

Prisoners of War – Werner Gebhard

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Western Europe – Germany

Revised December 24, 2016

Werner Gebhard in German Concentration Camp 1943 – 1945

My experiences in the custody of Gestapo and SS in the Concentration Camp and the recovery of freedom. Deciding to write this down I am acceding on the one hand to the often expressed wish to tell a little of my experiences at the Concentration Camp. On the other hand I felt the need of doing this to remember my poor innocent and unhappy fellow-prisoners whose blood was shed. Beyond that I feel under an obligation to show people what the fruit of that idea or ideology looked like, represented by those people who blasphemed the majesty of God so foolishly, mocking all that is sacred while idolizing MEN. These people who talked so much about chivalry without practicing it, who wanted to be considered noble and inherently gallant yet treating others so brutally, who praised themselves as great heroes but afterwards died or stepped down so cowardly, they seem to me to be fully responsible for all the horrors happening in those dread places. May the example of those twelve years warn us, never to give room to a way of thinking as it was so evident in those in power but rather to urge us afresh to follow the spirit of Christ who points out the solution to each problem among us men.

THE ARREST

On February 19, 1943 at about two p.m. two Gestapo officials turned up in my office in Aue/Saxony and declared without further ado that I was under arrest. At that time, due to the wartime work assignment, I was working for an industrial furnace company in my former profession as an electrical engineer. After searching my office furniture I was taken by them to my living quarters where both of my rooms were also ransacked. Taking along several written notes, books etc. of both technical and private nature I was first of all taken to city hall and locked up in a cell for an hour or more. This was repeated twice in towns along the way to Chemnitz. At about ten p.m. we then reached the town jail of Chemnitz. ? The car enters the yard. The doors close behind me. A strange feeling! ? We walk up the stairs of the cell block and in one cell I find a sleeping place on a plank bed placed on the floor between two prisoners already present.

IN JAIL AND WITH THE GESTAPO

After vainly waiting for an interrogation for two days I was picked up for questioning by one of the two Gestapo officials, Kriminalsekretär Naumann. On the way to the Gestapo building he disclosed to me: "I can tell you that your case has been quashed. You will not be put on trial – but free, you will NEVER be that again. – You will enter a Concentration Camp." These so impressively emphasized words were the first I heard about my case, before ever having the chance to utter even the least little thing in explanation, justification or defense. They will surely ring in my ears forever as regards their order as well as their severity and tone. So the verdict had been returned before ever a trial had take place.

The conversation following was aimed at prising out of me, by promising liberty that could possibly still be attained, any little thing that might be of help to the Gestapo. My answer was that I was accustomed to tell the truth but beyond that I could not admit to anything not being a fact. Meanwhile we had arrived at his office. The questioning began: "You are no doubt aware of the reasons leading to your arrest, aren't you?" I replied that I could only surmise it was in connection with my faith, as my friends throughout the whole country had already been told that they were not allowed to meet together any longer.

He answered: "For us you are Public Enemy No.1. Are you aware of making a statement similar to this: "The blood guiltiness of Germany is unique in the whole world?" – I admitted to this, upon which he then changed the subject, talking about the beginnings and aims of our fellowship, as well as about the friends with whom I was united through the fellowship of the spirit of Christ. The smallest details, some even going back more than twenty years were brought up.

I told of what had taken hold of me then, mentioning among other things, how I got to know the lives, the example, the actions and walk of those people, even though I was not able – as I was just a boy – to follow with the same kind of understanding the talks of those preachers who had come to our city, yet being the more impressed by them. Realizing later the reason for this: "Christ", obedience to His word, observing His counsel and example, I myself chose Christ as the pattern and example for conducting my life.

I further told how the study of the Scriptures, sharing thoughts about this as well as the testimony of proving this ourselves, also mutual encouragement and prayer gave meaning to the twice-weekly meetings of like minded people, that we were bound together neither by organization nor any of the usual statutes whether of a religious or profane nature. Instead of which we were rather aiming at a bond of true divine love, as it should generally rule among men.

When later I felt the call of God myself to bring to others what had filled my own life with peace and joy, I followed the instruction of Christ in giving up my job as an electrical engineer and all it entailed, in order to go out in the manner of the first preachers of Christ to

proclaim the Gospel. It was never my intention in this work to obtain a large following, rather it was my wish to portray to my fellow-men Christ as the One who alone can guarantee the solution to all the problems of human lives.

Our large annual meetings were discussed also, being attended by fellow-believers from that area and by those preaching the Gospel throughout the country as well as from other countries. All these sessions – there was a total of seven, the longest lasting 7 hours, the briefest 2 to 3 hours – showed that the Gestapo was well informed whether concerning the circle of people involved or their relationships among themselves. They were aware of the problems arising through the happenings at the time, the discussions held to find solutions.

Now the hearings – as the Gestapo put it and had me believe – turned to the actual main theme the reason for my arrest. I was asked where I had to answer as I had warned the friends against this spirit in many places, which – emanating from those in power – had taken possession of the people more and more and had unfortunately even influenced some among us which we could not sanction. Besides, the brutality with which people of another persuasion or race were hounded was repugnant to me. Well, finally I was asked if I knew a Miss X.

This brought back to me a certain evening, New Year's eve 1942 – 1943 which I spent in Y among some friends. Also there present was this Miss X now mentioned whom I had known for years. This person, though not having decided for Christ herself, had seemed to be interested in the meetings, especially the last while, was now apparently – whether knowingly or unknowingly remains undecided, for which reason I will leave her nameless – the informant of my remarks to the Gestapo.

That evening we were studying a subject from the Bible. Later someone turned the conversation to the events taking place at that time. I felt compelled to set right some of the opinions expressed, speaking also against the outrages committed by the SS, having heard of mass executions of men, women and children in the East and of the burning down of whole villages in Czechoslovakia. In this connection I expressed the fear of the terrible retribution exacted one day for this blood guiltiness unique in the world.

