

**Doerrys Dodge the Bullet:
Hanna Doerry and Her Three Children* as War Refugees -
February 1945**

Letter from Hanna Doerry, written Feb 16, 1945, two days after her and her children's successful escape from the advancing Soviet Russian army, to her husband Hans Doerry, stationed at the time as a soldier in Grimma, Saxony.

".... we seem to have had a guardian spirit who guided my actions. ...I hope this benevolent spirit will continue to protect us". (p. 7)

"... 'I hope that we'll meet again in a world of peace and freedom in the taxi cab if the accident will.' – I like that very much: 'If the accident will.'" Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse –Five, or the Children's Crusade.

Some Context and Background: In 1939 Dr. Hans Doerry (born 1901) lived with his wife Hanna (born 1902) and his daughter Helga (born 1932) in Osnabrueck, where he was employed as an actor and director at the Osnabrueck municipal theater. Osnabrueck is a medium size city in the center of western Germany. His son Karl Wilhelm, soon nicknamed "Butje," was born in Osnabrueck, January 1939. He is writing these explanations and the translation of his mother's letter to his father.

In 1941 Hans Doerry accepted a position as Director of the municipal theater in Bunzlau, a small city of just over 30 000 inhabitants, in Silesia in the eastern part of Germany (now: Boleslawiec, in the western part of Poland.) This was not only a positive career move but also turned out to be a smart move for his family's safety. Britain had begun a strategic bombing campaign targeting German cities, with increasing ferocity. Osnabrueck was a target from the beginning, while Bunzlau was so small and so out of reach of allied bombers that it was never bombed. Osnabrueck, on the other hand, suffered very extensive destruction and heavy civilian casualties.*

Life in Bunzlau was mostly peaceful for the Doerry family. The youngest son Hartmann was born in 1942. Theatre performances continued during the fall to spring season, schools were open, grandparents visited. Food and other supplies were rationed but not at starvation levels. Hanna, who had given up a promising stage career to raise her family, appeared on stage occasionally. She also helped with organizing entertainment for convalescents at the local military hospital.

The war had little effect on the children's life until their father was drafted in the fall of 1944. Dr. Doerry was trained to be a truck driver. His unit was eventually sent to Grimma, Saxony, where he was stationed during the time of his family's odyssey described below.

By January 1945 Nazi Germany had lost virtually all territory conquered in the previous years. In the west allied troops who had landed in northern France in June 1944, had reached the German border, but were struggling to cross the Rhine river. In east the Soviet Russian troops had reached the eastern borders of prewar Germany and opened the major offensive that would eventually take them to Berlin and German unconditional capitulation (on May 8, 1945.) 2.2 million Russian troops with overwhelmingly superior numbers of tanks, artillery, and planes faced 400 000 German troops. Russian forces made steady and often rapid progress, but German propaganda tried to downplay any successes as temporary setbacks. Evacuation of civilians therefore was typically delayed

till the last minute, but as refugees brought more and more tales of atrocities by the conquering Red Army and of civilian casualties, more and more civilians took matters in their own hands and started to stream west in increasing numbers, by any means possible – trains, horse drawn wagons, or on foot. Whole villages would form such convoys. As they were slow moving, these “treks” were always in danger of being overtaken and devastated by the advancing Russian troops - an event that happened all too often, with dire consequences for the civilians. But at temperatures often below 0 F countless civilians perished even without such attacks.

The regime and many communities set up services to assist refugees as they passed through – providing housing and food as best as possible. (Hanna alludes to her participation in these activities.) The Nazi regime had always prided itself on its ability to take charge, control things, and run the world efficiently, and this tradition no doubt saved many lives, including, perhaps, the lives of our family.

At the beginning of February 1945 the Russian army had crossed the Odra River in two places north and south of the Silesian capital Breslau (today Polish Wroclaw) which it by-passed and completely encircled by Feb. 13 (the garrison held out till May 6, two days before the end of the war, thoroughly destroying Breslau in the process.) Russian troops advanced steadily. As reported by Hanna, Liegnitz (now: Legnice), approx. 30 miles due east of Bunzlau, fell Feb 11, Bunzlau apparently a day later. This then was the military situation at the time Hanna Doerry decided to get out of Bunzlau.*

This decision was made easier because unlike most refugees we had a place to go to: Hanna’s father-in-law had been a country doctor in Rosche, a village near the town of Uelzen, about half way between Hamburg and Hannover. He had died but his widow was still living there, in the house the doctor had built. Eventually all three of her sons plus their families, plus other relatives, plus unrelated refugees found themselves housed and sheltered in this house, with numbers fluctuating around fifteen persons at any one time. Plenty of opportunity for friction and conflict, what with food, clothing, electricity, heating fuel ...rationed and scarce. But that did not become a problem until later. In February 1945: at least we knew where we wanted to go.

The distance we had to cover was approximately 350 miles, not very far in today’s world. But when train schedules are constantly disrupted by bombing raids that frequently targeted transportation facilities and rolling stock, when fuel and transport capacity of all kinds are scarce and likely to be diverted to military use, when you are competing for transport with thousands of others just as desperate, when you have to dodge bombing and strafing aircraft, and all that in a cold February - the five days that it took us to cover this distance can seem very long.

