

The following account comprises some of the events that occurred during the approximately six weeks to the men left behind in Mannschaft Stammlager XVII-B near Krems-Gneixendorf, Austria, commencing on or about April 1-7, 1945, after the main body of the prisoner-of-war personnel had marched west ahead of advancing Russian armies.

Time has dulled memory of exact dates of occurrences as well as names of participants, and also even the number of men that actually comprised this small band, but most events are clear in my memory.

This account is written by Kenneth J. Kurtenbach, generally known by the men of the camp as "Kurt" during the period of time from December of 1942 until the end of the war in May of 1945. I had been Camp Leader, also known as Man of Confidence (MoC), and by the Germans as Hauptvertrauensmann ("Head Trusted Man") from mid-July of 1943 at Stalag VII-A at Moosburg, Bavaria, through the move to Stalag XVII-B at Krems, Austria, on the Danube River in mid-October of 1943.

Approximately the middle of March, 1945, the German armies had retreated before the oncoming Russians to within a few kilometers east of Vienna, in an area known as the "Gates of Vienna", a series of hills east of Vienna where the German lines had momentarily stiffened and fierce fighting was raging in defense of "Der Vaterland".

During the last week of March the authorities of the prison camp, both the officers of the Luftwaffe and the Wehrmacht, informed me that it appeared necessary that all prisoners capable of walking would be moved eastward to "safety" away from the Russians and the dangers of the front line fighting. They stated there would be no transports available for those soldiers unable to walk with the regular column and therefore those men would, of necessity, be left behind to await whatever the fortunes of war would bring them.

The stiffening and holding of the line east of Vienna had been entrusted by Hitler to General Sepp Dietrich, a brilliant tactician who had held the Russian onslaught at various points on the retreat of the Germans from Russia for the prior year-and-one half westward from Stalingrad and Leningrad.

For several nights prior to the main camp being marched out the eastern horizon resembled sheet lightning from the many artillery duels between the two opposing forces, situated perhaps 100 kilometers to the east from the camp.

The day prior to the data selected by the Germans for the march those men determined by a joint committee of primarily Austrian doctors and the American doctors, headed by Major Fred Beaumont, to be unable to make the march were placed in the two buildings comprising the revier, or infirmary in the main camp. These men were those with wounds incurred during their combat time, still debilitating, men with legs none or badly wounded, blindness, or other conditions that made them unfit for the horrendous conditions they would probably encounter on a forced march of this nature.

After consultation with the doctors, it was decided jointly that because of former wounds to my right leg, and also because of my knowledge of the camp, the authorities that would remain, that I should stay behind and provide whatever help I could to those remaining behind.

There was a general feeling within the camp that the Russians would soon be there, that we would be released, and we should drag our feet in the evacuation. Dragging of the feet was done, but the Germans were adamant in their desire to get on the road, and so with much shouting, threats and some physical violence the last of the 4260. men were out the main gate of our compound in late afternoon.

The authorities had informed me there would be no kitchen facilities so a number of Red Cross parcels were brought into and stored within the two barracks, Nos. 13 and 14, and we were allowed to go into the Vorlager to pick up loaves of bread from the camp bakery on occasion.

There remained in the entire camp our group of perhaps 100 men, plus perhaps another 500 men in the French and Serbian compounds, a very few Russians prisoners, most of whom were dying from disease and malnutrition, and a small contingent of German and Austrian soldiers commanded by perhaps 2 or 3 officers.

A single strand fence was built about our two barracks and there was one guard stationed at the gate, but there was easy egress from this small compound most days. We were not allowed at first into the western compounds where the other nationalities had lived, but we were free to wander about the former American compound almost at will. At night, however, fairly stern discipline prevented us from wandering about.

The first evening after the main body of prisoners-of-war had departed I personally, and I am sure most of the others remaining behind, felt an extreme sense of loneliness and an emptiness. For my part, this was the very first time that I had not been surrounded by thousands of other men, living in a camp with the attendant noise, murmurs of voices and continual movement of bodies about you and this had been my environment for two-and-one-half years. Now there was nothing but silence and this sense of being alone. Even the few remaining behind spoke quietly, when they spoke at all. We went about our few chores attendant upon living and eating and cleanliness and care for those unable to help themselves in almost total silence. I believe we all knew how fragile our existence had become now that we did not have the comparative "safety of numbers".

For a few days this life we now had continued, sleeping by day for the most part, and then watching the growing intensity of the battles to the east and realizing that slowly the area of active warfare was growing closer and closer.

The Russians were now in the suburbs of Vienna proper and the Austrians wished to have the city declared an open city so that it could be spared total destruction. General Dietrich insisted upon holding every inch of ground. As a result of this, according to the clandestine radio which I still monitored, the Austrian troops revolted and the General was shot in the back by his own troops and negotiations between the defenders and the Russians were commenced with the result that Vienna became an open city and further destruction was spared it.

This opened a pathway up the Danube and deeper into Austria for the Russians and our time had come to experience warfare as known by front-line ground troops. The star shells and the sound of artillery grew stronger each day and night. Fortunately we still had the slit trenches available to us and it was soon our only escape at night from the potential hazards of artillery fire.