Another subject was concerning my personal position in the fellowship. Although I mentioned that among us dedicated to the preaching of the Gospel, according to the instruction of our Lord, there was no one occupying a privileged position, nevertheless the Gestapo officials considered Aue, my residence at that time, as some kind of "headquarters". Their reason for doing so was partly that my companions and friends often visited me, this being due, however, to the fact that because of my professional engagement, time to make necessary visits involving travel was not available in such measure to me as to them.

In addition, a letter with contents important to us all, had happened to be addressed to me, a letter which never contrary to their habit – sent on to me later. Finally they saw the job I had taken up as proof of their supposition. I was informed that my mail had been strictly watched for about 6 months. I was shown photo copies of letters addressed to me. I was asked as to their content. Although this was in no way a surprise to me – there had been indications for long – that my mail went through special channels prior to being delivered to me, yet it seemed in some way strange, that I had been under surveillance fully six months before the reason for my arrest had supposedly arisen.

This mistake of the management found its climax in their telling me: "We followed you all over the country. Sorry to say we were sometimes late, as you maintained courier mail as well." This interesting name was given to letters which I gave to friends now and then who visited me. Any phone calls I made were also considered "Courier mail". I must, however, admit that I really did sometimes entrust letters to some friends because of the feeling that letters by ordinary mail would be read by the Gestapo which I did not always consider to be absolutely essential. Telegrams I was shown sent from various stations by Gestapo officials or informers during breaks in my journeys, made it plain to me that surveillance to this extent had actually taken place. A pity that so much time was wasted by these people. But now what was likely the true reason for my arrest?

In early September of 1942 all our friends in the country – except for those in my then field – were under a ban on meetings after being first interrogated, some having their houses searched. My companions were under a speaking ban. I was still free, even though the Gestapo had told my mother in Berlin: "We will deal with your son yet. These spoilers of the people must be destroyed."

Some weeks later a policeman in Pomerania made the remark that all were now banned except the one in the mountains (which meant me), who continued undisturbed. True, I did not let them disturb me, according to our instructions: "Preach the word, be instant in season or out of season." But I was under no misapprehension: there was a special reason for my still being at liberty.

By December of 1942 all had developed in such a way that I could reckon with a visit by the Gestapo sooner or later. Considering the many families among the brethren whom I wanted to spare complications, I advised the friends in Saxony to suspend the meetings for a time, which they agreed to, after some deliberations as being the best solution.

The last part of the hearings, conducted by the other Gestapo man, Kriminalsekretär Scheithauer, made plain the actual reasons. This official was in the department for counterespionage. He informed me of Fritz Schwiller writing a letter to me on July 9, 1942 (and this was that letter already mentioned), in which among other things, he wanted to encourage us that although we might not hear any more from him, this should not cause us anxiety, as he soon hoped to be there where Arnold Scharmen was.

July 12 Fritz is supposed to have crossed the Russian lines. Apparently the letter had by that time not passed military censorship but was being examined more carefully and passed on to the Gestapo. There it was thought that I knew of everything and had even been in touch with Fritz somehow. Beyond that I was under suspicion to have influenced others which would be tantamount to undermining military discipline. Here this "gentleman" indulged in the coarsest insults against Fritz.

On the one hand he seemed to recognize Fritz' great courage in accepting the death penalty rather than turn unfaithful to his convictions, then again he shouted Fritz should have been hacked to pieces and quartered, as Fritz preferred a phantom, his religious

concept, to the most sacred there is, the Fatherland. Today it is surely evident to the whole world who the dreamers were, after the dream of this creation which would supposedly last for eternity burst like a bubble after only 12 years. It is only sad how many were hounded to their deaths for such madness.

Where Fritz fought his hard and lonely battle for something so much more real and better!! How much less the others invested in their supposedly so holy Fatherland! Instead of dying for their most sacred object, these selfish and brutal people acted so cowardly. What a contrast when we think of Christ the truly Holy and Courageous One!! He did not just quickly swallow a vial of poison at the last moment but went to meet his pursuers courageously: "I AM HE !! " The Gestapo knew that we did not practice any suppression of conscience.

Nevertheless, they tried to engineer something by which we as preachers could have been put on trial for high treason or the undermining of military discipline. Some things were probably discussed 40 to 50 times. To me at least it was beyond a doubt clear what the reason for my removal from public life was. The Gestapo had recognized that we as Christians were unable to obey blindly any government command, rather, that we would first examine whether we could justify it before God – and if not, well, then we would refuse to obey people in that very thing. After all, this is what we read of the first Christians and Apostles, this being their attitude that they had to obey God rather than men, is that not right?

The Gestapo hated this in us that we still loved people outside our borders and race and that we would not simply accept everything as right and good that served our Fatherland, rather only what was acceptable to God. For this reason the likes of us had to disappear. So the freedom that had been left to me a little longer was only aimed at catching me at an opportune moment. As their supposition concerning me, that I engaged in passing on news to foreign countries was wrong I was finally apprehended in this manner. I closed my interrogations with this, that it was the increasing tendency against Christianity in National Socialist papers, magazines and literature which had brought me into this position of opposing the state.

After spending seven weeks in custody at the jail in Chemnitz, I was presented the "protective custody order" issued in Berlin. Upon which I started my journey to the Concentration Camp Flossenbürg, April 10, 1943.

As regards personal feelings it is a strange sensation when entering a jail cell for the first time, knowing that one will be locked up and is henceforth at the mercy of brutal people. One's whole life now takes place within a space of 2.5 x 3.5 yards. On one side it contained a pull down bed, on the other a pile of plank beds which were spread out on the floor according to their being needed. On the one narrow end there was a small table and two stools between the sleeping accommodations and high above a small window. The narrow side opposite contained the door, a lavatory to the left, a small radiator to the right which was not heated, however. Usually there were 3 – 4 prisoners together, at times up to 20 had to be put up. Then they were packed in closely on the floor or leaned against the walls at night. It may not be hard to imagine what it was like when someone had to use the toilet at night, not to mention the air, bugs etc. In the mornings the cells were unlocked for a short while to take in water, brooms, shovels, rags, buckets for cleaning the cells.

