

**Diary Fragments Tagebuch-Fragmente
from World War II aus dem zweiten Weltkrieg
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- Excerpts of Christmas experiences -

1940: Jaslo, Poland

It's Christmas. The company celebrates in a small hall in the city. The evening begins with a solemn commemoration of the comrades who fell in the Polish and French campaigns. Then we sing Christmas carols. This is followed by the distribution of post and parcels from home, and then everyone deals with his colorful plate and the spirits provided.

Today, on Christmas Day, we have organized a banquet in a small circle, namely the Company Sergeant Major Fritz Schulz, the feed master Sergeant Jupp Zimmermann and me. The three of us sat in the feed master's quarters at the white table and enjoyed a festive goose roast with red wine. The goose was Polish and the red wine was French booty. I have rarely eaten so cheap and tasty. The Polish geese are not fat, but dirt cheap. The average price for a goose was 7 zloty (3.50 RM). The red wine had been issued as sutler goods. Our company had gotten a 50-liter barrel. But since many comrades were on vacation and others did not like the slightly acidic wine, I alone had 12 bottles. But even that was too much for me, although I drank wine every morning for breakfast instead of coffee.

1941: Slavyansk or Rai Gorodok, Ukraine

Barvenkova fell into the hands of the Reds. Despite its 14,000 inhabitants, it was a meager nest, but in the Army Supply Warehouse it stored our food stocks, the sutler goods, and the supplies of food for our horses. One day, the vehicles that drove once a week to fetch oats returned empty. They could not get through anymore. The Russians had cashed everything. It was particularly annoying that our Christmas sutler goods was already there. Now the Russians enjoyed it. They even thanked us via loudspeakers, the scoundrels. Only a small part had been saved, such as briefcases and penknives bearing the arms of our division, the Berlin Bear. Christmas present from the city of Berlin to our division.

The cold continues to increase. The thermometer shows 25-30 °C below zero. There is high snow. Our Christmas party will take place on 23.12. already. In his address, the boss gives the reason: We are to be relocated. After the speech there will be a medal ceremony for the last battles on the Donets, and then everyone dedicates himself to his colorful plate, which, contrary to expectations, is more abundant than was feared. So, for example, everyone got two and a half bars of chocolate. I increased my inventory to five and a half bars by exchanging tobacco products.

24th December 1941 Ready to leave. Ironically, on Christmas Eve! I am pissed off. We start to pack. When everything is almost finished, and my platoon begins to line up, the vehicles are not yet there. They had not been notified. I rush to the drivers to make up for lost time. Hadn't they noticed that the other platoons are packing? Hadn't the company sergeant major notified them? Anyway, it was my fault too, because I would have to notify my drivers anyway. So it happens that the battalion has to wait, ready to march, nearly an hour in the cold until my platoon is ready. A nice mess. In the late afternoon, the battalion leaves the city. The sun is already setting, and as we march out of the city into the wide, snowy plain, it is already dark. Christmas silence lies over the white landscape. Only the crunching noises of the vehicles and the marching column interrupt the silence of winter night.

Nobody is speaking. I'm tired of the Christmas mood, as because of the delay in departure there has been a row with the company commander. I mean, the company sergeant major also has a bit of a blame, but since Fritz Schulz is a decent guy, I did not involve him in the affair.

After several hours of marching, the dark strip of a settlement in the white snow landscape appears in the gloom of winter night. It's Rai Gorodok, our destination. The village is located on the edge of the flat Donets plain, about one kilometer from the river. On the eastern edge of the village, the Torets flows past, a tributary of the Donets. I have lodged in a tiny little house. The woman who lives here is extremely grumpy, but I'm in the same mood, so I do not mind. I look at one of my platoon quarters and then retire to my accommodation. I finally want to have something like Christmas Eve. It's already late anyway. So I rummage my little Christmas angel from the luggage and put it on the table. It's a tiny wooden angel with a candleholder for puppet candles. I light the little candle and look dreamily into the dim light...