As I was only six years old at the time and moreover, as the letter indicates, somewhat incapacitated, my mind only retained isolated incidents, no doubt later modified by listening to retellings. Still, I believe that experiences like this (together with subsequent postwar struggles) shaped my outlook on life indelibly, and created attitudes that, for better or worse, I probably passed on (reinforced by their mother’s similar experiences,) to my children, and they in turn to theirs. Perhaps this letter will help them understand some of the peculiarities of the “Doerry way” at which they have so often shaken their heads and marveled.

Karl W. Doerry

February 2006

Feb. 16, 1945

Dear Hans,

Alright, the two older ones have just found some paper for me and I will now try to write you a little report. I am not sure how far back I should start. I had written a letter for you on the Saturday before I left*. Good thing I didn't send it.

As I wrote to you already, I had been in bed since Tuesday [Feb. 6] Butje as well – sore throat, high fever with hallucinations. He was a little better by Friday, a little worse again Saturday, but my fever was down to 38 C [100.5].

On Friday [Feb. 9] afternoon our Mrs Schmidt* returned from town, reporting that loudspeakers in the market square had announced that women and children should leave the city as soon as possible. On Thursday [Feb. 8] the same loudspeakers had announced that nobody should worry, an evacuation of Bunzlau was not being considered at this time. Mrs Schmidt suggested right away that I should not excite myself but wait quietly for further instructions from the local authorities, as that had been the practice in Liegnitz [a city some 30 miles to the east, previously evacuated.] – Nevertheless I sent word to Germer* to let him know that Butje and I were sick. Kaethe* came back with the reply that they had taken note of it and expected that someone would see that we got help.

When nothing had happened by that evening or the next morning, I sent [Kaethe] over again and learnt that Germers had left town the previous night. Kirchners had left as well. Now I got out of bed; at first, I felt as if I was drunk. Then a man whom I had never seen before, came by, a little crazy, and brought the evacuation order/permit*. I asked him if he had orders or instructions for us, because we were sick, but he just stuttered: “N-o-o; I am just s-s-supposed to de-de-deliver this!” But he promised to inform Mr Schiederman or someone like that (someone totally unknown to me.)

Well, now I my patience was at an end. In the meantime the word was Gremsdorf [a village a few miles outside Bunzlau] is burning, Russian tanks were said to be in Kittlitzreben, etc. Tanks rumbled through the streets. All night there was a continuous racket. – So I went to the District Administration [Kreisleitung]. Fortunately Giemsa* was there. – It's true I had to wait a long time, as new developments were coming in all the time. The local commandant of Greulich [another nearby town] came in, visibly disturbed, apparently coming directly from the fighting; wanted to see the District Commander [Kreisleiter], reported that on Friday 5 Russian tanks had appeared there already, two of which had been destroyed, the others had shelled the narrow gauge train and the trek [i.e. the column of refugees fleeing on foot and wagons]. He was concerned about his family who had been in the trek. – Finally Giemsa appeared at 11:50 a.m.[Sat., Feb.10] with the news that if I could be at the theater by 1 p.m., I could get on a bus to Hoyerswerda [a city approximately 65 miles further west], saying he had reserved four seats for me. I rushed home. Kaethe quickly cooked some hot cereal and fed Hartmann, I dressed Butje. It was good that we had had a “dress rehearsal”* once before, earlier when we made our unsuccessful attempt to leave Bunzlau. I had Butje ready – it was sunny –

and I sent him downstairs and outside, we dragged the rest of the luggage down, I grabbed 1½ loaves of bread and a sausage for the trip, some crackers and cookies, candy. There was no time to make sandwiches. Suddenly horrible shooting and airplane noise. I just yelled: “Into the basement!” But Butje was nowhere. He showed up downstairs. It had been a strafing attack by Russian fighter planes, which had, among others, hit the five-year old child of the Burkhardts*; no air raid warning. I asked Butje, who had seen everything precisely, including the muzzle flashes on the airplanes’ cannons, why he hadn’t come in immediately, and the rascal answers me; “ Well , but I had to go pee first!!” * – So now we are off, with the hand wagon from Kaethe’s mother, two bags and two suitcases on it, then the baby carriage and each of us with a backpack. We passed the Kutusoff- Monument; a male corpse was lying there, shot, clad in pants only; supposedly a deserter.* At the theater we still had to wait. Soon Giemsa came as well, Duerlich, Ronneburger *. Mrs Giemsa, who is expecting a baby, has been in Lommatzsch for quite some time; he brought his war blinded son-in-law and his family to the bus. There were three busses. We were in the bus with Duerlich’s wife and Ronneburger’s wife and daughter. All the luggage got put on board and we had a pleasant journey. On the highway we saw many people with handcarts and bicycles. – In Hoyerswerda everything was full and we were sent on to Bernsdorf [*about another 8 miles*]. I wrote you from there. We also received a kind of oat gruel and coffee*, slept well on straw mattresses on the floor. It was worth a lot to me that I was by myself with my three children.* There was a wash room next door, so that we could refresh ourselves nicely the next day [Su., Feb. 11]. Only Butje made a pitiful impression, pale as chalk and bright red lips and tongue, dull eyes, totally silent, no complaining. That broke my heart. We had to leave these accommodations, were supposed to go to a villa 20 minutes away. But I asked that we be housed close to the train station, as we wanted to travel on. Eventually we were assigned to a good natured 70 year old woman, where I could put Butje to bed in the afternoon, after he had almost collapsed on me during lunch. I simply could not travel on with him in this condition. The woman gave me a flu tablet for him, even though I was convinced he had scarlet fever. At least the fever came down a bit. Hartmann slept as well. Helga and I went to the train station, to ask about possibilities for traveling on. At the station we learned that Liegnitz had fallen, i.e. Sunday noon. Now I got really worried. – I managed to borrow a hand wagon from the woman and first of all took our luggage to the train station. Seeing the impossibility of traveling on with all this luggage *and* the three children, I decided to send ahead two bags and one of the suitcases. Later Butje woke up much recovered. I slept that night in his bed, i.e. I lay awake. Helga had Hartmann with her. At 6:21 the train was to leave for Falkenberg, change train to Dessau, etc. – according to the schedule I was supposed to be in Uelzen that same evening. So Monday [*Feb. 12*] morning warmly dressed as always, Helga with my fur jacket, she and I each wearing one of your trousers, with baby carriage, blankets, suitcase, handbag, foodbag, and backpacks, i.e. still loaded down pretty good, we dragged ourselves to the Bernsdorf train station. There we met others from Bunzlau, the daughter from the Krebs hat store; they wanted to get to Eisenach. After waiting for 1½ hours in the rain on the open platform (a charitable railroad employee had taken the children inside) we were put without trouble into a compartment for “travelers with big luggage.” Unfortunately only for two stops. Now the word was: change trains in Hohenbocka. Our connecting train, scheduled to go all the way to Dessau, had not left and came after about 40 minutes, but it