Of course the stories of our fellow prisoners were known to us. There was nothing else to do but to wait for being called for Interrogation. That might be in the morning, noon or evening, today or tomorrow, perhaps as much as a week later, seemingly depending on when it was thought that the prisoner's nerves had been sufficiently shattered by waiting. Food was bad and contained hardly more than 1000 calories.

The first joyous and at the same time painful experience was my mother's and Wilma's visit. What a reunion after having been together just two weeks previously! The treatment of the family, by the way, was among the saddest and most unprincipled actions by the Gestapo, raising their hopes by claiming among other things that I would be back home in one or two weeks. It seems that the suffering of others brought them pleasure.

On top of that, these "gentlemen" kept endeavoring to separate the family from the prisoner inwardly, to isolate him completely and make sure that his removal would not cause an outcry among the public. At night it happened that one heard on their plank bed – you yourself perhaps unable to sleep – how prisoners in the cellar cried out pitifully due to some mistreatment, something dreadful in such a place during the rest at night!

IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

On April 10, 1943 – it was a Saturday – I found out early in the morning that I would be moved at noon. I was taken to the main station in Chemnitz in a green prison car and loaded into a railway carriage for prisoners. The journey took us first to Plauen where the prisoners of this transport spent the night in jail on the castle hill. Sunday morning we continued in the same manner as far as Hof. There we were bound and again delivered into prison where we stayed until Wednesday and were kept busy chopping wood. Again we went on by train, this time as far as Weiden in der Oberpfalz in Bavaria. A police car met us and took us up the Bohemian Forest under strictest guard and at high speed. After some time we saw quarries – high above us – and soon afterwards we wheeled into the "Camp for Protective Custody Flossenbürg".

Only now one became fully conscious of what had happened: cast out, kept apart from all loved ones, separated by an electric fence and machine guns, by barbed wire and bloodhounds and other such things! But now there was no more time for feelings. You are to jump down quickly from the car and line up for parade.

The first look: brutal, cynical faces of SS men watching us coldly, beside them prisoners in good civilian clothes that seem to play a special role. Using these prisoners the SS wrote an especially infamous chapter in its criminal history when they not only locked up those who opposed their ideas with common criminals such as mass murderers, pimps, robbers, swindlers, racketeers etc. but used

these same elements in this camp for keeping "order", enforcing work etc. by setting them up above those serving for racial, religious or political reasons. Other governments before them had treated them so much more nobly if they had really received some light sentence for some violations for which they themselves later sentenced people to death without scruples.

First we were taken to the house. Our things were thrown into a sack, we were brought into a shower room where we had to shave each other completely from head to toe. Then we washed ourselves thoroughly by means of the showers hanging down from the ceiling, adjusting the temperature to warm or cold. There followed an examination by SS doctors. Then we were driven into another room. There everybody received a bundle of worn out, torn rags smeared with red paint, not to mention lack of aesthetics or even hygiene. With them we went to the barracks for new arrivals. There we stuffed straw ticks, sewed our numbers on our things including the colored badges which identified us and were taught the most important commands, such as: attention, caps off. Evening parade and supper brought to an end first day in camp.

The second day was to bring me a lot more experiences. It began with our being presented to the political wing. Of the 25 which had then arrived in the camp I was the only one to appear before the officers' corps. A game of questions and answers began: "How old are you?" 33 years. "How much longer do you want to live?" No answer "Oh well, you have really lived long enough, haven't you?" "You are a missionary? What did you preach?" Christ. "How would it be if you preached to us, say next Sunday at 9?" No answer. "You probably think, these people here are bad, don't you?" For about another half hour I endured further mocks and taunts of this nature in the most cynical and sarcastic way. Finally they deliberated what was to be done with me and threw me out in the end.

The next department: the stock room. There all our things being brought into the camp were registered. Except for a few small items none of them were returned to us. Instead, a very young and equally curious Oberscharführer treated me in a most angry manner. After wildly gesticulating before my face for half an hour he dismissed me with these words, "I have only one wish for you and that is that you perish soon. You will carry rocks till bearable for you here. I will take a personal interest in you."

On we went to the sick bay to be weighed and measured. We had not been standing there for long when two of the professional criminals who were the darlings of the SS, no doubt due to similarity of character, were driving on a stretcher one of the political prisoners into the sickbay with blows. Hardly five minutes had passed when that unfortunate was taken dead to the crematory. Being assigned for work and for duties in the camp ended the second day.

The Flossenbürg camp was – like Mauthausen – a penal camp among the Concentration Camps. At that time it consisted of perhaps 3000 prisoners. The numbers remained at that level then, as those exiting, it would be more correct to say, those who had been tormented to death, corresponded in about to the numbers of new arrivals. These received the numbers of the ones burned in the crematory. So it is hardly possible to determine the number of those perished in the camp. The Gestapo just coolly remarked that the mortality rate corresponded about to that at the front. The living quarters in the camp consisted of 2 departments, block A and B. Each of these blocks housed between 200 and 400 prisoners. There was a communal dormitory, bathroom and living room for each of them. Really there was only room for 100 people at the most.

Later the camp filled up even more, so that the triple decker beds in the sleeping quarters had to be used by 3-5 men on each deck. At about a quarter past four in the morning one of the criminals who had the say in the blocks, called out, "Fall out!" Lightning fast all were out of bed to make it as quickly and as correctly as possible, there hardly being room to move for this since the over-crowding of the rooms caused one to get in the neighbor's way. Then you hurried into the wash-room to wash, all the time being pushed and shoved in the throng that crowded around the relatively few taps, before finally being able to dress in the day room. Then there was a long line for receiving the first food of the day: About one quart of coffee-like liquid or the same amount of soup. You quickly swallow this drink. You clean your bowl and are driven out because the living quarters have to be cleaned immediately.