Early next morning already, the company commander calls me. He wants to visit my mortar positions with me. I smell the roast: he wants to fool me. I did not visit my positions last night and therefore could not show them to him now. The commander knew that, of course. Well, it never rains but it pours. On the way back he tells me that I would probably be removed from the list of officer candidates. However, his wish is not fulfilled, because after all, everybody makes a mistake sometime, and because of a single breakdown, no one is hanged immediately. I note, however, that even the Battalion Aide will not miss any opportunity to denigrate me. They do not forget that I let them wait an hour in the cold, and so my company commander has certainly been given a dressing-down from the battalion commander.

1942: Home leave in Berlin

Le Conquet near Brest, France. A few days after our arrival I'm back on vacation, from 18th December 1942 to 4th January 1943. It came so surprisingly that I could not take anything back for the parents. There is nothing to buy here in the small town anyway. The last time I also came home with almost empty hands. That's why I decided to sacrifice a holiday. I changed to Plouaret-Trégor and made a detour to Lannion [where the author had stayed some time before]. Here I first put up at our old hotel at the station where the officers of the battalion had lived. The landlady recognizes me, of course, because we are not long gone. She assigns me a room, I put my suitcase in it and go on tour immediately. My first visit is to the Alsatian merchant couple. I ask for butter. The woman gives me two pounds and says that if I had notified her earlier she would have been able to give me more. Then I go to the Wehrmacht home. There I know the catering sergeant who also sells me three pounds. By now it's getting dark, but I really want to go to the tailor's. The shop is still open, but it's all dark. A weak beam of light falls from the staircase that leads up to the apartment. When the doorbell rings on my entering, Jeannine calls from above: "Y at-il personne ?" (Is there somebody?) I answer only: "Oui!" (Yes!) Then I hear her exclaim in surprise: "Oh, c'est Monsieur Herbert. J'en suis sure!" (Oh, that's Mr. Herbert, I'm sure of that!) And while she says that, she's hurrying down the stairs. There is a warm welcome with kisses. After a long conversation with the parents, I leave the house with a thick chocolate bar and return to my hotel at late night. The landlady is still sitting at the table with some guests. I also take place in the taproom, and when the guests were gone, the landlady comes to me.

I have had nothing to pay for the night. So the next morning I travel back to the mainline and in Plouaret-Trégor get on the military leave personnel train.

Once at home, in front of my parents, I stack the five pounds of butter on the kitchen table and then add the thick chocolate bar. This is a welcome extra ration for my lovely parents and my holidays. In the next few days I am fully occupied with visits to relatives and acquaintances. I also had an appointment with Ruth in a Schöneberg café, which I only found after a long search in the completely blacked-out city. And then this holiday was over too. Ruth had taken me to Anhalter Bahnhof station,

and now the train is rolling through the familiar neighborhoods of the beloved hometown, to the west.

1943: Boshidar near Nikopol , Ukraine

24th December 1943 - Christmas Eve! Gorgeous packages came up tonight: Christmas stollen, cake and sweets. But I do not have time to enjoy it yet. I want to go to the men first.

25th December 1943 - First Christmas holiday! I suddenly start up from my straw rest. The day is just beginning to dawn, when the shells are cracking around our bunker. The holiday starts nicely! At the crack of dawn, the Russian suddenly amplified his harassing fire. Now it rumbles and thunders outside for hours, sometimes fading, sometimes swelling. Then it suddenly stops altogether, so that you think, now he attacks.

But he does not come. And then the artillery fire starts again, dripping, spattering, but persistent. Meanwhile it has become noon, and the hope grows that he will not attack today. I watch the fire carefully. With what is he shooting? Where is the fire? Does he reinforce it on certain points? Does he move it forwards or backwards? From such behavior one can infer possible attack intentions or goals. Besides, subconsciously, is the concern for a full hit on my shack. I reach for the telephone and crank - no sound. I turn again on the crank - silence. So the line is shot. Well, the battalion will mend it already. It is one of their tasks.

