

# The War Ends in Liederberg

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The German country road streamed like a ribbon from under the  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton Army truck we were riding in on that May morning in 1945. The war had ended a few days ago and now the little Rebane family was being taken back to a collection point in Augsburg for war refugees who were not German nationals. I sat between mom and dad on some olive drab colored military looking boxes; we were facing backwards with our three makeshift suitcases piled at our feet. This road from the little farming village of Liederberg passed through some incredibly green fields on this bright, sunny, and cloudless morning. Our stay in that very ordinary Bavarian farm community lasted about three weeks, but these short weeks left us with a lifetime of memories – memories that simply were tossed now onto a very big pile of similar memories to be sorted out later.

We must have been a sight as we walked into Liederberg in the latter half of April. Our party of four was made up of my mom and dad, me, and Rita. Rita, good-looking and in her late twenties, was my mom's friend from Estonia. (How Rita joined us is a saga all of its own and not mine to tell.) That morning we arrived in Monheim on a narrow gauge train that connected the small town to the city of Augsburg, thirty miles to the south. Our little episode with the P-51s (see ['1945 – The Year Easter was Cancelled'](#)) convinced my dad that we would seek a less exciting place in which to wait for the arrival of Patton's Third Army and the Americans.

I don't remember much of the short train ride to Monheim, but I do remember my father walking off to talk to some people at the train station when we arrived in the early morning. Trains only ran at night in 1945 Germany; anything significant moving during the daytime was strafed to smithereens by your local orbiting and definitely unfriendly P-47 or P-51. By mid April there was no longer a front line remaining on the western front which itself was now already inside Germany.

In April the western allies were opposed by pockets of diehard Nazi fanatics and Wehrmacht units of the disintegrating German war machine. Knowing it was going to lose the war, Germany threw its remaining organized forces against the Red Army approaching from the east. Everyone knew how Stalin felt about Soviet conquered lands. The civilian population was caught between a rock and a hard place. We were constantly assaulted from the skies while trying to figure out how we would survive the final artillery bombardment followed by the house-to-house ground assault. In the meantime, local Nazi fanatics were demanding that you remained loyal to the Fatherland and acted like you were going to oppose the enemies of the Reich to the bitter end. Any show of weakness there by the unarmed population was too often countered with on the spot summary executions.

That we were foreigners and refugees in Germany did not matter much. My 35-year-old father was prime cannon fodder for one of the Wehrmacht's foreign brigades which Hitler was throwing into the breach to slow the Red Army. These units fought to the death simply because they could not surrender or retreat – upon capture they would simply be executed as escaped

traitors. By demonstrating his skills as an electrician to reconstruct destroyed cities and factories, he was able to stay in the civil work battalions that restored structure, power, and plumbing after bombing raids. But now, nothing mattered and it was time to high-tail it into the countryside.



So there we were in beautiful downtown Monheim getting ready for a long walk with our well-worn suitcases. Dad had learned of a farming village about a three mile walk east of town where he might be able to trade his skills for room and board. The village was populated mostly by women, children, the elderly, and disabled. Their working age sons and husbands had long been fed into the greatest meat grinder that man had ever conceived. Most likely there would be work for dad, and even for mom and Rita. Next thing I knew, we were all walking down a narrow gravel road between fields and forests, heading east toward a place called Liederberg. (see picture, North on top)

The sun was starting to peek from between the breaking morning overcast and the colors of the fields, trees, and roadside wildflowers made a big impression on me. I remember being totally absorbed in the color palette spread before me. Starting in Estonia, for the past two or more years I had been in some pretty desperate looking urban environments, and now suddenly here was a world clean, incredibly colorful, and no buildings of any kind. My childhood memories revolve a lot around colors in which scenes stand out in almost Disneyesque brilliance and simplicity. I guess the world becomes a bit smudged and muted as we get older with brights turning to pastels, maybe on their way to shades of gray.

I don't remember our reception, if any, as we finally walked into the little village of Liederberg ('song mountain') tucked between wide expanses of green fields. As a kid I never knew how the adults did all the things they accomplished, and it always made me hold my parents in awe. Because here we were, lugging our stuff up the stairs to an attic room of one of the farm houses



on the south side of the town's single street. Rita was told that she might find a room and work in a neighboring village to which she immediately departed with her suitcase.