Depending on the weather, this meant being wet through or cold even before starting to work. Fortunate were those therefore, who were assigned room duty for once. There one would receive a little more soup at times, be in the dry until work started and sometimes find a scrap of thrown away paper, off of which one could possibly lick a little fat or artificial honey. As soon as certain whistle tones sounded through camp all fell in for the march to the parade grounds. Standing there in that rectangle in military formation the block elders, clerks and leaders reported the numbers of prisoners in camp. The command: "Fall out to quarries!" caused regrouping, long columns of five filing out of the camp past the SS who dealt anybody blows or kicks who didn't keep in marching order, missed a beat or whose clothing was not in order. Past also the loud howling of the Alsatians and bloodhounds that could be kept back from us only by exerting great effort and so on to the 4 quarries. As a newcomer, of course, I was assigned – and especially I – to transporting stones in quarry 1, the part with the hardest work.

Here, too, as far as the eye could see, the criminals occupied the so-called "capo" or foreman positions. It was mostly lorries, though in between there were trucks, being loaded with stones of about a half to three hundredweights. This took place accompanied by constant driving, blows with sticks or kicks on the part of the "Greens" (the criminals wore a green badge for identification on their clothing). The lorries being loaded they were then taken 400 – 500 yards on the double, partly uphill, unloaded, returned on the double, again loaded in the greatest hurry, away on the double etc.

At about 10 a.m. you received – at the beginning anyway – 2 good slices of bread with margarine or lunch meat which afforded a 5 minute lunch break. So the work continued at high speed. At 12 the food was brought to the quarry. Again one waited – and that in even longer lines for one's quart of food, mostly boiled cabbage or turnips. We got the latter the winter before last every day for eight months. At times there was a little meat, barley or potatoes in it. On the other hand the food was stretched in this way, that about one third consisted of potato peels. Still, for eating there was a rest for 45 minutes. During that time one sat on the rocks and had the beautiful surroundings beyond the quarries in view. Afterwards the work continued at the usual pace until quitting time at about 6 p.m.

How often, as a boy, had I read and heard about compulsory and slave labor. I did not know then that one day I would see the picture of this and more – and that in my fatherland that I held so dear. Watching the transporting of stones from the upper rocks, the following picture presented itself: poor, emaciated people were pushing and pulling carts or lorries loaded down with stones, standing behind them a criminal or SS man with a cudgel which was used as soon as the prisoners stopped. Wild beasts are tame in comparison with these dehumanized creatures who would treat the poor prisoners who could not continue because of weariness and exhaustion, just catching their breath, with clubs, whips and kicks, beyond that reporting them from time to time to the SS camp command for systematic punishment, the command itself watching the prisoners by means of binoculars from hidden places to punish them in the evenings for alleged work sabotage, laziness etc.

The siren sounds. Everybody hurries to the assembly point. All move in quick time, carrying with them such as died that day, towards the parade grounds. There are reports and military commands followed by punishing those that are often totally unaware for laziness, sabotage, theft, smoking during work and other things. An SS officer announces the verdict: 25, 50, or even 100 lashes. He selects half a dozen of the criminals, impresses upon them the need to inflict the blows with all energy unless they themselves want to receive them. A grating is set up and the Greens throw their victim over it, then taking their turns to keep the blows strong enough they beat the convicted one the set number of times, being animated by the SS officers the while. In this, serious injuries like breaking the spine, severing the kidneys or portions of flesh were no rarity. All this happened in view of the assembled prisoners.

If in the eyes of the SS the offence merited more serious measures, they could for example sentence one to a year in a penal company. This detachment would start their march 2 hours ahead of the others to a workplace that was 6-8 miles distant and consisted of setting up a goldfish pond for an SS officer, drying up of swampland and similar jobs. There was no breakfast for these people and on their way home, about a mile and a quarter away from the camp they had to pick up a rock weighing about a hundredweight and carry it, the last 200 yards being uphill. Only those who walked that way and did that work on the wholly insufficient food can appreciate fully all this meant.

The march alone – round trip 4 hours – in those horrible, heavy, unhandy and bad wooden shoes was a torment in itself. The prisoners were swaying when they entered the camp. Besides, they were not allowed any mail or other favors. Right after parade one could trade clothing and shoes. But if the Greens, who here too had the say, considered the items to be repairable by the prisoner, he was quickly ejected from the supply room. If in their opinion the items were in bad repair, one ran the risk of being accused of willfully destroying property and being reported to the SS. At that time one could also report to the sick bay for treatment of injuries or illness.

However, I personally preferred to hobble out to the quarries even with a broken finger and feet that were both sprained at the same time, than to trust to the very uncertain end of such a visit to the sick bay. For a newcomer like myself, who had no connections whatsoever in the camp, it was most advantageous – as I knew from a fellow-prisoner from Buchenwald – to fall into the hands of a prisoner doctor who had perhaps been a baker or butcher and in time learned to perform surgery for appendicitis or something similar rather than into the hands of an SS doctor who would sometimes conduct studies of any of the prisoner's organs. It was simply a disaster to fall ill in camp. If during parade a prisoner turned out to be missing, the SS officer on duty commanded: "The camp stands!" Imagine, people in their thousands return from the quarries after hard work, frozen through when it was cold, hungry and tired, and now have to stand with uncovered heads and possibly barefooted, stand without being allowed to leave the ranks until the missing one has been found or until – well, till the gentlemen of the SS thought it alright to let the prisoners leave. It happened in some camps that this was permitted only 70 hours later. It is hardly necessary to illustrate what the consequences of this were, or is it?

The dead were laid out in front. Those who because of this exposure became cripples were taken to the sick bay and later returned to work in the quarries. The desired purpose was reached. At any rate, the SS knew very well, that the prisoners guarded by them were more noble than they themselves. If anybody became desperate they would rather run towards the guards and have their lives ended by a salvo than to endanger the lives of their fellow-prisoners by escaping. Therefore attempts at escape were comparably rare. Besides, chances were slim to regain freedom by escaping. Most of them were caught anyway. All the police stations were alerted. The SS searched the whole vicinity with their dogs and furthermore each prisoner could be recognized immediately by his clothing and the shorn head. Such an escapee was a pitiful sight when returning to camp. Usually he was in such condition that he could only crawl into camp like a dog. When parade was at an end and one reached their barracks there were often long lectures on taking better care of clothing, inventory etc. to listen to.