was so full that we had to stay outside. Back into the waiting room, crushed. At first there wasn't even a place to sit down. Butje silent and pitifully draped across the suitcase. Helga had to stay outside and guard the baby carriage. Hartmann's hunger was stilled with some crackers and black coffee. Outside the train station a woman sold milk. I asked her to give me ½ liter into the thermos, showing my ration cards and explaining our situation. "Well, I would have to go to the mayor's office" etc., etc. The second train was long overdue. I mentioned this in the waiting room and a woman gave me travel ration coupons for 1½ liters.* When I went to get the milk I ran into Mrs Golla and Mrs Iben, who were also trying to find out about transport options. Frau Golla, who mentioned 14 pieces of luggage, saw no chance of further transport and wanted to return with Mrs Iben to Hoyerswerda, where our [Bunzlau] District Administration was supposed to have landed, to ask to be transported on. For a moment I was tempted to do likewise. But I had already gotten rid of three pieces of luggage (probably for ever – the official would not guarantee anything). At that moment a long refugee train arrived, stopping a little ways outside [the train station]. In the meantime I had struck up a conversation with some men and complained that nobody in these train stations was there to take care of people like us, of us who had been there for refugees in Bunzlau day and night. The men got ambitious, found out that this was a refugee train from Bunzlau, bound for Leipzig*. Since I had help at the moment and realizing that I would most likely find the next scheduled train as hopelessly full as the previous one, I dragged these helpers with me to this refugee train and succeeded, with their help, in being put into a freight car, where I was welcomed kindly as "Mrs Doerry" by the other Bunzlauers. It turned into a rather difficult journey with uncertain destination. I learned that these people had left Bunzlau on Sunday morning [Feb. 11]. It had already been the last train. Behind them they saw demolition explosions, probably the railroad bridge* and the army warehouse. They experienced air raids and burning towns. In Kohlfurt they had spent 7 hours on a railroad siding during the night.* That's the speed at which we continued; and not to Leipzig, but to Dresden-Neustadt*. There was terrible filth in this cattle car, and there was a lot of bitching, especially on the occasion of an attempt to transfer me with the sick Butje to a fast train standing in a station on another track, almost empty, occupied by a few cigar smoking big shots. Written with chalk on the carriages: "Railroad Directorate" – "Staff Car" etc. We were told the empty seats would still be filled by railroad employees. Almost all the carriages were "2nd Class" [*i.e. somewhat more spacious and comfortable than the "normal" 3rd class*], and in our freight car not even a bit of straw were I could lay down Butje. I myself didn't say anything. – In Dresden-Neustadt I had to get out, because word was the train was to continue to Chemnitz* and wouldn't stop at Dresden Central Station. In Neustadt the children even received some ginger bread and some candies. Now we had to find a way to get – with our baby carriage – to Dresden Central Station, where the trains to Leipzig were to originate. Thus I had to revise my travel plans radically. A couple helped us in Neustadt and we moved on soon. At the Central Station help from B.D.M* and polit officials.* We were sent to the heated air raid shelter, where people could sit down on benches - warm, but too warm. I sweated out my fever. At 1:11 a.m. [Feb. 13] a train was to leave for Leipzig. We had time to eat some noodle soup, to pee, etc. Hartmann, for whom I always had a chamber pot* ready, stayed dry the whole trip. With the help of B.D.M. I made my way up to the platform at midnight, but we didn't even make it up the second set of stairs and had to let the train go. Now I didn't

