



German Soldier Erwin Grubba

Born in 1925 in East Prussia, Erwin moved with his family to Berlin at the age of five. Having served in the First World War, Erwin's father became a Border Guard before joining the Headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Dept in Berlin. Erwin lost his sister in infancy but had a younger brother. The family was deeply religious and Erwin's father voted for the Centre Party, being anti-Nazi and a monarchist. He enjoyed a happy childhood and worshipped his mother:

in my heart of hearts, she came straight after the Madonna.

My father never voted anything but the Centre Party. He never voted for the Nazis, in fact he wouldn't even have a picture of Hitler in the house. He once took me on a walk in the woods near Berlin where we rented a small cottage and said "I tell you one thing, this is going to be the story of the apocalypse because this fellow is going to bring us to war and disaster". In our house my mother bought from Jewish shops on principle and I had a Jewish dentist and a Jewish doctor.



Erwin Grubba

Erwin attended a Catholic primary school in Berlin, where he made good progress and then on to grammar school, concentrating on languages and literature.

My school had no National Socialism. In fact, the teaching staff was like my father, all old Conservatives. We had no pictures of Hitler in the classroom, but there was one somewhere in the corridor near the assembly hall, just to go through the motions. I was with The Church Youth Movement and had good friends there. We always cracked all the anti-Hitler jokes that were circulating in Berlin, in a small town that would have been impossible. I used to stand up with a little comb to make a moustache, brush my hair down and imitate Adolf Hitler, because I was good at imitating voices.

During the war they came once more to try to make me join the Hitler Youth and said "Look, you are not in yet, what are you doing? You will never get a job after the end of the war. You will never enter university" and I thought "Well, you won't even be here" but I didn't tell them that. I said "Well, you know what? I prefer the foxtrot to the goosestep" and that shut them up.

The night before I was called up, the RAF paid us a visit and wiped us off the map in Berlin. We were in the cellar fortunately as the whole caboodle crashed on top of us. We had to tunnel our way out. We made it, and father had already made in the front garden a small trench like the First World War trenches, it was safer than the house actually, and we made a dash into there with what we were wearing. Singed shirts and smoky clothes, and that was it. The next morning I had to report to the barracks. That was August 1943. Remember by that time they were taking almost anybody with two



legs and two arms, as cannon fodder for the Eastern Front. I think if I had four weeks that would be the maximum training, just enough to throw hand grenades, fire a rifle, to learn how to cut barbed wire, and then we had to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler the day before we were shipped out - which I didn't, well, I mean I stood there as well but I didn't move my lips, I wasn't going to repeat that.

Then in typical German Army style we were put into cattle trucks, forty of us, with a little layer of straw scattered over the bare wooden floor. You can imagine; no proper ablutions, when the train stopped you just got out on the side of the embankment and as for food, cabbage leaves boiled in water with a few bits of stringy meat in it, more gristle than meat, and two slices of bread and a bit of marg. It was as miserable as can be.

As his train headed for Russia, Erwin felt:

depressed is the only word to say, utterly depressed, and the civilians looked at us with glowing eyes as if to say "we are going to put a knife to your throat", you could feel the hatred of them, and you cannot blame them when you hear how they were treated. You also knew that the same man with a shovel doing some digging in his front garden, would have a rifle at night-time. Then we saw a little boy sitting on the embankment and he had a big tin over a little fire with a rat in it that he stewing for his meal. He asked us for bread so naturally quite a few of us cut a slice off our meagre ration and threw him a piece of bread.

Erwin was randomly selected for a 'special mission' in the West which probably saved his life, in view of the fate of the remainder of his unit. His spirits lifted as he headed into France:

we saw women properly dressed with stockings, high heeled shoes, and lipstick which you didn't see in Russia'. However he would not be destined to stay for long, 'then comes the crowning glory when the officer said "and you lot, that bunch, you step over there, you are going to go by boat, you are going across to the Channel Islands". "Yippee", I thought, "They are British aren't they? Oh, it couldn't be better' and on arrival, 'What do I see to my glad eyes on the quayside regulating the traffic? A British bobby.

In Guernsey Erwin guarded certain strong-points and also roads at night time, as a curfew was imposed on civilians after 10 pm.

The beaches of course were heavily mined and barb-wired and being Germans, they had every mine listed on a map. When the British came, and they wanted to lift them, then at least we knew where they were without causing extra casualties.

Erwin helped to mark the position of the mines which 'got me off square-bashing a bit' and due to his command of English, quickly made friends among the islanders. He was sent out to check houses for illicit radios and went through the motions of opening one or two cupboards, the islanders having had plenty of notice of his visit.

Soon it became clear that the invasion was imminent



first of all, everybody expected it. You could tell by the build-up of the bombing. They came over in hordes, like locusts, unloading stuff in northern France. When D-Day came, we had a first class seat free of charge, like sitting on a balcony seat in a theatre, and by jove it was impressive. The sky was black with fliers for seventy-two hours non-stop and artillery from those battleships, you could see them with your glasses. I knew 'the British are not going to come and land here. What for? To kill their own and lose more lives? For what? They have us in the bag. As soon as they are on the mainland we are cut off. Very soon even the high-ups said "well take your tin hats off and go back to normal duties but be more alert".