Perhaps a bread crumb or something similar had been found in a locker. Then the evening meal was finally dished out. In the beginning it still consisted of a quarter loaf of bread with margarine or lunch meat or cheese or jam and a quart of coffee, later there was only the sixth part of a loaf of bread (half a pound), some tea and at times about an ounce of margarine with it. After eating there remained perhaps an hour which was spent in thorough bodily cleansing, cleaning and repairing of clothing. Not before and hardly later than the command was given "Fall in", one was allowed to enter the sleeping area, dressed only in a shirt. If the Greens thought it took too long till all had disappeared they again used their clubs in the most brutal manner. At least you fell into a deep, restful sleep then. However, it often happened that one was driven out in the middle of the night to have one's body inspected as to its cleanliness. All this was about the normal camp life.

Because of all these annoying practices and the strictest orders not to help others the greater part reverted to complete indifference in anything but food and drink and developed into totally self-centered creatures. The criminals, however, who occupied the posts concerned with keeping order, led quite a different life. They lacked nothing. They possessed just about everything that could be had. Since very often the well-being of the normal prisoner depended on them, practically all had to pay tribute to these people, whether by parting with some of the food or tobacco that the prisoners received from their relatives or by stealing some of the property. Often the

Greens traded this again with the SS for alcohol or other items they desired. Though the web of intrigue which involved both their fellow-prisoners and the SS was feared most. Often they were undisputed masters of the camp where even SS officers had to beat a hasty retreat sometimes.

In all my time at Flossenbürg I actually met only 3 people who were kindly disposed towards me, and they were 3 young Russian officers. Once, when I – compared to what the others transported in their good lorries – had to push double the load of cement on the worst lorry and my strength failed, one of these young officers took my lorry without a word and left me his. Usually one was allowed to write on one or two Sundays a month. What a wonderful moment! To establish contact with one's loved ones for a moment. But how dangerous those few words could become at times, should the few words one was allowed to write seem ambiguous. Enough of that, though.

One day, skilled workers being in ever greater demand, I was tested in the electric repair shop and received an extraordinarily good evaluation. Several weeks later, after parade I was given a medical check by SS doctors together with others. They were to determine our bodily fitness for an extension camp. For this there was a scale of five. 1-3 was considered fit. Apparently those prisoners in bad condition were not to be presented to the outside world. I was given practically the worst verdict: 4 -5, and appeared very much like those pictures that have been made public, in which nearly every rib, tendon and bone of the prisoner can be seen. No doubt it was the fact that electricians were urgently needed and perhaps the intervention of a fellow-prisoner by name of August Skladal, as well as the intercession of the leader of the work detail, an SS-Unterscharführer who treated me very decently, that I was sent to Neu-Rohlau near Karlsbad with others, there to build a new camp and thereby eventually staying alive.

On June 1, 1943 – it was a beautiful morning – we left the camp at 5 a.m. What a release to leave that hellish place behind us and roam through fields and woods. There were 5 of us prisoners. Among them was the electrical engineer August Skladal from Innsbruck. He became such a good and faithful comrade to me. There was an escort of about 12 SS guards. We were wearing different clothes, blue and white striped but new suits. These clothes puzzled the local population when they saw us. Some thought we were American paratroopers.

After an extended train trip from Floss via Eger, we arrived at our destination "Neu-Rohlau" in the evening. Here was a porcelain factory belonging to the SS. Female prisoners worked here. For the time being we were housed on the factory site. There were already about 60 male prisoners from Dachau and several hundred female prisoners there. About 500 yards from the factory a hill was leveled first of all. Then the prisoners erected the barracks. My comrade and I had been given the planning, calculating, ordering and carrying out of the electrical parts of the camp. Our task was difficult enough since we had no listings, testing equipment or other instruments at our disposal. For the carrying out of this task I owe so much to my comrade. For 10 years I had not been working in the electrical field anymore, therefore lacked his extensive experience and routine. I had to get back into it first of all.

Nevertheless there was never even the slightest disharmony between us, nor did the Greens ever succeed in playing us off against each other. I will never forget this noble, good person who was a good friend and comrade to me in every way. Our main tasks consisted of laying electric lines, installations in the barracks, overhead lines, camp lighting and the erection of an electric fence, as well as the wire obstacles in front of it, work that we finished extremely successfully, in spite of conditions that were very difficult in part.

For an example I just want to mention that for months we had to climb the poles in those unhandy wooden clogs and blunt crampons. The barbed wire used for the electric fence and obstacles was poisoned. But we had to work it with our bare hands. Consequently, there were sores and boils on our hand for weeks afterwards.

On August 10, 1943 I was accepted as company electrician at the porcelain factory. The work varied greatly: New Installations, repairs and maintenance of lighting and power systems, of motors, of electrically powered installations, safeguards and relays; bell, telephone and radio installations, refrigerators, heaters, rechargeable batteries etc., all this made the months go by faster.

Even if Neu-Rohlau was sometimes strict enough and even cruel, it was no Flossenbürg by far. The food was – at least in the beginning – better and my work was not as hard by far. Most of all there was some rest now and then. This made me gain strength again soon. And it was especially Wilma's care to the limit, as well as being looked after so lovingly by all my dear family and friends, who sent packages which meant great sacrifice and doing without, that made improvement possible. I further owe the recovery of my strength to a Serbian lady doctor, a prisoner likewise, and to her efforts.

Neu-Rohlau was mainly a camp for female prisoners, an extension camp of the large Ravensbrück camp in Mecklenburg. There arrived large transports of female prisoners from time to time. The women were shipped in freight cars at 50-80 per car. Sometimes these transports took 2-3 weeks. During the whole time no one was allowed to leave the cars. So everything took place in the cars. I think that even if one never saw one of these cars as it arrived, it should not be difficult to picture the kind of journey these poor people had behind them. For many of these women and girls Neu-Rohlau was a relief from their main camp. Before they had to do hard work such as carting rocks etc. If their strength left them it was possible that dogs were sent to attack them that could maul them till they bled all over.