So there we were, about as far from war and chaos as we could imagine. My father immediately was shown a lot of things that needed to be repaired, built, installed, etc. He took out his little kit of tools and went to work. I don't remember the full inventory that he carried with him except for two tools that seemed to be the important ones – a small hammer and a pair of Swedish combination pliers which I treasure and use to this day. My thirty-year-old mom was an excellent seamstress who could make anything from heavy coats to fashion dresses, and everything in between. It wasn't long before she was also repairing, altering, and making clothes, primarily for the village children who had outgrown what they wore earlier in

the war years.

And almost immediately my parents were bringing to our little attic room bread, butter, milk, eggs, carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables. Mom was allowed to cook in the landlord's kitchen, we hadn't eaten this well in over two years. The reason was that we were now where the food was produced, and not in the cities where it was taken – with some inevitable 'shrinkage' - to be rationed and doled out in ever smaller portions. Throughout history during times of crisis, working farmers are always the last to suffer starvation. They know how squirrel away the good stuff and hide it from government agents. This was a prime reason that a few years before, Stalin had killed over 20 million Ukrainian kulaks – they hid their food from the communists and fought collectivization.

We thought life was finally back on an even keel, and all we had to do was wait for the Americans to come marching in. Wrong. A few days after our arrival, a small furtive band of German soldiers walked into the village and announced that they were going to set up a battle position across the field in the wood line west of town. This development surprised and disappointed everyone in Liederberg, because truth be told, the German villagers were also looking forward to the arrival of the Americans. Overnight life changed again to the grim side.

The soldiers were reputed to be an SS unit that would mount a last ditch defense from a well camouflaged high ground with commanding fields of grazing fire over about 300 yards of slowly rising, open fields between them and the town. They planned on not being detected until they would open fire. It was clear to all that they expected the Americans to fight from the village and charge them over a large and exposed field. The village would pretty much be trashed in the process, and none of the farmers wanted their homes destroyed. Here I should mention that the German custom is for the farmers to have their houses, barns, and outbuildings located together cheek by jowl in a village from where they would go out to work their surrounding fields and pastures. This arrangement also lets them help each other and have a richer social life. But all of that would be destroyed were the planned battle to take place.



The villagers were told that they would also be feeding the unit while we all waited. And so every day a soldier or two would walk from the forest high ground down the road to the village and go back with various kinds of foodstuffs. Soon thereafter, the commander of the German unit told the villagers that they had to build a tank barrier in the middle of their single street. The barrier would consist of two huge posts, each made up of about twenty logs that would be lashed together and sunk deep into the ground. They were to be spaced so as to let a car or farm wagon pass, but supposedly too close to let an American Sherman tank get through.

The village got to work. Men hitched up their horses, mules, oxen to wagons and went to the forest near the holed up German troops to cut down pine trees and bring them back to the village. Another party was assembled to dig two huge holes into which the logs would be lowered and then lashed together. My father was assigned to the digging crew, and in no time the imposing 'tank trap' was erected in the middle of the village. For us kids all this activity was very exciting, and we gathered, boys in one group and girls in another, to watch and discuss. We really had no idea at that time what we were looking at.

After the war, when I was older, my father explained that the logs were meant to stop the tanks from coming quickly through town and assaulting the German position in the forest. In any event, it was a community project for a few days and kept the men away from their spring farm chores. But what no one thought of was that the project piqued the interest of some very attentive eyes in the sky.

Seeing American fighters overhead in ones and twos coming and going was now routine, the Luftwaffe was long gone. But after the logs were installed, we noticed that a fighter would now come and orbit the low valley in which lay little Liederberg. The Germans in the woods saw this and were laying low, changing their food runs to the twilight to dawn hours. This went on for



about a week - one fighter would make lazy circles at about two to three thousand feet above the valley, and after a couple or three hours it would be replaced by another fighter.

