

The Last Train from Stettin

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18 September 2005

[This story from the Rebane family WW2 experiences was written for the third grade classmates of our granddaughter Fiona Kenney. The class was asked to bring to class stories of any grandparents who had witnessed the war at first hand.]

During the last few days of March 1945 we began hearing heavy artillery shells landing in the heart of Stettin, a city in Nazi Germany which we had called home for almost one year during the last dark months of World War Two. My mother, father, and I had arrived in Stettin in March 1944 from Estonia, our native land. We left Estonia to escape communist Russia and its Red Army. In 1940, the year I was born, the Red Army invaded our country and killed many Estonians they called 'enemies of the people'. Those they didn't kill were put in cattle cars and taken to prison camps in a very cold part of Russia called Siberia. There the prisoners from Estonia and many other eastern European countries were worked to death. The Rebane family was put on the 'enemies of the people' list because my father was an electrician and had started his own business. Several members of my family who could not hide were executed or shipped to Siberia in 1940.

The war in that part of Europe was very complicated. After the Russians invaded Estonia, Germany began attacking Russia and drove them out of Estonia and other eastern European countries. Germany then became the new conqueror of those countries. Since the Germans were more friendly toward the Estonians my family didn't have to hide, and we stayed in our land until the Germans began losing the war and started being pushed back towards Germany (it's better to see all this on a map of Europe). In 1944 the Red Army was again ready to invade Estonia and this time my parents decided we should escape to Germany and maybe go back to Estonia after the war was over.

So after living in what was then eastern Germany for a year, the Red Army in 1945 had beaten the Germans back all across east Europe to their own borders. And my family, along with many thousands of other families who had escaped from their native lands (we were called refugees), were now again in danger of being captured by the Russians. By this time it was known by everyone what would happen to refugees who were captured by the Red Army – all those (including children) who were not immediately shot or killed in more horrible ways were put on special trains and shipped straight to Siberia never to be heard from again. My mother and father did not want our family to die before the war was over, so on that very cold spring morning I saw my parents rush around our little apartment and quickly put some things into a couple of suitcases. They put on their warmest clothes and dressed me so I looked and felt like an overstuffed teddy bear. We didn't have a car and streetcars were not running any more because the city had become a battlefield. I just remember a long and very fast walk through many streets to the railroad station. I was holding on to my mother and father's hands and being practically carried

along under a very dark and cloudy sky. The sound of exploding shells was now getting closer and making a continuous din as we finally saw the station up ahead.

As we approached the station we were joined by streams of people coming from all directions, all dressed pretty much like we were and carrying suitcases. Everyone wanted to get on a train and leave Stettin as quickly as possible. The closer we got to the station the more people we saw. Everyone was very excited and talking very loudly trying to ask questions about which train might be ready to take them west and away from the Red Army that would be in the city before night came. The scene was totally chaotic – thousands of scared refugees not knowing whether they would escape or be killed before the sun came up again. My father led us right into the middle of the huge crowd and with my mom's help we somehow got into the station and onto the platform where there was only one train with its engine huffing and puffing while building up steam.

To me it was the strangest train I had ever seen, its engine was not up front where it was supposed to be, but right in the middle of the train and right in front of the passenger platform. It had passenger cars in front of it that it would push, and more cars in their usual place behind, that it would pull. This was done so the valuable engine could be saved if the train would run into something or off the tracks.

But that was not the only thing strange about that train, and not even the most strange thing about it. That train was totally covered with people on the roofs of the cars and hanging on to the sides, and the station platform was full of more people who were still trying to get on to that train. The reason for this was now obvious to my father and mother, this would be the last train out of Stettin. The people who did not leave on this train in the next few minutes would be left behind and be captured by the Red Army.

As we fought through the crowd to get closer to the train I saw grown-ups with tears in their eyes holding up their little children to the windows of the passenger cars. They were begging someone inside to take their child so he or she could escape. At that moment my parents knew that they would most certainly be left behind when that train pulled out. My father, who was a big and strong man, quickly grabbed me under one arm and by one leg. He held me up to an open window pleading for the people inside to save his only child. I remember being on my back looking up into the cold sky as the first snowflakes were beginning to fall, then someone from inside the passenger car pulled me in. It was one of the few times during the war that I was really afraid – I thought I would never see my parents again.