It also happened that from time to time some girls or women were selected at random for "surgery". For this, healthy, strong women and girls in their prime were given certain injections after which they soon lost weight and died. Just imagine what each one went through at the thought of the next parade, when dozens of "numbers" were called up again for "surgery", the cruel suffering when they heard the number of a mother or sister, of a daughter or a friend which made them know they would never see them again!!! What a shame for our poor, unhappy nation.

How justified my warnings had been. Here in Neu-Rohlau, too, there were many things that filled me with loathing. I saw these "elite" troops, the SS, and the nobility among them acted no different, whip girls, box, kick or shove them, trample on those fallen to the ground, mistreat them with their rough boots, cut off their hair, deny them their ration of bread and lock them up in unheated dungeons in biting cold for days, and all that for the most minor infractions of rules and many times for no reason at all.

In the summer there was often water feet high in these dungeons and no table, chair or bed in them. Then there was collective punishment. How often did I see those girls, about a thousand of them, spend the whole night standing in formation, after working hard for 10 hours, without having eaten and made to return to work again in the morning. All of them suffered in this way because perhaps one of them had been found with the bed made not according to regulations or something similar. Many noble people suffered the gravest damages for ever after. If one of the girls – and that happened almost daily – lost consciousness in the hot and poorly ventilated rooms of the porcelain factory, the female SS guards just laughed cynically, saying: "She will come to again" or even: "Let her croak!"

Though it was strictly forbidden to give the prisoners of the opposite sex as much as a glance, let alone speak to them, under these circumstances I cared nothing for that. Even today I am thankful that I had the opportunity to alleviate the lot of a few to some extent by supplying them with medicine and things like rubber, leather, nails etc. that I was able to get because of my work in the repair shop. I feel grateful to have been privileged to share in the lot of those poor people and to bring them a little help and encouragement in this way.

How often during the time when I did repair work here and there in the factory did we speak about all those subjects that were on our minds and by doing so I learned a little Polish, too. Some of the often repeated sentences were: Co slychac nowego? (What is new). Kiedy wrócimy do domu? (When are we going home). Nie długo wiencej, mislem dwa albo trzy miesionce jeszcze (Not long now, I think 2 or 3 weeks). Niech Pani nie traci nadzieje, Czlowiek mysli a Pan Bog kieruje (Don't lose hope, man plans but God directs). Ufajmy w tego od ktorego wszystko zalezne (Let us trust In Him on whom all depends).

The female prisoners were also of various nationalities and quality. While German women had often found themselves in camp because of irresponsible doings, the Polish women, who were in the majority, had among them many with great strength of character who suffered their lot out of love for their nation and with great dignity. Then there were those who had their property taken away from them or had been brought here as children of parents who had been executed. Many among them had been taken to Germany for forced labor and then out of sheer home-sickness had left their work places. They were then picked up at the borders and sent to camp. The Yugoslav women were taken as hostages because fathers or brothers fought in Tito's army. Even if working in the porcelain factory was no great benefit compared to camp life, at least there were some decent civilians there who told us of things going on outside.

REGAINING OUR FREEDOM

The closer the front lines came towards us and the louder the thunder of the guns became, the more cowardly one part of the SS became and the more brutal another. Threats "to get rid of all of us beforehand" were common. All the more my companion Gustl and I debated how to thwart this and how to help the decent ones among the prisoners. I had promised help to a group of about 25 Polish women and girls. Then unexpectedly 1400 female and about 80 male prisoners were sent on transport on April 18, 1945 in the evening after work.

The management of the factory insisted on getting rid of those who had been so useful to them until then, probably out of fear for retribution which could be meted out to them some day. About 17 men, among them my comrade and I, as well as 250 female prisoners, German and Polish ones, were left behind.

Those leaving walked for about 3 – 4 hours to a small train station near Karlsbad. There they were loaded at 120 to each freight car and were to be taken to Dachau and its gas chambers. Fortunately, planes had already destroyed the tracks so thoroughly that after 4 days of waiting on the site of the station all were unloaded again and were to set off on foot. However, they never reached their destination.

About a week before, several prisoner transports had arrived at the Neu-Rohlau station containing prisoners from camps further north that had been dissolved. These were left without food for days. Besides suffering from hunger there was also typhoid among them which caused 100 deaths in a short time. These transports had also started on that night, leaving behind them another 12 or 13 dead or near dead. We took them up to the camp where they were interred, the SS having fired shots into their heads. They could not be burned any more, as there was no more coal.

Our own lot seemed uncertain at the time. But it slowly became apparent that they wanted to get rid of us, too. The commandant of the camp, Sturmscharführer Bock, a person at times brutal, vain, indecisive and cowardly, claimed that there was no more food for the prisoners. To dissolve the camp for this reason could only be taken to mean that the problem of feeding us was to be solved by taking us somewhere else, there to kill us without hesitation.

Besides, the thunder of the American guns no doubt held an urgent message. In discussions by the hour my friend and I had sought to succeed in getting the management of the factory to prevent another transport, as the march of 350 – 400 miles to Dachau, without sufficient food and just for the purpose of being killed, could only be considered an act of insanity or running amuck. This however, only afforded a delay for the project.

Finally, on Sunday, April 22, 1945, the project was begun. Among other things I had put the question to the manager, what attitude he would take if prisoners getting away from the transport would return to Neu-Rohlau. He answered by saying: "The camp is up there."

Even if I could not depend on his word 100%, at least he was not plainly antagonistic and I also understood some things that he could not or was not allowed to say outright. I took counsel with some of the Polish girls regarding the possibilities and details of our escape, how we would manage it on the way.

Withdrawing then for a short time to my quarters in order to prepare for what might be the last steps of my life, I heard how the Polish girls – no doubt moved by the same thought – were singing a hymn and reciting a prayer together. What a serious, moral and courageous confession among so many who held different thoughts altogether. Then circumstances in our favor came to our aid. Leaving camp was delayed by loading the food stores which the SS was seemingly very interested in. At least there was no SS man in our vicinity and darkness began to fall. That was the chance we had to make the most of.