want to go back down again and so set up our camp on the platform under the open sky. Poor Butje let us do to him whatever we wanted; as soon as he sat down, he'd go to sleep. All the children were dressed very warmly with two coats, but it was still pitiful how they lay around me. "My" polit. official [*i.e. the one assigned to that platform*] was at the station all night and looked in on us every once in a while. A train to Berlin first had to pass through our platform, then I had to watch another train, scheduled for later, arrive ahead of schedule, but of course it was filled immediately. In the meantime people were standing two rows deep ahead of us, even though we had positioned ourselves pretty close to the platform edge. Snow and rain drizzled down on us; there was a terrible draft. Butje slept and jerked occasionally. Helga sat slumped over on her backpack. Hartmann slept on my lap. Finally our train came. "My" polit. official was near me but the B.D.M. girls "just happened to be somewhere else." Furthermore the carriage in front of us was a type with very narrow access doors. The train was full immediately, before we even had a chance to push forward. The children now screamed as if possessed. Hartmann didn't want to get off my arm. Butje staggered and swayed, Helga seemed half unconscious. I didn't know what to do. At that moment our polit. official came and conducted us to the baggage car; at his intercession it was opened for women with baby carriages*. As his special protégés we were put in the first.* And now the train took us via Grimma (!!)* to Leipzig. Then a quick connection to Magdeburg*. The baby carriage was parked on the open platform between the train carriages, where Helga had to stand the whole time. The weather was fine.* A soldier gave Butje, who was always thirsty, some coffee from his canteen. We had seats, even at the window, and Hartmann, who had slept the whole time in the dark baggage car, was interested and cheerful, as if there could be no greater pleasure than fleeing from the Russians. With me traveled a navy soldier and an O.T. man,* both very well read and knowledgeable people, but, like all the people I met on this memorable journey, without any hope for a turn around of the situation in our [Germany's] favor. – I don't see how we are supposed to win the war with such people at this late time. From Stendal to Salzwedel an officer traveled with us who – just like the one in Glogau* the other day - coolly and unabashedly laid out the proof for our defeat.* – When we left Bunzlau Duerlich, Ronneburger etc stood by the bus and said: "Never fear, we'll not let them [the Russians] enter Bunzlau," and two days later they were there. I am just wondering if Mrs Berger* and her children made it out. I had promised to let her know if I would leave, but in the rush and with all the intervening incidents it was just impossible. Kaethe probably didn't get around to it either. In the morning [Saturday] at the District Administration the word had still been that the evacuation would go on throughout the next week and nobody should hurry unduly, but if the last train left Sunday morning, events clearly accelerated a great deal.

In Stendal there was a terrible fight to get on the train. The metal handle of my hand bag was broken off cleanly. Other people later took the children on their laps where they slept without interruption even though other children screamed as if stuck the whole time. In Stendal the station was pitch dark. Because of highest level air raid alert. Terrible stress, couldn't see the children, couldn't find the luggage. On top of that: everyone down into the shelter. Then all of a sudden word that the train was continuing to Salzwedel*. I take the children upstairs again. Looking for the luggage by flash light, while being yelled at*, and then – with the help of the above officer – put everything back on the train. Barely aboard, the train leaves again. In Salzwedel fabulous reception. Hartmann received milk

and a salami sandwich. Coffee and salami sandwich for Helga and me. Then the children were put down to sleep. Next morning [Feb 14] at 7:17 we traveled on, somewhat behind schedule and without breakfast. I had latched on to a soldier who vigorously intervened on our behalf. The baby carriage was again put on the platform between the carriages, but it was secured by chain and could not roll off. – Finally, thank God, in Uelzen. I sent off the most recent postcard, then called Oma* and went to the N.S.V.* where we were given beautiful hot cream-of-wheat gruel; even Butje ate some of it. As there was quite a bit of time left I went to Mariechen* to bring her the papers, but in vain, she was not home. On the way back: air raid alarm. I rushed back to the station like crazy, where the children were already looking for me with help from the N.S.V. After some time the “all clear” came; we could go out on the platform but not inside into the N.S.V. room. So we just sat around. Suddenly someone presses my hand, indescribably wonderful: Eva,* who had come to the train station by bicycle* to help me.

We couldn't get away from the train station; had to go into the air raid shelter two more times, missed the bus [to Rosche], called Rosche, then took the Suhlendorf bus to Wellendorf, a tractor from Hinrichs* took the baby carriage along. In Rosche Frommhagens* had arranged for a [horse drawn] wagon from Adolf Schulz and were waiting for us in Wellendorf. The baby carriage came along as well and thus in the evening the sun finally rose for us.*

