

Chapter 6

August–September 1945

I'm waiting to get to Bavaria, the center for war-crimes prosecution. Meantime, I'm involved in court-martial cases in the XVI Corps and the 102nd Division, both units of the Ninth Army.

We move south from Stendal into Bavaria in easy stages, as the Russians are not yet ready to occupy their zones. The frequent moving is a nuisance, but it gives us the chance to see central Germany. It is good to get away from Stendal. Our outfit has handled and screened more than 80,000 prisoners and countless thousands of displaced persons. Everyone has been on edge and dog-tired besides. We deserve a rest, and now we finally get it. In early June we move south to the city of Gotha in Thuringia, Germany.

I make my first trip on the continent in something other than a Jeep or a truck. We have a liberated bus with soft leather seats and a quiet motor, almost as good as a Greyhound. Our route takes us

Witness to Barbarism

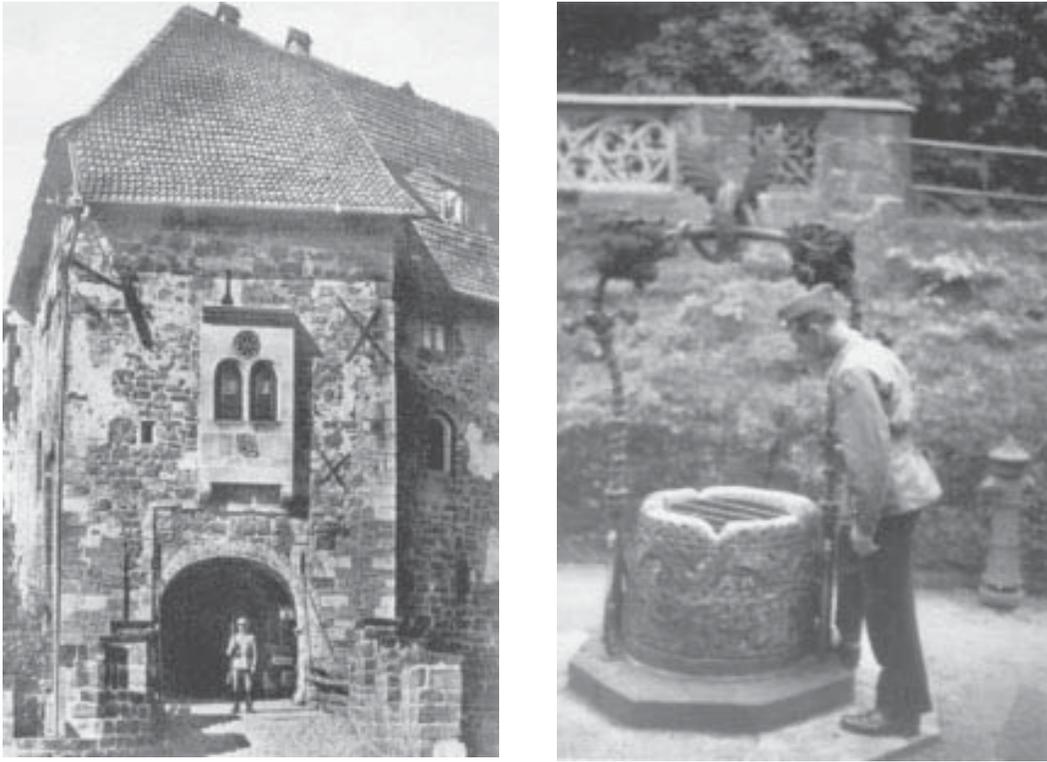
through the rolling country of Saxony and finally through the Harz Mountains into the state of Thuringia. The Harz chain is a dead ringer for the Tennessee Smokies—not as large but just as grand. Pine trees cover the mountains, and there is the same misty haze around the peaks. Even the blacktop roads look the same. The only difference is that in every valley a huge church with a high spire dominates a cluster of red-roofed houses. Ox teams pull the farm wagons. There are few roadside inns or billboards.

After a while, though, we see several of the legendary museum castles. The Schaufenberg at Friedrichrode contains armor and mail suits, lances, swords, shields, and other relics of the Crusades, the Thirty Years' War, and the campaigns of Napoleon. The Wartburg at Eisenach, the best preserved, is a storybook castle with battle wall, moat, and drawbridge. We see furniture and other relics of Martin Luther, who translated the New Testament into German from Greek



Wartburg castle, near Eisenach, Germany.