The hours of uninterrupted shelling gradually dull the tension. The attention decreases. I have not listened for a long time. But anyway, any change in the fire activity makes me sit up and take notice. Does the fire decrease or is it displaced? Now I have the impression that he just scatters the terrain. A strong harassing fire over the entire section. 4 pm. It's getting dark. My inner palm is wet again. Nervous, after all?

Finally the fire has stopped. Now I remember that I have not yet eaten all day. The beautiful Christmas stollen is still untouched in the paper. But I still have no real appetite. The inner turmoil must first decay somewhat. And with the gradual relaxation, the thoughts also return to today's holiday: first Christmas holiday!

For days the red tide has attacked and stormed us. We resisted. Although the enemy has won terrain on the left neighbor and is on our flank, we are still in Boshidar. He drummed us with heavy artillery, but it did not help him. He sacrificed almost a whole tank corps. We smashed it up. He has inflicted heavy losses on us, especially our left neighbor, but we are not giving way.

1944: Danzig

Training area Wandern in Neumark. The Christmas season is approaching. We send scouts to the villages to see if we can accommodate the men with the farmers over the Christmas holidays. The village population is touching helpful. I have already housed my entire company. Now I'm still looking for a place for Carola [author's wife] and me, because I want to try to bring Carola in over the holidays.

21st December 1944. All our plans are upset! We are not going to the west, but to Courland! The third Courland battle has just begun, and the fortress urgently needs reinforcement. And since we are ready, we are thrown in. To make things faster, we only take our weapons with us. Within a few hours we have handed over all horses and vehicles and get ready to march. We change our name to "Corps MG Battalion 410".

23rd December 1944. We are in Danzig. Since the date of our passage has not yet been determined, we were accommodated in a barracks near the port. Here we meet the preparations for Christmas Eve. The platoons have procured Christmas trees and set up their lodgings for the celebration. In my company office the sutler goods pile up to mountains. Everywhere on the floor, on tables and chairs,

there are boxes and packages of baker's ware. They are donated by the Wehrmacht, the Party, the Red Cross, and the Danzig women's organizations. The homeland does everything in its power to relieve the fighters of their hard fate. This sacrifice of the people and individuals has amazed me again and again. A group of soldiers are busy distributing the presents on the individual platoons. I myself am so busy with official running that I cannot look after this work.

A soldier of my company lives in Danzig: he invites me for the second holiday to roast duck in his parents' house. But I decline with thanks, because I do not want to commit myself in any way.

Our soldiers are already wearing their winter gear. Throughout the streets, our soldiers are now walking in winter camouflage suits and thick felt boots.

In the afternoon the battalion gathers in a hall where a propaganda officer gives us a lecture on the situation in Courland. He describes the size of the Courland area we still hold and names the number and strength of the divisions, artillery, and tanks fighting there. There are around 300,000 men. He wants to prove that the Courland fortress is by no means a mousetrap but a bastion that gives the Russians no end of trouble and binds strong Soviet forces that would otherwise march against East Prussia.

Of course you can agree with that. It is not even completely wrong, but he does not mention the crucial point: that, on the whole, we are withdrawing. He also did not say, of course, that we had to give up Riga three months ago. He's a propaganda man.

24th December 1944 -Christmas Eve in Danzig. It is dark. I go from one platoon to the other to attend their Christmas parties. At every platoon I give a short speech. At last I am at the 1st Platoon. Here, to my great surprise, the platoon leader, Lieutenant Harms, hands me a Christmas present from the company. It is a book by Ludwig Thoma and a very nice copper engraving of the Krantor.