The airplanes' droning engine became a constant in the life of the village. No one was really afraid of the fighters because everyone knew that Americans did not wantonly kill civilians, and there was no visible military

activity in the shallow valley. Nothing out of the ordinary except for those big posts of logs sticking out of the ground in the center of the village. Being interested in airplanes, I studied 'our' fighters the best I could. I noticed that they were not the fighters that had strafed us in Augsburg a couple of weeks ago, they seemed bigger, were fatter looking, and more fearsome in my eyes. Later I learned that these were P-47 Thunderbolts (pictured) affectionately called Jugs by the airmen who flew and worked on them.

While all this had been going on there was an elderly farmer in the village who had been working for several days loading his farm wagon with manure from the big pile outside his barn door. Such manure piles were characteristic of German farms and the animal manure was used to fertilize fields and gardens throughout the year. These piles gave every farm village its familiar smell, but people very quickly adapted out and life went on. The farmer had lost two sons in the war and was on his own in tending to his only means of livelihood. With pitchfork in hand, each passing day he heaved the moist smelly mess onto his wagon higher and higher.

Then on one morning my mom was getting me into some kind of one piece outfit with short pants and buttons in the back. To make it easier for her, she had me stand on the broad window sill of our room's one attic window. So there I was, standing at the second story level looking down at the activity in the village street. I could put a hand on each side of the window and lean out a little to look up and down the street. I didn't even pay attention to the steady drone of the orbiting fighter high above the town, until suddenly its engine revved up quickly into a roar and then a scream.

I leaned out to look up and saw the Jug stand on its tail and do a complete loop that took it away from the town toward the east, it continued the loop into a shallow dive that lined it up with the village street. My mother's hands froze and I leaned further out the window looking both ways to see if there was anything else going on. All I saw was a few people running to get indoors and a solitary manure wagon pulled by two oxen turning crosswise into the street to head to the fields west of town. The old man had finished loading manure and today was the day to haul it to his field. He was standing in the front of the wagon, maybe on the tongue, because the wagon had

no seat, and he had a long whip in his hand. I'm not sure he had heard the fighter because he was looking at the oxen as they slowly pulled the heavy wagon into the street.

What happen next probably took no longer than three or four seconds. The Jug got down to almost street level, was coming at an unimaginable speed, and opened up on the manure wagon. Its eight wing-mounted 50 caliber machine guns 'walked' right through the wagon and the oxen. The fighter was so close to its target that the bullet tracks from the four guns on each wing had yet to converge when they exploded into the manure and the animals.

Mom was still frozen when I instinctively pulled my head back in as the P-47, with all guns blazing, flashed in front of my face. Its wing tip could not have been more than twenty feet from my nose. I quickly looked back out to the west (war veteran kids don't always know when to be scared) and saw an unforgettable tragi-comic image that has been with me for over sixty years. The farmer was getting off the ground in the middle of two rows of carnage that stretched about fifty feet from him toward the fields where he should have been heading – one ragged row consisted of recognizable pieces of his wagon and all of its recently carefully loaded manure, the other was a trail of gory remains of the two oxen that had been pulling the wagon. And miraculously, there was the farmer, standing in the middle of the mess, shaking his fist in rage at the Jug now doing a 'victory roll' as it quickly regained its orbit altitude.

As I said, the telling takes a lot longer than the happening. Mom suddenly realized what had happened and went into hyper-protective mode with all her war-honed instincts now fully functional. She yanked me into the room and, clutching me to her chest, ran down two flights of stairs into the basement. At the bottom of the basement stairs was a heavy door to the work and storage room that was her goal. The door didn't have a chance. With me as a cushion, she took that door down and we were again safe underground.

Now the only problem was that I had a smashed left knee which was bleeding like a stuck pig. Mom later said that I didn't cry that much as they sat me on a table and started cleaning up my knee. I do remember sitting there being bothered more by the cup of warm milk the German landlady was trying to pour down my throat, than my busted knee. The injury was enough to leave me a lifelong scar that always reminds me of that May morning in 1945.

In the meanwhile, the Jug resumed its droning orbit above the town as if nothing had happened. I've always wondered what the pilot thought of his accomplishment as he realized that all he had done was destroy some poor farmer's ability to make a living. He no doubt had thought that the wagon was really a camouflaged heavy gun or other piece of German armament being moved surreptitiously. During the last months of the war, German units often moved military equipment during the day disguised as some wagon pulled by draft animals. Big tanks and artillery pieces were often moved in this manner, and discovered only after an alert pilot smelled something fishy and strafed the suspicious 'wagon'.