Quickly – behind our quarters there was a blind spot that could not be seen by the SS guards – my comrade cut through the electric fence while I bent back the wires. Immediately opposite us there were the dog kennels but we did not mind the barking and the dogs which started at once. Seemingly the SS was much too occupied with itself and the food. Then I hurried over to one of the women's barracks and reported the situation and what they should do, that is, follow me at short intervals in ones and twos. Grabbing a few bags and helping two of the girls, Maria and Irene whom I had come to know as people of great worth, through the windows and letting them through the fence behind our barracks, we made it outside.

First we went down a hollow, later we had to climb a hill and then reached a small wood. The other male prisoners who had watched us were already in front of us, other women followed behind us. Most of them immediately disappeared in the forest. My comrade who had always been courageous, remained at the edge of the forest to show the best way to those following. I guided those two girls a little further into the forest and let them rest there a little.

Then I ran back so as not to lose contact with my friend. I had almost come out of the forest again when I heard to one side rustling and barking of dogs, the SS already in pursuit. So I had to get back at once and with those under my protection set off in a different direction. Far from any path, through dense forest and thickets, avoiding any clearing, through swampy patches as well as rocky ones, we luckily escaped. It was, however, difficult enough to keep to a certain direction without knowing the area, without maps or compass, without signs and under an overcast sky, where there was no path or road and things had almost gone wrong. Because without knowing at first we went in a huge semi circle around the camp. But then – after a walk of 3-4 hours, and how difficult it was for my two companions in their home made sandals and in bad health – finally we were able to rest in a thicket.

Meanwhile it had started to rain. This was good for our escape, because the dogs on our trail would not be able to work so well now. Towards morning it started to snow and soon we were lying under a white blanket, even though being covered by the blankets we had taken from camp. As soon as it became light I went on my way to look for our fellow prisoners but was unsuccessful. Then enjoying our freedom we climbed around some rocks, basking in the wonderful sunshine and appreciating the nice view we had from there. Finally we found a little hut near a quarry and made ourselves at home there. We built a little fireplace from the many rocks lying around, started a fire and hung up our clothing to dry and to warm up ourselves a little. Not far from our shelter there was a creek running by. This gave us opportunity to wash and to prepare a drink from warm sugar water.

In the days previous we had saved some food. With rationing, we could do with this for a few days. As we found out later about 30 had been able to escape from camp. Then once again it was one of the Greens who had been making life hard for us for the last 2 years, who alerted the commandant, thereby keeping the others from escaping. He himself had nothing to fear since he was under the personal protection of a high SS officer. The SS guards were sent out with their dogs and the rest of the prisoners had to start marching. Our plan of escape had been to wait in the vicinity of the camp till the SS would have left, then to return to camp there to wait for the end of the war.

The first to return to camp was to completely search it and having established the fact that it was deserted was to put a white cloth into the fence. This would let the others know that they needed to fear no danger. After vainly pursuing us – they had not caught any one – the SS had been lying in wait for a little while, then finally left. We were very much aware that our plan would not guarantee success 100%. But where were we to go? There was a lot of shooting in the woods. It would have been an adventure to try and reach the front lines, one with a quick ending if we had happened to run into SS positions. We likewise did not know how much longer the war would last. And we hardly had enough food for more than 5 days, even if we ate sparingly. So this plan seemed to offer a lot more, also we could alter it some as there were plenty of hiding places in the drainage pipes of the camp which we could lock.

So the three of us spent our first day of freedom in our little hut, the rain having started again and falling the whole day which did not entice us to find out what the situation in camp was like. The next morning we were going to do this. But it came differently. Until then we had always succeeded in not being seen by any one in the forest. When on the second morning of our freedom I wanted to go down to the creek to wash and to carry some water back, I saw in the distance a man armed with a rifle who seemed to be watching our hut. Of course he saw me at once, as I was still wearing my clothing with their noticeable stripes. Nevertheless, I went – seemingly calmly – down to the creek, washed myself and carried the water back up. A short time later there was a knock on the door of the hut and the man declared that he would have to take us to the nearest police station. We still fixed ourselves a good breakfast and he waited patiently, too.

Then we started our journey. Soon we left the forest and walking along the country road we met a young army officer, accompanied by 2 home-guard men. He stopped us and asked where we were coming from and going to, and turning to me he said we ought to be shot at once. I replied that after all we were fighting for our lives just like others and for this reason had escaped from camp. And that it was our intention anyway, as soon as the SS had left the camp, to return there. He ordered us brought to the next police station, then to notify the Gestapo in Karlsbad and have us taken there.

I did not like this at all and so I interrupted him by asking if one might appeal to his humane feelings and have us taken to the authorities in Neu-Rohlau to whom we were known as decent people who did their duty and there to let us await further developments, rather than to deliver us into the hands of people who would treat us and also sentence us indifferently. After some reluctance he permitted this, adding that he was the new camp commandant. I cannot say that this was exactly music in my ears but later I found out that he was nothing but a deserted officer who kept some prostitutes in the empty barracks and who did some checks at road blocks to put a legal stamp on his behavior.

After some walking we saw to the left of us Neu-Rohlau, the camp and the white cloth in the fence! New hope filled our hearts. They were already expecting us. Gustl was also there. We arranged with the factory that we would continue to work there and they in turn would give us food from the factory canteen. Every day new escapees from the transport appeared, among them one girl, Marie Bieliska, that had shown great magnanimity and courage. A whole group of prisoners had entrusted itself to her. Neither tall nor of strong build, her courage and moral bearing simply caused one to admire her. She was a niece of the Supreme Commander of Polish Forces fighting in Germany, General Maczek. She was responsible for saving the lives of possibly most of her fellow-prisoners anyway. Not until she had made all their escape possible did she herself and a few others flee.