As I was wedged in between people in the passenger compartment the train began to pull out of the station, I could no longer see my mom and dad on the platform. All I remember was a loud moaning scream coming from the thousands of people who were being left behind. The snow was now falling heavily and the window, through which I was passed, was slid up into its closed position. Packed in the middle of all those people I suddenly felt very alone.

But, as it turned out, my parents did not just stand there after they got me onto the train. My father told my mom to go to the nearest open passenger car door and plead to be let on the train. No more men were taken into the train, but he had seen that some women had been allowed on at the last minute and thought that mom could be one of them because she was young and very beautiful. He then quickly forced his way to where two passenger cars were coupled together. There were already some men in that space between the cars hanging on to whatever handholds they could find. My father wedged himself between them and grabbed hold of something cold and firm, and hoped that he would not slip off of whatever he was standing on. Immediately without thinking, my mother took our two little suitcases and pushed through to the nearest door as the train started moving. She begged to be let on and in a flash of what she later said was a miracle of mercy, she was pulled into the doorway of the now moving car still clutching the suitcases. It luckily happened to be the same car into which I had been stuffed.

Later my mom told me that, slowly crawling over other people, it took her over an hour to finally find me. In the confusion she wasn't sure that she was in the same car with me but would not rest until she would search the entire car. One could imagine that scene - it was as if one sardine in a sealed can was trying to find another sardine by squirming through yet more sardines. When she found me half of my world had joyfully returned, but after lots of hugs and kisses we became sad again because my father was either left behind in Stettin or freezing to death hanging on to the outside of the train.

I remember very little of the trip itself after mom found me. What I do remember was looking at two men outside the window who were still holding on to the passenger car. They were hunched over and facing backward. Because of all the people in the way, I couldn't see them very well and after a while I could not see them at all because outside this human-worm of a train people were falling off and dying as the train chugged through the driving snow toward Berlin.

Germany's capital city, Berlin, is about 70 miles from Stettin and it would have been a nice two hour trip on a normal spring day, even if you had to ride holding on to the outside of the train. But on this spring day in 1945 a late blizzard struck and the train was now plowing through a heavy snowfall at a speed that made the wind extra cold on the hundreds of people hanging on for their very lives. One by one the people started freezing and falling off as the train sped through the white countryside. Soon the two men outside the window that I had seen before were gone. When we arrived in Berlin, most of the people hanging on to the outside of the train had fallen off.

All the people inside the train, of course, knew what was happening during the trip and my mom was very worried that my dad had also fallen off and died. As soon as the train pulled into the Stettiner Station of Berlin we rushed out of the train along with the other passengers. The train station was very crowded and the German Red Cross had set up stands where the arriving refugees could get a hot drink and a sandwich. My mom left me with the two suitcases and went running up and down the train looking for my father while some people were helping the few surviving and frozen 'outside passengers' down onto the platform. She found my father still holding on to the train between two cars and

helped him down. He was covered with snow and ice and could not talk. To me he looked like an ice man, but I now again had a mom and a dad.

Mom managed to get us both into the main hall of the train station which I remember was very brightly lit by lights in the high ceiling. She settled us near a huge pile of suitcases and we stayed there not saying a word as mom brought dad and me each a hot drink and a sandwich. As we sat there in the middle of hundreds of confused people all trying to figure out what they should do now, my dad had still not said anything and was just staring straight ahead. Most of the snow and ice on his clothes and face had already melted and he was shivering. His hands were badly frozen and he could not hold anything very well. Then suddenly my mom got a worried look on her face and looked up at the ceiling. I also looked up because we both heard a low droning sound that seemed to be coming from behind all the excited voices talking and shouting around us.

My mom stood up quickly and told us to stay exactly where we were and not go any place since if we got separated we would never find each other again. She left and walked rapidly in the direction of the train tracks that led out of the covered train station. I just remember sitting there and watching her disappear into the crowd. At that moment I felt very satisfied that I still had a mom and dad as I chewed on a sandwich that tasted a little funny as if the bread had sawdust mixed in with the flour. It was later I learned that my mom went on a mission that would save our lives for the second time that day.