Witness to Barbarism



*The Wartburg drawbridge, sole entrance to the castle (left),
and the author examining a water well inside.*

while he was hidden here, and of Wolfgang Goethe, who wrote poetry here. We also see the mementos of Franz Liszt, who played concerts in the festival hall.

Everywhere in Europe is the sharp contrast between the common folk and the members of the upper class, who have mansions and castles on the high ground or at the edges of towns. There seems to be no middle class.

By this time most of the slave laborers in the large cities have been repatriated or housed separately from the Germans, in DP (displaced person) centers. Even after two months of eating double rations, they are so thin as to be readily distinguishable from German civilians. Some were hardly more than skin-covered skeletons before liberation.

Witness to Barbarism

Caring for these people is our first concern and a major headache. With few unbombed homes available, housing is the greatest problem. Often we must put them in Wehrmacht barracks, factory buildings, or even in the sanitized concentration camps whence they came. For a long time, 10,000 people have been housed in Buchenwald. Many have contagious diseases and require medical care. Food and other supplies can't be procured efficiently. A few of the slave laborers are understandably bent on plunder and violence, and some security is necessary. Many whose homelands are in the Russian zone of occupation do not want to go back.

I have been in many of these DP centers, and there is little difference among them. Despite the efforts of the American army to keep them clean, one is as filthy as the next. The army has been criticized for conditions in some places. In others the facilities are adequate, but the people have no will to improve their lot. Many never wash clothes



Erwin (above, far left, and at right) looks healthy compared to thousands of other skin-covered skeletons I see at Buchenwald. The Nazis forced 50,000 (on average here) prisoners to make weapons such as panzer fausts and cannon parts.

or take a bath. Some relieve themselves in any handy spot. They are fed and have beds; beyond that they don't care.

I've talked with some of the freed laborers about going home, and the response has never been enthusiastic. Many expect to find families gone, homes ruined, and the living hard. Some, especially those from the east, have left behind so little that they have no desire to go back. Repatriation committees for each nationality (made up of its own people) practically have to push them around to overcome their inertia.

Despite the army's order to treat those who refuse repatriation as German civilians, hundreds of thousands of DPs remain. We can't force them to go, but we really don't want to treat them like Germans. I suspect a good many simply want to stay where they can see Americans. Others are still afraid of starvation. There is little we can do to make their lives better.



Yesterday we got an order, classified secret, that the Russians will take over Thuringia, their agreed-upon area, in one week. But today, the American-controlled German radio announced the news, and panic began.

Every day in the week that follows we see all roads jammed with German civilians fleeing south to Bavaria. From children to old

women, they walk with packs on their backs, push overloaded baby buggies or pull carts, ride on everything from a wagon with ox team to a train of hayracks pulled by a tractor. This mass exodus has surprised us. We knew the Germans hated the Russians, but nothing like this. We know now, more certainly, that when a German abandons his property, he is moved by more than hate. It is more like pure terror. The GIs who comment on all this usually say, "I'd be scared too, knowing what I'd done to the Russians."

In two days the Russian advance party arrives to plan offices, quarters, and occupation details. The men come in the queerest-looking military convoy I've ever seen, with everything from three-wheeled pickups and jalopies to ambulances and long, black Mercedes limousines—all German civilian vehicles. About 50 men are in the party, and with great seriousness they immediately set about their work. The moment they appear, the window shades of the town are drawn.

The Russians come without complete messing equipment, so the officers eat with us, and the Ivans eat their emergency rations. I visit the soldiers in their separate billets at noon one day, but I immediately become more interested in their mess. They have black bread, margarine, and some kind of sour-smelling canned meat. First they cut the small loaf of bread in half and scoop out the center. Then they mix the crumbs with margarine and canned meat, kneading it with their hands on a dirty table, and stuff the mixture into the hollowed loaf. They eat it like an ice-cream cone and wipe their greasy hands on their jackets afterwards.

"A *real* mess," I think.

After dinner one night, I invite one of the Russian officers to my quarters, a single-family house that I share with another officer. The

Witness to Barbarism



A Russian major and his assistant (left) and a Russian soldier consorting with fräuleins on the American side of the Elbe.

Russian is intelligent, speaks fair English, and says his home is in Vladivostok. He plays the piano well, if loudly, and like most Russian soldiers drinks cognac like water. His tunic is loaded with medals, and after some urging, he explains that several are for major battles including Stalingrad, and five are for wounds. Despite all this combat he still wants to get in the fight with the Japanese. He chews gum vigorously all the while, and leaving, he asks, “Do you have some new gum? I chew this one for two days.”

