sent to help out. She helped deliver a baby at night by torchlight. No water or baby clothes were to be found. She and another refugee tore the woman's underskirt off to wrap up the baby.

Other refugees had already been placed with families. No one dared refuse, because it had been ordered. In the former air raid shelters, refugees were gradually placed. Refugees brought of course their children. Some were teenagers. The boys helped their families who lived in those air raid shelters financially, by working day and night shifts by flashlight to rebuild houses. There

was no temptation to spend the money earned on themselves, because all shops were empty, and food was only available on ration cards.

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The Americans occupied the first German town "Aachen." On news reels I have seen some people welcoming the Americans, only to be very glad that the war for them was over. A new Lord Mayor was appointed for Aachen. But the joy did not last long.

The Germans soldiers put up a fierce fight to win back Aachen and succeeded for a while. At the time, arrests had been made and the new Lord Mayor had been hung by the returning German troops.

My father, who had been working for a Chemical Plant as a machine designer during the war, was now being ordered to join the Volks Sturm (Dad's Army.) He had to go, because the SS were out to catch anyone who did not follow orders and shot them on the spot.

When father returned, his hair had turned white. Out of 400 men, only 4 survived. The Americans came, and drove their Jeeps everywhere. I saw the first Americans coming down our road, sitting on their Sherman tanks. I waved to the soldiers, glad they had come, and they waved back. Free at last! A month before, I had returned from a Labour Camp (branch of Buchenwald.).

Our main occupation now was how to get food, which was the main concern at the time. In our area, and perhaps elsewhere too, lots of people turned to the Communist Party after the Russians occupied East Germany. The leaders convinced most of those misguided people that we in East Germany didn't need the Marshall Plan. They tried to tell us that they could soon provide for us what was needed, in regard to food and clothing, without any help from the West. People waited in vain. The black market was in full swing, but sometimes the Police invaded it. They called this raid a Razia. Then people lost everything, because the Police confiscated it all. I was able to buy one loaf of bread for DM110.00 once on the black market. There were plenty of racketeers about.

Then we had the very cold winter of 46/47. It went down to 30 degrees below zero. We all said that the Russians had brought their cold winter with them. It was so very cold that people could not be buried, as the ground was too hard to be dug. They were put in heaps and burned. Typhoid had broken out and we all were given injections. Very many elderly people did not survive this cold winter.

We personally had no trouble with the Russians soldiers. I was amazed that very many had a good knowledge of German, but in technical things they were hopeless. They did not know how to use a toilet, but washed potatoes in it and wondered why they disappeared. When watches stopped, they threw them away and said: *mechanic kaput*. They exchanged brand new bicycles for old ones, when they saw some one riding it freehanded. Also they had to learn how to ride the bicycles.

In West Germany things were more favourable because of the Marshall Plan. But I also think people there were more concerned about the present than the past.

My father had joined the Nazi Party because of his job, and I must say, after WWI the mess that was left was terrible. There was no work, and little or no food, which played right into the hands of the Nazi Party. I blame the Treaty of Versailles. The Weimar Government had signed it regardless. At first Hitler organized food and work for everyone. This was of great importance. Many people then turned to the Nazi Party. Sometimes it interfered with family life, because I heard my parents argue that my mother and I should join the Party. My father had heard that after the war all the Non Party Members would be sorted out. He worried that we were in danger. But I told him straight that I would not join. With my mother, it was different. She did not want to mix with the lower classes! Mother and I had to keep mum when father wanted to listen to Hitler's clap-trap. Many families were divided on their views. Some people can be easily influenced with a little bait and promises.

I observed that after the war people did not want to be reminded of the Nazi years. They had lost all appetite for it, but rather concentrated on the future.

I think that the discovery of the Concentration Camps had a lot to do with this. It must have weighed heavily on them to discover the true meaning of Nazism.

In the year 1992, I went to see my brother in East Germany. I had not seen him in 35 years. My last visit home had been in 1957.

Before I went, I wrote to the church of Wansleben, where I had been held a prisoner of the Gestapo. It was there that I had been put in a Labour Camp. There were quite a few of those in the neighbourhood. I told them in the letter about my stay there and how I would like to ask the villagers about their thoughts at that time. A letter came back telling me that I was very welcome and to let them know when I would arrive in Leipzig, so they could call the Pastor, and we could set a date and time. My brother and his wife took me in their car and we arrived at the church, where a lady had been waiting for us. She took us to the vicarage and we were invited in for a snack. She wanted to know about my experiences there, and she confirmed about the other camps, having seen the slave labourers being marched to work.

She cooked us a lovely meal. We thought it was very kind, and we talked a lot more. After a while, she took us to the cemetery and showed us the well-kept graves of the dead victims, Russians, Italians and Polish.

She then took us to a nursery (plants). There she found only one person who would talk to us. All others refused. They did not even look at us. I am quite sure that they felt humiliated. They had to live with those prisoners all around them at the time, and could do nothing to help them. As soon as the prisoners were freed, the whole population of the village took it upon themselves to take in sick prisoners and nurse them back to health. They buried the ones who died. The graves are well looked after to this day.

After the visit to the nursery and the cemetery, the lady told us that we were invited by the Lord Mayor, and went at once to his house.

He greeted me with a bunch of flowers, took us inside and asked me about my experiences in the camp. Then he took us to the dining room where coffee and cake was already laid out on a table. He told us about how everyone in the village had taken care of the prisoners from the camps after the liberation. He showed me a file with lots of comments and thanks to the local community from the prisoners, for helping them get back on their feet again.