One of the girls was shot during the escape. They carried this unfortunate girl with them, bandaged her wounds but in spite of this they could not save her as she was bleeding to death, so they buried her before continuing with their own flight. She had also acted so gravely towards the Gestapo when they came to arrest her. Neither she nor her parents had implored them to let them go free. She did not want that. In working for her country she was fully aware from the very beginning what the possible outcome would be and was prepared to sacrifice her life.

Eventually there were 73 of us who had returned to camp. Some arrived totally exhausted after walking 60 – 90 miles. They told many sad stories about those being driven on, who were soon led into the Bohemian woods since the American advance made it impossible to continue on the planned route. Some fled but many a girl in her prime died from the bullets of the SS.

We now lived a comparatively good life in camp. There was not much work any more, the food was decidedly better, more plentiful and tastier. Probably the management had reported us to the Gestapo in Karlsbad. But there was no reaction from there any more. Two more weeks passed till the collapse of our oppressors came, of those who had subjugated the whole German people for 12 years.

The American lines ran through the town of Chodau, about 2 miles from camp. If the Americans did not come to us, we had to go to them. The General's niece, a Polish student, Sofia Gorska, and I drove over there in a vehicle from the factory. We were on the road the whole day, for hours we watched a whole German army go past us into captivity. Wounded persons filled the roads. All were making towards the west. We continued on to Karlsbad where there was a lot going on. After many varied experiences we returned to Neu-Rohlau. I had the order of an American Captain in my pocket. This told the mayor of Neu-Rohlau to supply us with food as well as all other necessities.

We had planned our departure from camp for the next day. There were still means of transport, maps and money to be obtained. The factory supplied us with all this. A document which I had given to the mayor to type, legitimized us and gave us free passage. In it the authorities along the way were prohibited from causing us any difficulty and ordered to help us in any way possible. This document I had signed by the old and new local authorities and then by 3:30 in the afternoon of that memorable day, Thursday, May 10, 1945, I was back in camp.

The small truck, which had been given to us by the management after prolonged negotiations, had been loaded with food and luggage and was now ready. On it 32 people, that is how many we now were, were to find a place. It was impossible for the small vehicle, which could hold about 17. I therefore divided the group in two and sent one of them under the leadership of my friend Gustl ahead on the road to Neu-deck. The others took their seats on top of the luggage. I had a seat on one fender, another comrade on the other one and off we went, it was exactly 4 p.m.

After traveling about 6 – 8 miles I called for a stop. All got off and being led by Miss Bieliska the group marched on in the direction we had agreed upon. The truck turned around and we picked up the others, again going about 6 – 8 miles beyond the others and had them walk while picking up the first ones. Shuttling back and forth in this manner we reached Rautenkrantz in the evening, it was already dark, this being the closest to our goal "Plauen" near the American lines. We unloaded the truck and sent it back. Soon we had found a good camping place near the edge of the forest, made a camp fire and sat together quietly for a while. All were occupied with themselves, their new situation, their loved ones and the freedom which only now began to dawn on them. Somewhere nearby a mouth organ sounded the song: "Gypsy life is fun ..." – Us men divided guard duty among ourselves and soon everybody else was asleep.

A new day began. At the American lines we first of all looked for the American commander for the purpose of admittance. But there was a lot going on and we had to wait. Therefore I decided on visiting the friends in that vicinity. After a walk of an hour and a half across the woods I was in Neuheide at Normann's. It seemed like a dream to be able to sit among friends again after so long and after so much that was hard and horrible. Minnel and Marthel also came at once. An hour later I went on to Petzold's at Stützengrün. Karl and Emma Müller were there also. What a joyous reunion! On the same day I took a bike to Zschorlau and Aue where I surprised Wilma. It was almost too much to take in, in one day. I could hardly believe that we were sitting together again. What a comfort to be able to sleep in a decent bed after 2 and a quarter years!

The next morning I took the bike back to my friends in the forest. I stayed with them till Sunday. At noon we got a truck from the Americans and at 2 p.m. on this 13th of May, I took my leave from 31 good friends, they going on towards Plauen while I returned to

the Erzgebirge. During the next few days I saw all the friends in the Vogtland area again. The many appeals of the authorities of that area for those who had moved there since the war to leave because of the food shortages, as well as the uncertainty of the whereabouts of my family, caused me to decide to leave after obtaining a document for free passage. In Werda, on my way south and west, I had my first meeting after a long, long time. I can hardly say how moved I was.

I do not want to end this without mentioning, for special reasons, a little incident. I saw the Polish segment of my comrades in suffering three more times in Ölsnitz before leaving Saxony. They were well and we were glad to see each other again. I noticed that the girls were still wearing the clothes they had been given in camp, though much improved in the meantime. I asked one of them whom I had come to esteem so highly, Maria Mielniczuk, if they had not been able to obtain anything else. She answered quietly: "I don't want to take away the little these people still have. I can wait till I get back what will then be my own." That was the attitude of a young girl towards our nation after this had been done to her by that nation: She was a Pole occupying a very good position. All had been taken away from them. Father, mother and six brothers had been taken to a concentration camp like herself. She had not heard any more as to the whereabouts of her family. She herself had been robbed of the best years – 5 long years – of her youth, been treated cruelly, had her possessions taken from her and been harmed physically. What a noble attitude towards a nation that had caused her so much suffering.

I end these notes which contain so many horrors being committed by those of our nation and even its leadership with this little incident, I should say this song of songs for this young girl, to point out how most noble people were mistreated through criminal delusions, only because they belonged to a different nation. How much did the Polish people have to suffer in the course of their history? How noble did I find so many of their members. Let us therefore look to accomplishing the good and rooting out the bad among us as a nation. And may we show the respect we hope to command from the other nations and that without any exceptions. But above all may Christ rule in our lives which will enable us to lead a peaceable, godly life in all harmony!

Written by Werner Gebhard in 1945

* It was later discovered that Fritz Schille was not executed. He was captured by the Soviet Army on the Eastern Front in 1942 and was sent to a POW labor camp in Siberia, where he served on the Russian front as a stretcher bearer. He died in 1943. After the fall of the Soviet Union and many records were released from that era. Sister workers have visited the site of the camp where he died and examined the records regarding his death there.