Amongst Erwin's own troops he had to be wary, yet there was a definite anti-war feeling:

In 1944 I remember when the fellow who read the news said "An attempt has been made on the Fuhrer's life, but fortunately his life was saved", whereupon a voice from the ranks said "Oh shit".

Three German soldiers lost hope after D Day and committed suicide, while the winter offensive in the Ardennes produced a different reaction in others 'the fanatics thought "now they are coming to rescue us".'

For the following few months, troops on Guernsey waited for the war to finish. Erwin had mixed feelings, aware that he was relatively safe but worried for the well-being of his family as 'there wasn't any news whatsoever.'

By this stage, there was a severe shortage of food:

my ribs were showing like a key on an accordion. In fact, one day I was on duty with my steel helmet on and probably with the pressure of the helmet I keeled over. We organised concerts, we had literary readings, even a cabaret to take our minds off things and the hours of duty were cut. For instance there was a compulsory forty winks period in the afternoon after our so-called lunch, which was nettles boiled in sea water. I mean these are all signs of decay aren't they, when an Army has to do that?.

Erwin celebrated VE Day with his civilian friends:

'I had to be supported by the Sergeant Major on one side and another Corporal on the other to get back to my billet and to my bed, because I had knocked down the wine a bit too much, but we had a great celebration'.

At the beginning of June 1945 British troops arrived:

six cyclists from the Royal Artillery in Portsmouth came near our barracks and stopped as they didn't quite trust us, so I stepped forward, cheeky me as usual and said "How do you do, have you come to collect our weapons?" "Oh no, we were just told to patrol and see you are behaving yourselves". I asked one what he did in civvy street and he told me he was a taxi driver, and that was my first encounter with the British forces face to face.

Shortly afterwards the German troops were taken as POWs to Haltwhistle in Northumberland, having given the ladies of the WI a fright on their journey:



Some voluntary organisations were still working on the platforms issuing free tea to troops returning from Europe. They thought we were British and came up to us with cups of tea and when we started talking there was a mighty big scream, "Ah, ah Germans!" and they scattered as if someone had thrown a bomb among them, which made us roar with laughter.

The English countryside, as the troops marched towards camp, had an unexpected effect:

It looked so beautiful and this is the honest truth that without a single word of command we burst out into song, and there were hundreds of German officers singing lustily as we walked down through the South Tyne valley until we stopped and saw the castle itself, and they had cleverly hidden behind it the nissen huts, which were going to be our home for the next three years. Then I got my first decent meal, I remember going into the canteen barrack block and holding out my plate, and half a dozen bangers were put on it! That was too much actually because with our meagre diet up till then, it almost made me ill.

The camp contained around three thousand prisoners:

Colonel Vickers, (who was in charge of Featherstone Park), told us "The worst thing to do is for you to walk around the barbed wire, like a lion that can't get out. Occupy your mind and your body, and whatever you need for that I shall try and get for you", and true enough, he did. It was in fact like a university with literature and theatre. We had three theatres, a chamber orchestra, string orchestra, brass band, you name it, choirs, everything. Actually you could say that we had a curriculum from A to Z, Archaeology to Zoology, Politics as well of course, Economics, History. We had two chapels, one for the Lutherans and one for the Catholics. We formed the Marionette Theatre Group of which I was a member. We had such an active life that it was sometimes difficult to fit it all in.

The interrogation officer, who was also responsible for our re-education, was a Frankfurt Jew, who had escaped before the outbreak of war. He had to screen us to find out our opinions and he spent a lot of time with ex-Nazis who were understandably very depressed. He would tell them "Look, you were misled by an idiot, you thought he was going to save Germany but he ruined it. Now the future is what matters and we want people who have a sense of honesty, decency and a respect for humanity".

As time went on things got easier and easier:

the big watch towers were taken down with the machine guns and searchlights, and the fences reduced to shoulder height, as Colonel Vickers said "not to keep you in but to keep the cattle out".

For Erwin, the hardest part was finding out by letter that his mother had died. He was sustained through this difficult time by his religious beliefs and the help of his chaplain. Erwin was released in May 1948, married Norah and remained in England to find work, in the knowledge that conditions in Germany were



still primitive in many ways, my father and my brother had a job to keep themselves fed and they had no heating still, so I wasn't anxious to go over there.

During a YMCA-organised visit to the Theatre Royal in Newcastle, Erwin Grubba met his future wife Norah, a journalist;

I liked the music of Coppelia but I didn't care much for the bouncing ballet. Then the manager came down in the interval and said "I have a reporter here who would like to interview you, any objection?" I said, "No, not at all" and there was a woman, five feet two with a nice costume, a carnation in her buttonhole and a pencil and notebook, and that was the girl I married.

After his release the couple remained in Newcastle where Erwin eventually became the director of Thorne's, the University bookshop.