Now, by day, there were many attacks by the Sturmoviks, or the Russian equivalent of the German Stuka, or dive-bomber, on the city of Krems, particularly the marshalling yards by the Danube. You could see them flash by just above the rim of the walls of the Danube, flip over and dive for their target. By night there were sporadic bombing runs by larger aircraft on targets clustered primarily along the river. On one occasion barracks No. 13 was hit by what appeared to be an anti-personnel bomb, perhaps 100 pounds, but it was a dud, it did not explode. In all probability many of the Americans would have died or been badly wounded had it not been a dud.

After about the first week of being alone there started to appear the first of the displaced persons, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, who moved into primarily barracks 36, 37 and 38. At first there was merely a trickle, then they came in by the dozens. To this day I do not know whether this movement into the camp was by permission of the camp authorities or whether the flood of refugees simply overwhelmed them. It would have been extremely difficult for the few soldiers remaining to have policed these desperate and starving mass of humanity so perhaps they just let it happen.

These poor souls were becoming desperate for food and with the approval and assistance of the authorities, we barred these people from our small compound and it was enforced

rigorously by both the guards and by ourselves. We would have been in very bad straits had we allowed even one of them into our compound and had they seen what supplies we were hoarding for they could have overcome us very easily.

On occasion a few of the ambulatory Americans did go out into the damp and visit with these people and on one occasion a few of them attended the birth of a child to a lady in barracks 37A. After witnessing this birth, the young men came back vowing never to marry and have children if this was what it was all about.

By the middle of April the front lines were within a very few miles east of us and at this time the defenders moved into the American compound several artillery pieces, primarily the famous, by now, 88 mm. There were perhaps four under the trees on the south, or upper, side of the camp where the road to the Vorlager had been. Then there were several others placed to the north, or lower, side of the camp in the field outside the guard fence.

In addition, there were encamped along both sides of the road at the entrance to the main camp several small detachments of infantry. These appeared to be remnants of front line detachments and I was told by a couple of our guards that they had fought rearguard actions back across Russia in their retreat for 1,500 kilometers. We were warned strenuously by the guards and officers not to engage in conversation with these men as they were "dangerous".

Their clothing was ragged, their faces were haggard and drawn, and they appeared to be completely exhausted. For the most part, they were listless and completely discouraged, as well they might be, considering their experiences.

On this occasion when I asked to be allowed to speak to the remaining officers in charge of the camp, I was escorted by an older, familiar to me, Unteroffizier, to the Vorlager. He and I went out through the main camp to the road and passed through these several detachments. One of the men lying in the ditch asked the Austrian guard what and who I was. The guard replied that I was an American flier who had been a prisoner in the camp. The man acted violently at once, he drew a pistol and charged the slide, but there were no bullets in the gun. He then went about his comrades asking for a gun or bullets and they either wanted no part of a murder, or they had no ammunition to give him. He was shouting and raving about killing me. The guard with me turned white and said, 'Keep moving, Kurt, don't run, but move along rapidly.' We moved out of sight of the man and I then asked what it was all about. The guard replied that apparently this man's family had all been killed by American bombers some days before and he wanted retribution. Needless to say, the guard and I took another path back to the American compound. From all this I gathered they were about out of ammunition and supplies, fortunately for me.

It should be mentioned that during the days after the main camp marched out there returned to the American compound literally dozens of Americans who had escaped from the march. They would come filtering into the compound, usually at night, in ones, twos and threes. It became apparent to them, after escaping, that there was little hope of making any friendly lines, and remembering where the camp was and that there were still some Americans there, they simply headed for the only home they had known for a year-and-a-half and where there might be more security and companionship than there was in the hills and forests of Austria. We still had ample food, although water was now becoming a problem, so we welcomed them back and felt better because now we were becoming a larger unit. Perhaps another one hundred or so came back in this manner.

Repeated protests were made by me to the authorities concerning the presence of the artillery and soldiers within and about the very camp itself - I protested that it was against all the rules of the Geneva Convention, that it was calling for the Russians to attack the camp itself but they merely said they could do nothing about it and, somewhat quizzically, stated they were protecting the Americans and French from the onslaught of the Russians who would treat DS more- drastically than had the kindly Germans who had been guarding and protecting us.

Now the war reached us in a very real way. Each night the gunfire was louder and louder and the din and dirt from the return fire of the 88's was almost continuous. Each night, and occasionally during the day, it became necessary to assist some of the men into the slit trenches and we would spend most of the night in the trenches. During the day there was not the action particularly of the night before.

Occasionally the Russians would come over the walls of the valley of the Danube at night and there would be the flash and sound of small arms fire, a fire fight would develop in an area from three to five miles down the valley, and then it would break off. Toward the very last the fire fights came within a couple of thousand yards from the camp, rage for perhaps an hour, and then break off. The Americans became very tense and nerves were becoming frayed.

During this time, through the use of the MIS-X shortwave radio which I had used for many months, I learned that President Roosevelt had died, and had kept abreast of many of the battles and victories that the Allies had won. It appeared that the war was winding down, but it did not seem so to the embattled few in the American compound.