The sun behind the cloudy skies was setting and it was getting dark and windy when mom walked out of the station on the railroad tracks. She was looking for a train, any train that would be leaving the station and Berlin as quickly as possible. She knew the droning sound that was now getting louder meant that over a thousand bombers called B-17s were high in the sky coming toward Berlin. (These were American bombers from England because America and Great Britain were also at war with Germany.) Looking up she saw search lights all over the city turn on like long laser swords and begin sweeping the sky looking for the lead bombers. Soon the sound of hundreds of anti-aircraft guns could be heard all over the city. And through all this uproar, the droning sound of the bombers grew still louder.

Soon in the distance among the many parallel train tracks she could make out a train standing there without a single light on. It must have just pulled in and stopped far enough from the station so that no one in the station could see it. She now ran toward that train and as she got closer she saw people with suitcases silently walking to the train from both sides of the tracks and getting on. She walked up to a man who looked like a conductor or an official. It was clear that this train was about to leave Berlin and, without thinking twice, she told the official that she and her family also wanted to be on that train. The man told her this was a special train and it was forbidden for anyone else to get on. My mother insisted and told him what had happened on the trip from Stettin to Berlin. The official stood firm and ordered my mom to leave immediately, but as my mom turned to go back to the station the official called her back and said that we could get on the train on only one condition – we had to come quickly and quietly, and not tell anyone else in station that there was a secret train about to leave Berlin.

Mom ran back to the station and hurriedly got us up and told us to follow her. She again carried both suitcases and had me hold my dad's hand as we walked behind her. I remember it was hard to get dad down off the platform and onto the tracks when we came to where the station ended. But soon we were walking very fast toward a train with no lights. As we approached, I could see more people coming from the sides of the tracks and climbing into the passenger cars. The anti-aircraft guns were now firing all around us and the sky was filled with searchlight beams. The droning of the thousand B-17s was now very loud and seemed to be directly overhead. Added to all that noise was the explosions in the sky of the anti-aircraft shells called flack. It was the job of the anti-aircraft guns to shoot down as many bombers as they could before they started dropping bombs on the city. We then heard the sound of huge explosions in the distance which meant that the bombs were already falling on Berlin.

As we climbed on the train we were directed to a compartment and found our seats. My mom had me sit next to the window and as we settled down the train lurched forward and we started to move. The train quickly picked up speed and I could see that we were now going through a neighborhood of houses. There were no lights on anywhere in the neighborhood but it had become almost as bright as day with all the search lights and explosions in the sky and in the burning city. I had seen bombings before in Stettin and in our native Estonia, but I had never been so close to it all. Before it had always been in the distance or we had been underground in bomb shelters when the bombs fell around us. Now I was above ground and in the middle of it all.

My nose was pressed against the window and I don't think I took the time to even blink so as not to miss anything. Suddenly way ahead in the direction the train was moving I saw a row of huge explosions that were coming directly toward us. The houses next to the railroad tracks were being blown to bits as the explosions roared past the train at the distance of about a football field. The concussion blast of the exploding bombs was so strong that it rocked our train's wheels up off the tracks and almost toppled us. I had never heard noise so loud as the explosions passed us and the steel wheels of the railroad cars smashed back onto the tracks and finally settled down. At this time almost everyone on the train was screaming thinking that they were going to die when the next bombs hit the train. My mom and dad were not screaming, but we were all very scared and held on tightly to each other.

And we didn't die. The nearby explosions stopped and no more bombs fell near our train as it headed into the dark countryside. Behind us the city of Berlin had received its biggest bombing of the war. We later learned that the explosions which passed the train were from 'sticks of bombs' from several bombers that were aiming for the Stettiner Station out of which my mom had just led us. Those sticks of bombs did find the Stettiner Station and in those terrible short seconds all the people in the railroad station, over three thousand of them, were killed. And those killed included all the people who just minutes before felt very lucky to have gotten out of Stettin alive.

Finally, the huge fires of the burning city faded behind us as we headed toward southern Germany. The last thing I remember was the click-click of the train wheels going over the tracks. I soon fell asleep with my head against the window. Everyone on the train knew that the morning could bring American fighter planes which then controlled the skies and strafed anything that moved in the German countryside. Ahead of us was still the month of April 1945 that would be filled with many more terrifying events before the war would end on a sunny day in May. And so at the end of that terrible day, our little family may have been the only survivors who were on the last train from Stettin.