But on this particular morning the Jug pilot had just created a sanitary problem for the village that also provided everyone with two unconventionally butchered oxen for some delicious meals during a time that saw very little meat on German tables. I don't recall that the Rebanes shared

in any of this, but we could have had some stew meat out of it. No doubt the German unit in the woods got their share that night after the sun went down.

The village routine quickly re-established itself after that little piece of war was cleaned up. People again did their field work and chores, and the duty P-47 droned on overhead at its usual altitude. But Liederberg's real war was yet to come.

Other vignettes that I still remember from those weeks, but can't place in any order, are seeing a bedraggled group of prisoners guarded by a couple of German soldiers being marched through the village. All I remember is that each had a dirty yellow star sewn on the sleeve of their ragged striped gray uniforms. They all looked unshaven and tired, and passed quickly through the village heading toward the east. I remember no talk about this incident, although I was already at the age when I began to take an extraordinary interest in the conversation of adults. (This little quirk stayed with me and intensified until I was about thirteen or fourteen, then my hormones decided that there wasn't all that much more that adults could teach me.) After the war, I found out that the prisoners were probably a work platoon of Jews being returned to, perhaps, the Dachau concentration camp that lay 50 miles to the southeast. I don't think that they ever made it back since they would probably have been intercepted by American forces sweeping eastward toward Munich. That was my only direct witness of the Jewish Holocaust of which I would learn after the war.

Another time Mom's friend Rita walked to Liederberg from where she was staying. It was again a beautiful day, probably a Sunday, and time for a hike out into the fields and woods. I was taken along as we walked eastward out of town towards the trees that started about a thousand feet from town (see picture). It was in the opposite direction from where the German unit was dug in, and at the moment the war seemed to be very far away.

We made it to the woods and were walking along a path in some pretty thick greenery when Mom (pictured) and Rita heard crunching footfalls some distance away. I was yanked off my feet as they both dove into some very thick undergrowth and we all lay down flat. Mom put her finger to her lips, signaling me to be very quiet. Her eyes were wide with fear; it was the second time in as many weeks that I had seen one of my parents looking very frightened. We were very quiet as a five or six man German patrol walked by single file within ten feet of where we were hiding. They had their rifles shouldered, and all I could see was their boots, pants, and rifle butts. They walked within easy talking distance of each other and were gabbing quietly.

After the patrol had passed, Mom put her hand on my back and kept pushing me down. We waited there like a frozen covey of quail until the sounds of the patrol finally faded into the normal noises of the breeze and forest critters. When the coast was clear I immediately asked Mom why we had hidden from German soldiers, weren't they supposed to be



our friends? Mom told me that I was too young to understand the answer, and gave me an attaboy for keeping quiet during those tense moments. (Years later after I was taught small unit tactics and patrolling, it became clear that, to our good fortune, the German soldiers had violated at least three important rules of patrolling. Their intervals were way too short thereby making them a localized high noise source; they were yakking with one another which added to their noise and prevented them from hearing us; and they walked steadily without stopping at intervals to quietly look and listen. Had they acted more professionally, I probably would have had my question to Mom answered.)

We had now been in Liederberg for about two weeks, and my father had to admit that his plan to sit out the ending war in a quiet German farm village off the beaten path had backfired in spades. The final confirmation of that came one night after the sun had gone down. The evening chores in all the farm yards had been done, the cows milked, pigs slopped, and chickens all in their coops. Everyone was heading for bed, since night life after dark was unknown in such conservative Catholic communities—here God fearing folks went to bed after the day's work was done. Outside it was last light, and I had not yet fallen asleep when the first rounds came whistling overhead. They exploded somewhere in the field between the village and where the German unit was dug in just inside the tree line less than a thousand feet to our west.