Finally, one night it was announced over the BBE that the surrender date of the Germans and Allies was to take place on May 8, 1945. There was, however, no cessation of the battle taking place near our camp.

The morning of May 8 outgoing shellfire from the artillery near the camp was met by incoming shellfire from down in the Danube valley. This continued until approximately 11:00 or 12:00. Then it became comparatively quiet until approximately 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon when one lone 88 was fired from the south edge of the camp, only one shell, and complete silence fell. To use a trite phrase, the silence was deafening.

Upon emerging from the slit trenches we discovered that not one single German soldier was in sight, there was no one near the artillery, our single guard at the gate had disappeared. We, and the displaced persons in the camp, simply stood about, slowly moving about the camp or simply sitting, looking, looking -- at nothing. There were no shouts of joy, we simply did not speak to one another, there was no conversation. This trance-like feeling persisted until late evening. At least for me this attitude remained -- for others the memory may be different.

The first night was quiet, though I believe we all felt some uneasiness. The next day the quiet persisted. A few of the men, myself included, ventured out into the surrounding countryside and found nothing but quiet prevailed. A few of the men bartered with older farm families to obtain eggs. These were suddenly the food of choice, as we had not seen eggs in many months, if not years. The older farmers were pleasant and cooperative, if not friendly. Younger persons remained at a distance and were not friendly. We did not venture into the towns or into Krems, but remained along the valley wall of hills.

Late that next evening a column of Russian soldiers appeared and entered the camp. While ranging from the Slavic-appearing soldier to the Uzbek cavalry, they were quiet and well-mannered. Their leader was an elderly general who took up residence in barrack 38-A.

When I asked for an audience with the general, it was granted almost at once, and when I entered the barracks he remained seated on one of the bunks with a blanket about him. He did salute, as did I. Through an interpreter he asked our numbers and why we were present in the camp. Upon explanation by me of our presence, he stated that we were safe from harm from his men, but that he had his problems and we had ours and that there was very little help he could or would give us. His only request was that we remain in our two barracks at night, that his men had orders to shoot anyone wandering about the camp, but that in the daytime we were free to wander about the area or countryside at will. This was not unreasonable and so I agreed to those conditions. He offered no food and asked for none. He appeared to be totally exhausted and, while pleasant, not friendly or unfriendly.

His men did not impede our movements during the daytime and we did not antagonize them during the nights. To my memory, not one of the Russian soldiers entered our compound nor carried on any conversation with any of the Americans.

This method of living continued for the remainder of the time we spent in Stalag XVII-B. We were, naturally, concerned about our fate in the coming days; were we to be transported to our lines near the western border of Austria, was someone coming to rescue us from our position, were we expected to somehow make the 180 kilometers from Krems to Linz on our own, had our country forgotten us?

Our queries were answered about the middle of May when, at about 5:00 a.m., several huge -- huge to us -- trucks smashed through the guard fence at the south side of the compound, along with perhaps six ambulances and one jeep carrying a .30 caliber machine gun, and rolled up to our two barracks. This party was led by a 1st Lieutenant, who spoke Hungarian, at least, if not other languages. He asked for "Kurt" and when I met him, he announced quietly that he had come to transport us to the American lines. He stated that they had started for us the day after the war was over, May 9, but that the Russians had bombed the ambulances and damaged them. That when word of this reached the commanders of the Third Army they asked for volunteers to come to our aid and that most of the Third Army stepped forward as one man.

The Lieutenant stated I had two hours in which to get all the men together, that stragglers would not be waited for, that we would be on the road at exactly 7:00 a. m. and "tough luck" for those out wandering around, that they would have to "hoof" it home.

We loaded the incapacitated into the ambulances and then loaded all the Americans into the trucks. We still had some space left and the Lieutenant agreed to allow as many of the French as possible into the trucks, many even hung on the idea for a trip home; many of the French having been at Stalag XVII-B since 1940.

The exhilaration of the roaring ride down the infamous hill into Krems cannot be described. Down through the narrow alleyways of the city and out into the open country we went, along the Danube and heading west and to home.

By this time there were guerilla units of the German army, primarily SS troops, who had gone into the hills for a continuation of the fight. There were occasional random shots from the hillsides, but no one was hurt and we continued on. At one point masses of wretched displaced persons clogged the road beside the Danube. We were held up for some little time until the commander of the unit told the people, mostly Hungarians heading home after service with the flak units of the German Army, that we were coming through, regardless of the consequences.

There were two-wheeled carts being pulled by some horses, some cattle, and mostly by the people themselves. All their possessions were piled in the carts, together with children and women. They were somewhat defiant until the lead truck, on which I was riding, slammed into the animals and the carts, throwing them into the river, at which point all the people turned westerly and ran, abandoning their possessions. The Lieutenant was not to be stopped in getting his charges back into Allied hands.

The sun was setting in the west when we encountered a makeshift gate near the city of Linz, manned by Russian guards. They politely opened the gate, saluted us as we passed, and we were free.