Everyone was so nice to us. Oma had arranged everything for us so lovingly. It is not uncomfortable at all. Everyone has his own bed. In the baby carriage I saved a down comforter and pillow. Those can await you. I also have a suit for you. At present I have only the dress I am wearing. Another one is in the suitcase. Maybe it will still arrive.* A pair of shoes for you are in one of the bags [mailed earlier]. I am just very doubtful that the bags will get here. In addition to us Hertha* is here with niece and nephew; consequently the Children's Room is taken up as her kitchen, as she insists on keeping her household separate. She hoards everything and seems to be afraid that we'd eat some of her stores. She has again behaved very shabbily, has been after Mother [i.e.Oma] to turn over various silver spoons and pieces to her, anxiously reminding her several times. We rarely see each other. She has tried to get in tight with everyone in town. – I saw Mother Behn* yesterday when I went to get ration coupons. She hugged me right away, gave me a beautiful liver sausage and a piece of bacon. – Butje certainly has had scarlet fever; his hands are also peeling now. I discussed it with Mother, who had also noticed his raspberry colored tongue and lips. I probably missed the rash, as we never got out of our clothes. Today he is still in bed, a little apathetic, but touchingly patient, his eyes are a little clearer today. We keep the other children away as much as possible. It doesn't always have to be as bad a case as with Helga*. The little one [i.e. Hartmann] has a cold like all of us, but otherwise he is quite cheerful. One really has to salute Butje, how he endured everything. Even so it wasn't easy for me, but how much harder it would have been without this strong attitude by Butje. I hope he will not be taken from us.* According to the army reports we seem to have had a guardian spirit who guided my actions. Just the *thought* of an air raid alarm in the Dresden train station* is devastating, not to mention an actual raid. I hope this benevolent spirit will continue to protect us, first of all for now our dear Butje.

Best wishes , Yours Hanna

NOTES

- Page 1 *Her children: Helga, born 1932/12 years old; Karl Wilhelm (“Butje”), born 1939/six years old; Hartmann, born 1942/ 2 1/2 years old.
- **Osnabrueck ... casualties*: “Osnabrueck was one of the most heavily damaged cities of the air war. After the last raid on Palm Sunday 1945 65% of all buildings lay in ruins, 94% in the old city center.” Joerg Friedrich. *Der Brand*. 7th ed., 2002, p. 204 (K)
- Page 2 *Did we *have to* flee? No, we were not *forced*; many people decided to stay. Most of them suffered for it. There are many reports of plundering, rapes, and summary shootings of civilians. Reportedly, the owner of the house where our flat was upstairs, was shot when he confronted Russian troops trying to ransack. Another example, from a Russian source: In February 1945 the deputy chief of the political administration Tschiganow (all Soviet military units included “political officers” to report political unreliability of soldiers) sent a report to Moscow reporting mass rapes and executions in the Bunzlau district and citing a Maria Schapovalova, forcibly brought to Germany by the Nazis as a laborer: “I waited night and day for our liberators and now our soldiers treat us worse than the Germans. I am not happy to be alive.” (Quoted in Norman Davies/Roger Moorhouse. *The Flower of Europe – Breslau – Wroclaw – Vratislavia: the History of a Middle European City*. London 2002. (Such report would not be made lightly, as it risked deportation to the GULAG, as exemplified by the fate of Russian Nobel Prize winner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, denounced by the political officer in his unit for trying to prevent atrocities by his troops.) So, while not fleeing was an understandable choice, I’m glad my mother chose to leave with us. Moreover: Even if we had survived the Russian army, we would no doubt have been evicted together with the rest of the German population - well over 7 millions – deported between 1945 and 1950 from what today is western Poland, their places, in turn, taken by Poles who were deported from areas added to the Soviet Union. “Ethnic cleansing” may be a term introduced in the 1990, but the practice was well established. (K)
- Page 3 **Saturday*: she left Saturday Feb. 9, this must refer to Sat., Feb. 2 (K)
- **our Mrs Schmidt*: it could be that this refers to a refugee couple from Liegnitz [some 30 miles east of Bunzlau] billeted with us when that city was evacuated. These people left us shortly afterwards leaving us a couple of bottles of wine as a thank you (H) K: But if they were still there a day before we left Bunzlau ...?
- **Germer*: apparently neighbors like *Kirchners*. Like us Kirchners lived in the Opitz St., a few houses down across the street. Mr Kirchner was a

school principal, had been drafted a few years earlier. In 1944 he was “missing in action”, probably dead. Kirchners had several small children, including a boy the same age as Karl Wilhelm (“Butje”) (H). K: Very true: he was my partner in crime, as when we lowered his toddler sister into the basement window of the Kirchners’ tenants and made her steal some fruit for us from the table, or when he helped me to shake our landlord’s pear tree until it released its only and first ever pear (which turned out to be hard and green.)

**Kaethe*: Kaethe Fischer was our dear “National Service Girl” who helped with the household. (H) K: To balance the draft for males young women had to serve a period in a household to prepare them for “family duty.” Many were probably exploited, but I’d like to think that ours – Kaethe was at least the third such woman – were treated well. She certainly treated me well, and as my mother’s report shows, was invaluable in getting us ready.

**Evacuation order/permit*. It would have been illegal to travel from the city without such a permit. (K)

**Giemsa*: “Ortsgruppenleiter” – one of the Party local leaders, reporting to the “Kreisleiter”, the District Head at the “Kreisleitung”, the District Administration, which was not far from the Opitzstrasse (where we lived) (H) K: as Director of the theatre my father obviously was a fairly well known person in the small town. My mother who not only occasionally appeared on stage at the local theatre but also organized entertainment for convalescents in the local military hospital and appears to have helped with assisting refugees evacuated from areas further east, was apparently somewhat well known at the local administration (K)

**dress rehearsal*: a few weeks earlier we had made a failed attempt to flee Bunzlau. At that time it was prohibited traveling more than 40 km (approx. 25 miles). Our plan had been to buy a ticket to Goerlitz [30 miles west] and then just stay in the train (in the direction of Berlin.). We never got to try this, as we were turned back when we tried to enter the train station.(H) K: entering the train station with the kind of luggage my mother wanted to take and pretending we only were going 40 km probably fooled nobody, especially since we would hardly have been the first to try this.