This was the proof I needed. I had been right in thinking that most Germans had to endure watching the diabolical treatment of the prisoners, but could do nothing to stop it, unless they wanted to join the prisoners.

### **I can tell the world about it now.**

There are pockets of Nazi enthusiasts still about. Let's hope that they never succeed in surfacing again!

There is something I have to mention. I often watch the History Channel, and I have seen German ex-soldiers cry when they talk about the terrible things they had to do or what had been done.

Here is one example: A troop of German Soldiers arrived on Christmas Eve at a little Russian Hamlet. They were welcomed and invited for the Christmas celebration.

On Christmas morning the soldiers had been given the order to march on, and burn the house down. This was the same house in which they had stayed the night before. They had to throw the Russians out and if the Russians didn't want to go, they had to shoot them. The person who related this event could not help but cry. He was not the only person who was very much affected by those terrible orders.

The order was given so that the Russian soldiers would not find any shelter when in pursuit of the retreating German Army.

To find remorse, it can't be found among the German population, because they had suffered just as badly. They lost everything and many thousands were killed or wounded, had lost loved ones and all their property.

The people who ordered the atrocities, from high officials to the small ranks, never felt any remorse. One can tell this from the Nueremberg (Nuernberg) Trials. All pleaded not guilty, except for Albert Speer, Hitler's architect. He was accused of being a traitor by his fellow inmates.

German people did not comment on anything openly, not on the Concentration Camps, not on the Jews, not even on their own hardships. It was not due to ignorance, but feeling ashamed, let down and humiliated. All wanted to get back to their normal lives. They, mainly women, made a start at once, working hard to remove all the rubble on the streets.

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The only time I tried to find answers myself from Germans here in England was during "German church meetings." We had a German Lady Pastor. Mainly elderly ladies attended. I could not get one word out of them when I asked them about their attitudes towards the Concentration Camps, prisoners and slave workers; and the atrocities committed in all the countries surrounding Germany. They said that they didn't want to be reminded of it.

I realised that they had been going through hell. Nearly all of them were refugees who had escaped from the Red Army. None of them were interested in my book either.

Here is a short snippet, which I had seen on TV:

As the Red Army moved towards Breslau, now a Polish town, an order from High Command came through that no one was allowed to leave the city. If they

tried, they would be shot. All women, while waiting to go, started cleaning their houses and left them in tip-top condition. An estimated hour before the Russians would appear in the city, they could leave.

Hitler wanted all Germans killed. He knew he would have to die. He said that all Germans were cowards and not worthy of him, because he could not persuade the civilians to attack or fight the enemy.

No sooner had most of the Germans left, that the order came to blow the whole town up. Nothing should be left for the Russians to use for rest or shelter. But of course, not all buildings had been destroyed.

Some Germans stayed behind in Breslau. They survived. My friend Rebecca returned and found relatives. After one year the last few were transported to the Dutch border, to a refugee camp. They had been made comfortable on their journey.

When the refugees from Breslau arrived at their destination, nothing had been prepared for them. They even had to find their own quarters, which was not easy with so many refugees arriving at the same time.

The German film “Downfall” shows the utter panic in Berlin. The soldiers were ordered to leave and take everything with them, food and anything else useful. This would mean that there would be no food or medical items left for the civilians. One doctor approached Hitler with this problem, but he did not want to hear about this and threw tantrums.

My father’s mother starved to death, because the Berlin Russian Commander decided that people who lived outside Berlin would get no ration cards, because they could grow their own food. People did not own land, perhaps a little lawn where nothing would grow. Just after the war there was no transport, post, gas or electricity for a while. We did not know about the situation in Berlin.

In the very end, it was mostly foreigners, who served with the German Army, who fought the Red Army in Berlin. They could not go home, as they would be imprisoned or worse. They would have been shot by the Russians. They choose to die fighting, rather than being tortured first.

At home in Leipzig, before I had returned from the Labour Camp, shopkeepers gave everything away. People came with handcarts to collect what they wanted. Tin food was buried in canvas bags in gardens. Railway carriages were raided. From curtains to cooking pots, everything had been taken, even coal. Later the people went with these goods to farmers to get food in exchange, or went to West Germany to offer their goods for food. What they came back with was hardly worth its while! Perhaps one loaf of bread, a small jar of jam, and a little sugar and coffee was all they brought back. .

My parents had also hoarded a few tins of meat and buried them in our garden. As there was no electricity, mother cooked over an open fire in the garden. She had a large cooking pot to make hearty soups. When Americans eventually came by, they came and had a look. We told them that we had no electricity. They said: *“that is bad!”*

The daily conversation was mainly about food. We imagined the most scrumptious things to eat. We were always four weeks in advance with our bread rationing. I used to eat dry bread and thought it tasted good.

Once I stole a bundle of wheat from a field. We cut the tops off with scissors and hid the straw underneath our beds, to be burned bit by bit. We put the corn tops in a sack and beat it, then put them into a large tray and threw it up, so that the wind could carry the last bits of stalks away. Then we put the corn through a coffee grinder and had some rough flour. It was a big help. We helped farmers and were given strawberries, peas and even poppies. The seeds were turned into oil. No fats were given and instead of meat, we often received sugar as a substitute. A lot of sugar beet had been grown by the farmers. Once a week we received a few grams of butter, just enough for three or four slices of bread.

I had also been asked if there are any Memorial days in Germany. One is held in Leipzig, and surely other towns too. They are held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February every year, in their lovely cemetery where the memorial graves of the Nazi victims are buried. People come from far to attend these meetings

I hope that I have given a little insight into the thoughts and situation just before the end and after the war.

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