Mom and dad were up in a flash, grabbed some clothes and me, and high-tailed it down the stairs again to the basement. This time I was carried by Dad who did not use me as a battering ram—my knee was still wrapped in a bandage from the last skedaddle to safety. Our German landlord family was already there as we arrived along with the second pair of adjusting rounds overhead. None of us saw where they landed, but by the sound of the sharp explosions, it was a bit further away.

When our ears adjusted again, we heard a lone voice screaming and calling for help from somewhere to the west. Apparently one of the Germans was going back up the road to the unit, probably carrying some foodstuffs, when he was caught by the first rounds falling short between the village and forest. His distant screams were drowned out when the firing battery (of probably 105mm howitzers) answered the forward observer's 'Repeat range, fire for effect.' Six rounds whistled overhead and crashed with a roar into the German position. Then we could again hear the soldier on the road screaming. Then the next salvo of six rounds came in, and then the next. And then it became a steady screech of rounds overhead and explosions as each howitzer commenced firing at its own sustained rate.

It turned out that our village was on what in artillery is called the 'gun-target line' (recall that I was once First Lieutenant—Artillery, US Army) which, unbeknownst to us at the time, put us on the axis of maximum error for the fall of round. That explained the occasional short round air burst that showered the village with shrapnel and shook all the buildings. This, of course, scared hell out of the exposed and wounded German who kept up his screams for help. By this time his calls were only answered by the sounds of lowing cows, grunting pigs, and cackling hens coming from the various barnyards that made up Liederberg. No one from town or, even less, from his unit was going to run out into that hail of jagged steel travelling at over 20,000 feet per second.

I don't know how long the barrage went on, but it was a very long time. Much later I would learn from my studies of WW2 history that at this stage of the war no one, at least on the Allies side, wanted to be the last one to die in combat. Every GI felt like a short timer in the Army, and could almost see the Statue of Liberty from the rail of the troopship bringing him home. So the tactic was to 'overuse' the number one killer on the battlefield – artillery. Shells were available now in abundance, and the fire was fast, accurate, and deadly; so what would be the rush to charge in there early and risk getting shot?

After what seemed like forever, the 'fire for effect' barrage stopped and the battery switched to H&I (harassment and interdiction) fire. This consisted of two rounds coming in every couple of minutes or so, and that kept up until about first light. Sometime during the night the wounded German quit screaming, and the next day he was found dead on the road.

I don't know about the adults, but I did fall asleep some time after the H&I firing started. When the artillery finally fell silent just before dawn, my parents and the German family went back upstairs to see what they could see. No one ventured outside, instead, all the curtains were drawn and we could see people in other houses also peeking out from behind their curtains. I noticed that a couple of houses had stuck white table cloths or towels tied on broomsticks and displayed them from of their windows. The town was absolutely quiet, even the animals must have sensed that something significant was going to happen.

After a bit we heard a very ominous sound approaching from the east – the distinctive squeaking clank of tank treads and heavy duty engines. We were back in our upstairs attic room and my father quickly went to the window, opened it and looked up the rise toward the German position. I was right behind him and crawled up so I could see too. The German position was gone; it was simply not there anymore. Nothing was there except smoke rising from still smoldering tree trunks. That part of the forest was now a charred field of broken stumps. Dad pulled me into the room, closed the window, and told mom that there was going to be no more fighting. The war for us was going to end within the hour, all we had to do was sit and wait.

We sat down and waited. At intervals each of us took turns going to the single window and looking out from behind the drawn curtain. I remember being admonished not to open the window or the curtain too wide. Mom and dad clearly looked relieved even though they did not know exactly what was going to happen when the Americans actually walked into town. We now heard the tank sounds get very loud – I thought that they were in the street below us – and then become quiet. When I next looked out the window I saw two lines of GIs slowly walking on either side of the street in full combat gear with rifles and Thompson machine guns at the ready. They were spaced about 20 feet apart and were looking intently into the house windows and barnyards as they passed.

Apparently another two such lines of infantry did the same thing walking the 'outskirts' of the village. Two tanks were positioned off both sides of the road at the east edge of town where they could provide covering fire should the infantry run into any resistance. It was a classical way to occupy a built up area that most likely did not hide any armed resistance. The village just watched and waited. A little more time passed, then we saw a couple of jeeps with mounted 50 calibers pull into town and stop. Almost immediately we heard some entry noises downstairs,

then many boots running up the stairs and our door was kicked open. All three of us instantly stood up as if we were spring loaded.