Finally, we are told that everything is organized in Bavaria and to come at our convenience. When our troops leave Thuringia, the civilians are apprehensive. They gather to watch us load the trucks, and they ask a lot of questions: “Do the Rooskies stay long? Come you

back? Don't some of your soldats stay here?" They are clearly apprehensive. I don't feel sorry for them.

The trip takes two days, south through most of Bavaria to an old town on the Danube River called Vilshofen, near the Czech-Austrian corner. The country is beautiful the entire way—hills, valleys, neatly kept forests, lots of villages along highways and rivers, picturesque inns and houses, and no signboards.

The most noticeable wartime mars on the landscape are the dozens of work subcamps, each usually adjoining a small factory set against a hill or in a wooded valley. Each subcamp is fairly well concealed and a little apart from a village. The obvious intent was to decentralize industry and avoid air-bombings. These are subcamps of mother camps like Buchenwald, Nordhausen, and Dachau, where the parts of all kinds of military equipment—telephones, tanks, artillery, mortars, machine guns, uniforms—from the subcamps are assembled. Some of the sanitized subcamps still house some DPs. Most are decorated with antifascist signs and the DPs' national flags.

Out of the blue sky, on August 5, the radio announces the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. There is almost complete disbelief until *Star and Stripes* carries the story the next day. Just about everyone stops work to talk about the greatest excitement since the crossing of the Rhine. This excitement is sweet because it counts us out of the war with Japan. Going home soon becomes a real possibility.

I ask Col. Edward Beale, who in civilian life was a patent lawyer specializing in chemistry, "Is the atom bomb related to chemical or physical science?" He says some of both.

Witness to Barbarism

I soon leave southern Bavaria for Bayreuth in central Germany, to obtain war-crimes evidence. Here I live in and take my meals at a modern building, used earlier for Hitler's visits. It was built within the walls of the Villa Wannfreid, the home of composer Richard Wagner.

One day I visit Wagner's mansion and meet Winifred Wagner, about 50, who shows me around the huge place. She is the widow of Siegfried Wagner, son of the composer by his second wife. She is English-born-and-raised and a graduate of Cambridge University.

She takes me to the music room, and there I see the instruments on which the composer wrote his music. One is a large concert piano and the other a pianoforte. There has been no damage to the mansion or the high stone walls surrounding the large area of the villa, except for one artillery shell that struck the corner of the kitchen.



Winifred Wagner, above with Hitler, ca. 1938, at the entry to Festspielhausen (Festival House), built for her father-in-law, composer Richard Wagner. (Paul) Josef Goebbels is partly visible, right. With back to camera is Hermann Goering.



Richard Wagner's home, Wahnfried. Facility at left was built for Hitler's visits.

Mrs. Wagner is most gracious and reminds me to go the operetta at the concert hall called Festspielhausen, built for the composer. *Rosalinda* is beautifully performed, and the acoustics in the amphitheater are nearly perfect. Later I think about Mrs. Wagner and her musical heritage. I again wonder how a man like Hitler could lead a country rich in the arts into the depths of barbarism.

After 16 months in Europe, I finally get a leave for nine luxurious days on the Riviera. We come back to find the de-Nazification program in full swing. Flour mills and clothing and shoe factories have shut down—their owners departed Nazis. No provision has been made to reopen them.

We've known for months that there will be inadequate fuel for the winter, but the woodcutting program won't start until fall—too late. Military government detachments are filled with inept personnel who

Witness to Barbarism

duck responsibility and pass the buck. One MG detachment replaces another, five times in less than three months, with utter confusion. We are probably the world's worst occupation force. The long, tough occupation job should be turned over to interested career people as soon as possible. The troops here now have no stomach for the job. They are sick and tired of Europe and want to go home.

I don't have enough points to leave, but still there is a welcome surprise—transfer to the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, to take part in the camp's war-crimes cases. This is what I've been waiting for.



The author and Capt. James Feeks with army nurses at the Carlton Hotel on the French Riviera, not long before Horace's transfer to Dachau.



Maj. Gen. Lucian Truscott (overcoat) bids farewell in October 1945 to Col. Edward Cheever (Third Army JAG, stationed at Munich) after touring the Dachau camp and trial facility. The author (far left) led the tour. Truscott succeeded Gen. George Patton as commanding officer of the Third Army after Patton died in a car accident.