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**Burkhardts*: In 1944/45 Irmgard Burkhardt was the leader of my youth squad. It was her little sister who became one of the victims of this Russian strafing attack, the first ever in Bunzlau . (H)

...*had to pee first*”: (K): I don’t remember making this excuse for staying outside, but I remember well enough peeing between the fence boards in front of our house, watching with fascination as the planes spitting fire from the canons on their wings swooped out of the sky, and then running

in to tell my mother excitedly about it. Maybe her frantic reception at having me back fixed this in my mind – I don't remember being afraid.

**Durlich, Ronneberger. Neighbors and acquaintances*

**male corpse, Kutusoff monument:* The sight of this corpse affected me deeply that day, not only because it was the first dead person I had ever seen in my life, but also because it was said that this man had been shot for trying to accompany his wife and children in fleeing the city instead of reporting to the “Volkssturm” (*a last ditch effort by the Nazi regime to form teenagers – 14 years and up – and old man – 60 and up – into a lay defense force, often without weapons or ammunition*) to defend the city. - Prince Kutusoff, (1714-1813) commanded the czarist Russian army, allied with Prussia, in the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon. When he died near Bunzlau his body was to be repatriated to Russia, but his intestines were buried outside Bunzlau, honored by the “Gut Monument”. A giant “Kutusoff Monument” memorialized the Wars of Liberation in the Bunzlau city park.

In retrospect it strikes me as particularly absurd that the body of this family man, summarily shot because he refused to fight – armed with nothing but an antitank weapon – against the Russians, should have been displayed at the foot of this monument, while a few days later the local representatives of the regime showed great skill in escaping to safety. (see p. 5 – the District Administration was in Hoyerswerda) (H)

**Coffee.* “coffee” must be taken to refer to “*Ersatzkaffee*” i.e. made from roasted barley and not containing any caffeine (K)

**...to be by myself with the tree children.* I.e.: not in the inn's big hall/auditorium like the rest of the refugees

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**Travel ration coupons.* Many items, including milk, were available only by surrendering ration coupons. These coupons were valid only for your city of residence. For other cities you had to have “travel coupons.” Only children up to a certain age and “heavy labor” workers were entitled to whole milk, adults and older children were entitled to “skim milk coupons” only. Hartmann and Butje were entitled to whole milk but the Bunzlau coupons were not valid in Hohenbocka. (H)

**Leipzig.* A large city about 70 miles west, therefore that much closer to Uelzen than Dresden where the train ended up taking them. (K)

**railroad bridge.* Known as the “viaduct” – the only way trains could cross the Bober river to leave Bunzlau. (H)

**7 hours on a railroad siding.* As it was now Monday, Feb 12th - the train had covered less than 100 miles in 24 hours (K)

**Dresden-Neustadt*. Dresden's second major train station, north of the river Elbe, while the Central Station is just south of the river. (K)

**Chemnitz*. A city 50 miles south of Dresden, therefore not toward Uelzen, due west. Even Dresden was a detour south, with almost no progress westward. (K)

**B.D.M.* The Nazi (mandatory) youth organization for girls 14 to 17 years; girls 10-13 had to join the "youth girls" ("Jungmaedchen"); for boys there were "youth folk" ("Jungvolk" also called "Pimpfe") for 10 to 13 years, and "Hitler Youth" ("Hitler jugend") 14 to 17 years. At age 18 everyone had to put in a year of work as "work maidens" or "work service men" ("Arbeitsdienst").(H)

**Polit . Officials "Politischer Leiter"* – these apparently were low level party officials assigned to supervise/manage day to day operations at railway stations and similar installations.(K)

**chamber pot*. This may seem a trivial detail. Obviously Hanna didn't think so: going to the bathroom could turn into serious business. I remember: during the preceding leg of the journey, in the freight car, the train stopped in the middle of nowhere. When Helga had to pee, she could not risk going outside, as the train might start up again at any moment. She had to hang her butt out the freight car door while two men hung on to her arms – probably not a pleasant memory for a 12 year old girl. At 21/2 years Hartmann had probably just been toilet trained. Considering that we all had on layers of clothes it was not unreasonable to worry whether they could be removed in time – lots of infants/toddlers froze to death in their own urine. The (enameled) chamber pot served us for many years after – my mother loved to tell the story of how she had to track down a plumber willing to solder it when it rusted through. She found one. (K)

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*...*women with baby carriages*. The irony, of course, was that our baby carriage had no baby in it, though two-year old Hartmann could ride on it occasionally when he got tired. The rest of the time the baby carriage served as a hand wagon. It was a pain to haul it up stairs and try to get it onto trains, but here it may very well have saved our lives.