Three no-nonsense but rather skuzzy looking GIs burst into the room with weapons at high port, two took positions inside at both sides of the door, and the third said something to us that we did not understand. Mom later said that we all had to put our hands up, but Dad disputed that. I don't remember having to put my hands up, my eyes were fastened on their guns. The third GI took a quick look around the small room with one window and walked over to a little shelf on which was a silver spoon, a small silver picture frame with a family picture – treasures from Estonia - and a couple of my dad's tools.

He shoved the spoon, picture frame, and the Swedish combination pliers in his field jacket, said something else and the three of them disappeared down the stairs. Mom and dad just stared at each other, and then dad started talking in an angry voice. I didn't know what to think – these soldiers were clearly not of the Red Army that I was taught to fear, they were supposed to be the 'other enemy' and much better than the Soviets. But why did they take our stuff?

It didn't take long for the Americans to sweep and secure the village, and soon we were all going outside into the street. More jeeps and ¾ ton trucks came into town. Some American officers were talking with a few of the German farmers (village leaders?), the atmosphere was one of relief and almost had a friendly air to it – the conquerors meeting the conquered, and no one making a big deal out of it. But looking at the smoldering forest on the rise reminded everyone of what could have been Liederberg this morning, this was still war.

About that time a smiling GI walked up to me – I stood out as a very red-haired freckle-faced little boy – and offered me something thin in a bright yellow wrapper. Family history will record this as my first introduction to (Juicy-fruit) chewing gum. I took the offered piece, unwrapped and smelled it, and immediately concluded that it was a new kind of delicious candy. It went into my mouth, and after a couple of chews, I swallowed and beamed a big thank you smile at the GI. He started talking to me in an excited voice and also said something to his partner. Then he took out another brightly wrapped piece and again handed it to me with some more words. I knew just what to do, and it too disappeared down my gullet. Being conquered was turning out to be a pretty good deal. The two GIs started laughing, shook their heads, and just walked away. It would be two more years until I would have my next chance to properly consume another piece of chewing gum. But I never told anyone of my introduction to this new American taste treat.

Then someone decided that the 'tank trap' posts were going to constrict the traffic scheduled to go through town toward Monheim. The GIs immediately started clearing the civilians, including us kids, off the street. Some of the military vehicles were also pulled to the side, and then one of the big Shermans from the edge of town rumbled into the village with the tank commander in the hatch of the turret, and the driver's head sticking out from his hatch below the turret now turned a bit to one side. For us boys this was cool stuff going on, nobody blinked for fear of missing something really important. The tank slowly pulled up to the first post of lashed logs, and without stopping, just knocked it over. It then backed up and effortlessly repeated the procedure

on the other post. The German farmers' jaws were on the ground – so much sweat and groaning went into building that pile of now firewood.

Soon people began to clear the street and get back to whatever might be called normal, I saw my father and a couple of German villagers talking to an American officer who spoke German. The American called over another officer, and before we knew it there was a lot of commotion with orders being shouted and GIs rushing to fall in to a semblance of a formation. The officer said something to the men who stood still looking at one another for a moment or two. Then many of them reached into their field jackets and pockets to take out all kinds of stuff they had collected from the Germans and one Estonian family.

They laid the items at their feet, did a right face, and slowly walked off leaving neat rows of 'valuables' in the dust. The Germans and my father were then invited to walk down the rows and retrieve what they had lost. My dad got back all of our things, including the Swedish combination pliers which, for some years to come, would continue to play an important part in the economic fortunes of our family.

In the process of retrieving our little treasures, my father was able to communicate that the Rebanes were war refugees and Estonian nationals. It was a few days after the war ended in Liederberg that another  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton truck pulled up in front of 'our' house. The American sergeant told us to get our stuff together because we were going back to Augsburg. So as we rode south on that beautiful May morning, even I knew that this exciting and often terrifying phase of our lives was over, and another was about to start. Peace was new to me – I had never known a world without war. Soon we and all east European refugees would discover that real peace for us would not come for several more years.