By now it's been 11 pm, and I'm going over to the casino, where we officers want to gather a little bit. I take a packet of Carola's delicious biscuits with me that came by mail today. These are the only biscuits I eat this Christmas because of the huge quantities of baked goods that the company has received, I did not get a single crumb because I was under way all day and the distributors gave the things to the platoons and the company commander's squad only.

Now we are sitting together in the casino. The battalion commander, his adjutant, the orderly officer, and we four company commanders. I offer my biscuits, which appeal especially to the commander. After the hustle and bustle of the day we feel the especially pleasant silence of the room we are sitting in. There is little talk, but there is a warm and friendly atmosphere in our get-together. We are all righteously tired and that is why we are not extending our celebration for too long.

I've packed a big package of unnecessary stuff that I want to send to Cammin in Pomerania [Carola's place]. Including my thick driver's coat and the Christmas gifts of the company. The man from Gdansk has offered to take it home. His wife will then take it to the post office.

25th December 1944 - First Christmas holiday. At 7 o'clock in the morning the battalion stands at the wharf. We begin loading. The soldiers stand in long lines, piled high with a backpack, a laundry bag, a carbine, a steel helmet and a lot of equipment on the paddock. Then the head begins to move, and man after man climbs up the swaying gangway. While the men board the ship, the derricks swing our equipment on board in large nets and put it on deck or sink it into the depth of the hatch.

We are at sea. The naval officers have asked us to their small salon, where we jointly speak of the uncertain future with a bottle of cognac. One of the officers is rolling drunk. He has drowned Christmas spirit and hangover in alcohol, but he does not show it.

1945: Forest camp Salaspils near Riga

Peeling potatoes in the afternoon. 6 pm ceremony in the "Club Hall". Then we go back to our barracks and eat what we have saved ourselves for days, celebrating a little "privately", exchange

congratulations. A sense of community of fate and camaraderie revives. In the corner of the barrack there is the Christmas tree struck in the forest, adorned with flashing tin stars cut from yellow and white tin cans, hung with silver foil threads and dabbed with cotton balls from the hospital barracks. Silhouettes of Christmas motives are stuck to the windows.

1946: Smolensk, Russia

On Christmas Eve, work until 4 pm. End was promised for 1 pm. Dinner a little better than usual, with a berliner. After that, gathering in the big cinema hall to celebrate the red Christmas. An Antifa comrade read the story of the poor proletarian child peering through the windows of the capitalist mansion and seeing the mountains of gifts under the decorated Christmas tree. In the text, class struggle slogans, tirades of hatred, envy and - maybe - a grain of truth. (If we put the idea of this story into action right now, the Landers would have to attack and overthrow the camp nobility, for our wealthy capitalists are the members of the camp nobility!) The assembly listen to story indifferently. There is no notion of Christmas mood. Finally, a song is to be sung. I was standing in the back of the room and I do not know if someone suggested the song or just began to sing. Anyway, the whole hall immediately fell in, and then the hall, with hundreds of voices, boomed: " Silent night, holy night..." The red comrades in front look speechlessly at the tabletop. Silently they listen to the song till the end: "... Christ the Savior is here...!" Then the assembly broke up.

I know well that inner peace is more important than external. Nevertheless, I also ask for external peace and salvation from physical need. Oh, Mary, help, come to us.

1947: Smolensk, Russia

December. Christmas silhouettes stick at the window of the NKVD office (of the Political Commissar). Some things in Russia are incomprehensible.

Christmas 1947. Post: none. Additional rations: none. Working time reduction at the holiday: none. For the 2 hours we ended earlier, some night commands had to go out, on Christmas Eve! The order that the 25th December should remain free of work reportedly arrives on the 27th. We are used to such deceit from the Ivan.

25th December. One dead (heart failure).

1948: Borisov, Belarus - no Christmas related entries!

26th December 1948. Punishments for "refusal to work" and "sabotage".

On 20th October 1949 the author arrived back in Warendorf in Westphalia where Carola had taken refuge.