*...*we were put in first*. It was now early morning – perhaps 2:30 a.m. on Feb, 13. That evening Dresden was hit by what is generally considered the worst air raid of World War II: in two waves, a few hours apart but lasting no more than a total of 49 minutes, 758 British planes dropped a total of 2647.4 tons of bombs - explosives and incendiaries in roughly equal proportions. The next day, Feb.14th, 311 American B-17 bombers dropped another 771 tons within 10 minutes. The Central Station was on the periphery of the area hit by the first wave; it was in the center of the target

area for the second wave. As there were many refugees in the city, casualty estimates vary widely. 40 000 fatalities is a conservative estimate. There are many eyewitness reports by survivors; so I'll give just one example. The historian Goetz Bergander, 17 years old at the time, had survived the raids in the air raid shelter of his parents home. In the early afternoon of Feb. 15 he decided to check up on some school mates near the Central Station where he had been assigned to "refugee assistance" many times during the past several weeks. Finding that clean up had begun already, he at first sees few fatalities. "But in the Bismarck St., under the main station's freight train ramp, the bodies had been stacked up. Neatly, body by body they lay, ready to be hauled away. Bodies of every age and in every imaginable condition. Naked and dressed, contorted and straight, covered in blood and spotless, mutilated and undamaged on the outside. Children, taking up less space, wedged between adults. Corpulent refugee women in their black scarves and wool stockings, women, awkwardly positioned, half naked. Men like limp grey sacks. Men in long white underwear, twisted, entangled, with shoes and without. Faces with eyes open and eyes closed. Occasionally an arm stuck up into the air, or a corpse with his knees tucked up refused to be stacked like cord wood. An insane monument, a long barricade. These bodies were still recognizable. Later, on the horse drawn wagons, they were not." (Goetz Bergander, *Dresden im Luftkrieg (Dresden during the Air War)* Wuerzburg: Flechsig, 1998. p. 178 (K)

**Grimma(!)*. Hanna's husband was stationed in Grimma at that time – but of course there was no chance or desire to get off the train and visit. (K)

**Magdeburg*. A large city approximately 65 miles northwest, i.e.: in the right direction! (K)

**The weather was fine*. Train carriages were typically connected by open platforms that you had to cross in the open to get from one carriage to the next. The weather may have been "fine" – but it was still February and bitter cold for Helga to stand in the open on a moving train for hours. (K)

**Glogau*. A city east of Bunzlau where we had visited my father during his basic training a few weeks earlier. (K)

**Mrs Berger*. A neighbor and friend of the family (H)

**O.T. man*. O.T. =Organization Todt, founded in 1938 by the Nazi engineer and high party official Fritz Todt (1881 -1942). This Organization was responsible for building the *Autobahn*/German freeway system as well as the fortifications on the western border. In 1940 he became "Minister for Armaments and Munitions. Killed 1942 in a plane crash. (H)

**proof of our defeat.* Hanna seems to be cautious here. Mail received by soldiers was subject to inspection by the political authorities and talk of defeat could get you into serious trouble, including execution. Not that her husband would have been “unreliable” – I remember finding a post card he sent, probably in response to this letter, in which he berated her for her defeatism and promising that Hitler had secret weapons up his sleeve that would still turn things around. (K)

**Salzwedel.* A town within 50 miles of Uelzen, hence *very* tempting to reach without further delay. (K)

**being yelled at.* Of course everything had to be darkened during the night and especially during air raid alarm. In fact, bombers fleets were flying overhead – en route to Dresden (see above) – and the “all clear” had not been given. (H)

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**Oma,* i.e. her mother in law, the doctor’s widow in Rosche.(K)

** went to the N.S.V. Nazi Welfare Organization.* It maintained a station to assist refugees at the Uelzen station (and many other locales.) (H)

**Mariechen.* Former household help in Rosche, now married to a school principal and a close friend of the family. Her daughter was a frequent visitor in Rosche. (H)

**Eva.* Eva Doerry, nee Fromm, wife of Hans’ younger brother Rudolf, who had evacuated her and his daughter Brigitte (b. 1932) to Rosche from Berlin as early as 1943, as Berlin was subject to frequent bombing raids. (H)

**bicycle.* A ten mile bike trip (K)

**Hinrichs.* A local farmer. (K)

**Frommhagens.* Neighbors from across the street. In 1953 they bought the Doerry house in Rosche. The family owns it to this day. (H)

**...evening.* Since Rosche has no rail connection the last 10 miles had to be traveled by bus. Since the bus to Rosche had left, we took the bus to Wellendorf , approx. 4 miles from Rosche. (K)

**Hertha.* Herta Doerry, wife of Hans’ youngest brother Ernst-Adolf. Came to Rosche when her home in Hannover was bombed, probably sometime in 1944. She invited her parents and her stepsister and stepsister’s family (husband plus two adolescent children) into the Rosche house. (H)

**...suitcase.* For weeks afterward every trip to the Uelzen train station had to include checking to see if the three pieces of luggage checked in

Bernsdorf earlier had arrived. Miraculously, one of them showed up one day. (H)

**Mother Behn.* She and her husband were day laborers attached to one of the big farmer's in Rosche and close friends of the (country doctor) Doerry family. Their son was a school friend of Hans Doerry. As day laborers the Behns had sausage and bacon from the farmer. (H)

