

TRAIN RIDE

By Manfred Davidmann

The rat-tat-tat of the train's wheels slowly sink into background noise as the moans and the stench take over. The partly-trained nurse (Hilfsschwester) looks after the wounded and the sick to the best of her considerable ability and her heart is pounding. Superimposed on the work effort are the tensions of the journey.

As she works her mind conjures up scenes from the past which intermingle with the reality of the journey and the needs of those who clamour for attention or just wait till their loneliness is noticed, the sequences broken by the need to concentrate when a task is particularly unfamiliar.

The train, a Krankentransport of the Wehrmacht, is taking the sick and the wounded away from heavily bombed Berlin to the safer and less densely populated country areas in Schleswig Holstein. She knows it is somehow connected with Rommel's Afrika Korps. She sometime wonders what awaits her at the end of the journey as she busies herself in the unfamiliar uniform.

Months earlier she had gone to a post office in Berlin to open a savings account. As she was paying money into the account there was no need to identify herself and she gave a false name. The disinterested face of the clerk behind the counter superimposes itself from nowhere on her memories. Disinterested and bored while she was standing calmly waiting for the passbook, while at the back of her mind her pulse was beating with the tense need for a new identity, with the fear of the consequences of discovery.

The train is held up for a while and she is busy looking after the patients. As it starts to move again her mind switches back to the police interrogation which followed when she reported the theft of her handbag and of the essential documents it contained including the ration cards.

All that she had left were her post office savings and "My savings were at home" she had said as she produced the passbook. "You surely have some other means of identification?" said the officer but "That is all I have left from being bombed out" finally made him provide the so necessary new emergency identity document and ration cards - using the false name on the passbook, providing her unknowingly with the essential new identity needed for survival.

Her mind switches to her children. How could they ever find her? Would she ever see them again? But just as she did not know how she had remained calm and appeared unconcerned when she had been given the new and life-saving documents so she did know that come what may she would see her children again.

Her name, her new name, is Maria Giese and this she had written so very carefully on the wooden coat-hangers she was using. The writing is neat and clear, soft and curvy but firm as if she was recording her determination to survive this living nightmare in which she finds herself.

The train stops and starts and rolls on. Its motion soothes some, gives pain to others and for a while she is busy doing what she can, doing work she has not been trained to do, afraid of drawing attention to herself,

afraid of being noticed. Yet the scene around her triggers memories which flash across the mind like hurtful disabling flashes of pain, isolation and despair.

She sees Leopold dying in Berlin's Jüdisches Krankenhaus in the Iranische Strasse, in Berlin's Jewish Hospital. Her two children are abroad. It is 1942 and they have had no news from them for the three years since the war started. The Red Cross postcards stopped coming after two months. There are others in the hospital also suffering from the after-effects of the kind of treatment meted out to her husband. She looks at him and he looks at her. Their eyes meet and speak to each other, transferring volumes in milliseconds. Understanding, encouragement, life's successes and failures, battles lost and won together. A kind and quiet man who had cared for and looked after his family in times good and bad, a good man who could not hurt another. His death certificate ascribes his death to a natural illness, thus denying him even in death the dignity of acknowledging that he suffered and died because of the beliefs of his fathers.

Overwhelming despair, isolation and loneliness. Her mind moves quickly to reject the memory and the onset of disabling depression. It does so but not before reminding her of how her old mother had to join a 'transport' and had never been heard of again. Of how shortly after Leopold's death her own 'Abtransportschein' arrived from the Jewish organisation arranging such matters, telling her to report for what she knew would be transport to certain death. She forces her mind quickly to apply the same soothing meaningful directing pattern of thought and emotion. The children were abroad, one could not believe the stories told about their new country, the children were alive, the war could not go on for ever, the children loved their parents, they would need her, they had all to come together again, they would come together again. She had the deeply felt conviction that one could not give up, that as long as one continued to struggle, at least for survival, against this evil corruption, then one could survive. She knew that as long as she kept going she would see her children again. So she latched onto these thoughts when isolation and loneliness asserted themselves.

The train is moving at some speed across flat country, closing in on its destination. The colours and the perspective into the distance are relaxing and a soothing change from the solid walls and wreckage of Berlin and of the screaming bombs. She wonders what the future holds. All she knows is that she will be taken to her destination.

Her mind conjures up again the hurtful isolation and loneliness, the solid walls of the coal cellar around her. Four months in the darkness of the coal storage cellar underneath the block of tenements in which she had lived. Hidden there by the porter when she would not allow herself to be transported to an extermination camp. Followed by the night when under cover of an Allied bombing raid a Wehrmacht transport had called for her and moved her to Potsdam. He had some contacts in the Wehrmacht and some people in a Wehrmacht unit, one of Rommel's units, were quite unbelievably risking life and limb by looking after her.

She had spent some time in Potsdam. Then the nurses uniform, the journey to the station, this journey north by train to hoped for safety.

We do not know much about the period in between this 1942 train journey and the time allied forces occupied Schleswig Holstein except that during these three years Maria Giese worked on the estate of a German Baron in Schleswig Holstein. She avoided talking about her past, she did not know who was friend or foe.

When British forces took Schleswig Holstein, the Baron was interrogated by British Military Intelligence about Nazi connections and activities. It was then that he mentioned that Maria Giese was Jewish and that he had knowingly and intentionally provided her with a place of refuge. She was then interrogated and when she realised that she could at last come out into the open she told her story but was not believed.

But she could point to her two children whose last addresses (in Glasgow) were deeply engraved on her memory. I myself will never forget the day I came home and was given this simple message: "A soldier called asking for you. He would not give his name or tell where he came from but he said your mother is alive and well behind British lines, will be told that you are well and will get in touch with you".

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