**scarlet fever.* Scarlet fever was/is a highly contagious infectious disease, now rare because of modern antibiotics. It was – perhaps still is – mandatory to report any case of the disease to the health authorities, with patients subject to quarantine, as had happened nine years earlier with Helga, then four years old. She writes: “In late 1936 I was hospitalized in the quarantine station of the hospital in Bremerhaven with a diagnosis of scarlet fever. They kept me there for about six weeks. In my memory this first and so lengthy separation from my parents was the worst. Because of the danger of infection nobody could visit me – four years old at the time. Early the next year, as a consequence of the scarlet fever, I developed a severe ear infection, necessitating an operation and another five weeks in the hospital, still in Bremerhaven. The next and final follow-up disease occurred the following summer, this time in Rosche: whooping cough. This was a time of hardship, for me as well as my parents. Until 1936 my father had been director and actor in Goerlitz, but his contract had not been renewed for fall 1936; he had not found a new job, was unemployed or had contracts on a play by play basis at various theaters. That was probably the reason why my mother and I were “parked” first with my mother's parents in Bremerhaven, then in Rosche during the following summer [1937]. Only with his engagement as director/actor at the municipal theater in Osnabrueck for the 1937/38 season did the period of unemployment and ‘homelessness’ end for my father and his family.” For understandable reasons Hanna would not be eager to have a diagnosis of scarlet fever confirmed – it would have meant quarantine for her son. (K)

**...not be taken from us.* I don't know how close I was to being “taken,” but I did have to stay in bed a long time, craving buttermilk above all, so that my mother had to make heroic efforts to secure that from the local dairy coop. When I finally did get out of bed, I had been off my feet so long that I had to re-learn how to walk for a few days. (K)

**...alarm in the Dresden train station.* Hanna has obviously heard already that there had been a heavy air attack on Dresden, but nobody would have known how heavy, as bodies were still being retrieved and counted. (See note above.)

Karl's Postscript

Chronology

Thursday, Feb. 8, 1945. Announcement in Bunzlau: "Evacuation is not being considered presently!"

Friday, Feb. 9, 1945 "Women and children are to leave town as soon as possible!"

Saturday, Feb. 10, 1945 Doerrys leave Bunzlau approx 1:30 p.m. travel by bus to Bernsdorf, arr. approx . 5:30 p.m. (approx. 65 miles, 4 hours)

Sunday, Feb. 11, 1945 Doerrys rest in Bernsdorf. Identify train to Uelzen for next day. Liegnitz has fallen. Last rain leaves Bunzlau. Bunzlau falls.

Monday, Feb. 12, 1945 Doerrys travel approx 12 hours to Dresden by cattle car (approx. 40 miles) Rest till midnight.

Tuesday, Feb. 13, 1945 Doerrys try unsuccessfully to leave Dresden at 1:11 a.m. eventually manage to leave (in baggage car) around 2:30 a.m. Travel via Leipzig – Magdeburg – Stendal (air raid alarm) to Salzwedel. (approx 200 miles/20 hrs). Miss Dresden air raid.

Wednesday, Feb.14, 1945 Doerrys reach Uelzen in the morning and, by the evening, Rosche. (approx. 40 miles/12 hours)

Total distance: approx. 350 miles Total travel time: 50 hours Total trip: 5 days

The survival of this letter is almost as remarkable as the survival of the Doerrys. The letter was written, in pencil, on the low quality paper (the wood particles still visible) available at the time. It was written, obviously in breathless haste, largely in an old German (Gothic) script (*Suetterlin*) hard to read for post war readers. It turned up in the papers of our father Hans Doerry after his death in 1989, in an envelope with military postmark: Grimma, March 14, 1945, and addressed to his mother-in-law Emilie Boening, living, at that time, outside of Bremerhaven, where she had been bombed out of her home in 1944 (in the same night as her two sisters). Apparently Hans mailed the letter to his mother-in-law before being sent off to the (western) front, so that it survived and was returned to him when she came to live with us in 1954. After we found it in 1989 it apparently was mislaid until it turned up again and was transcribed by Helga Doerry in

2001. With the unfamiliar script and the letter's poor condition, she found it sometimes difficult to identify some of the names and terms. But as she was 12 years old during the events described in the letter, she could add valuable explanations and footnotes, which are included, identified with (H).

When she sent her translation to me, I was much impressed and responded:

I, of course, have only vague memories of most of it ... and can contribute only few concrete facts – really only amazement at the fact of how the thin ice on which we were skating held up again and again. Also amazement at all the things that were still functioning. You go, for instance, to the train station in Bernsdorf, practically under the sound of artillery, to check the train schedule for the next train, apparently certain that you can reach Uelzen by the next evening as per schedule. And that train even arrives, late but with a delay that would be within tolerances even today. Even the fact that it is packed seems “normal.” Then there are B.D.M. helpers, noodle soup here, wheat gruel there, friendly helpers everywhere. And then we even get to profit from the Nazi cult of motherhood thanks to the empty baby carriage that gets us into the baggage car. Well, the “guardian spirit” mentioned by Mother probably had many names (foremost Hanna and Helga), and I have to make a real effort not to give the Nazis too much credit and to remind myself that they not only handled the mess well, but created it in the first place. ...

I see no reasons to change any of these words. - After receiving Helga's translation I made copies for my children and others, including my relative Wulf Doerry who lives in Kansas. He, in turn, encouraged me to translate it for his children as well as later offspring who might not be able to read it in German. How could I say no? I have added more explanations and footnotes, identified by (K), that I considered helpful for those future readers. So: here it is. More, perhaps, later – the “guardian spirit” invoked by my mother continued to be active.