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MARCH 1945: LUCKENWALDE

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Reading the exaggerated prose of militant minority spokesmen and their liberal sycophants, as they describe oppression, hunger and disgraceful living conditions throughout America, sometimes makes us wonder if they can really be serious. They seem unaware that freedom and comfort (health even) are relative commodities. Even after 25 years of indulgent living during a period of unprecedented affluence, it still isn't difficult to recall how it once felt to live an oppressed and regimented life under utterly miserable conditions in the prison camps of Germany as World War II neared its end.

By that time, most of us who had been prisoners for a year or more accepted crowding, primitive sanitation, constant cold and gnawing, chronic hunger as a regular part of existence. We knew—or at least we hoped—the war would end eventually and a better future lay ahead. But there was always a feeling of helplessness and an uncertainty of how it might end in particular for us individually. It didn't pay to plan beyond the next tomorrow.

For the 130 of us who arrived at Luckenwalde's Stalag III-A, 35 miles south of Berlin, early in March 1945, just the prospect of sleeping under a roof again seemed fortunate. We had survived a two-week march across northern Poland in howling blizzards and temperatures of 20 and 30 below zero. We had endured a long eight days of rail travel from Stettin (now Szczecin), half of us jammed into an open-slatted cattle car, half in a coal gondola covered by a torn tarpaulin. So, shelter—a straw pallet of our own to stretch out on and the comparative warmth of barracks life—was an unexpected windfall.

Viewed from more fortunate times, Luckenwalde was an incredible experience for thousands of Allied prisoners. As the Russians advanced, the string of prison camps in East Germany and Silesia was abandoned, and prisoners, on foot until they could march no longer, were funneled westward toward Stalag III-A. By March, with over 17,000 men of all nations there and more arriving daily, the already overtaxed camp organization was completely overwhelmed. More than 4,000 newly arrived American enlisted men were living on bare ground covered only by soggy straw under six, circus-type tents on a mud-and-snow-swept clearing. One large open-pit latrine and one water point served them all. By contrast, as officers, we lived in luxury, sleeping on bunks in barracks and with two *aborts* (latrine buildings) for our convenience.

The six barracks in our compound, occupied by Polish, French, American, British, Norwegian, Belgian and Serbian officers, were segregated by seven-foot, double barbed wire from the rest of the camp. About two hundred of us lived in the south end of Barracks XII, a long, one-storied, brick and wooden building, in a room one hundred by forty feet. There was a similar room at the north end and between the two was a washroom equipped with three stone troughs and two dozen iron spigots, which were eternally leaky, frozen or not working.

Three ceramic-tiled stoves about eight feet high were spaced down the long axis of our room. They were the heating system, but at this point there were no briquettes or coal to burn in them. Our bunks were heavy, three-tiered, wooden frameworks, built in sections of 12, each being two bunks long and two wide. The straw-filled mattresses of coarse fiber sacking, resting on four or five wooden bed slats, were odorous, dank and infested with lice, bed bugs and fleas contributed by countless occupants before us. (We added new crops of our own.)

We had rearranged the bunk sections into cubicles around a wooden table for 24 men, with a wooden stool for every two. Ratty lines of twine and string, stretched between bunks and rafters, were draped with washing and laundry that never dried. The dirt-and-soot-covered

windows let in a minimum of light during the day, and, by night, the eight weak light bulbs dropped from the rafters (two or three were always burned out) glowed as dim blobs of orange in the smog-and-smoke-filled room.

Primarily, body heat kept us warm, but also our homemade tin can stoves (heatless smokers, we called them) in which we tried to burn scraps of cardboard, twigs and shavings from the bunks and bed boards, in an attempt to heat water or warm food undoubtedly helped. In addition, our fat lamps—tin cans filled with margarine, grease and a floating cloth wick, which we lit at night after the nine o'clock lights out—contributed something. The barracks atmosphere, at all times, day or night, was far thicker than any pea soup fog. To normal nostrils the odor must have been indescribable—a suffocating, miasmatic blend of unwashed bodies, grease, sour food, dirt, smoke, filthy bedding and damp brick flooring. Periodic airings, even on windy, sunshiny days, had little or no effect on it.

Red Cross food parcels had ceased to exist, though most of us still had left, squirreled away, a few cigarettes, raisins and prunes, and some powdered coffee, tea and milk. Breakfast was at 7:30 a.m. when a tub of hot water arrived from the central kitchen. It consisted of ersatz coffee, a few soaked prunes or raisins and a slice of sour, black German bread pathetically "toasted" on a tin can stove. After roll call at 8:30, we policed the quarters, which meant straightening out the ragged, gray blanket on the straw pallet, sweeping the cubicle and airing the barracks as a gesture to health. The rest of the day was our own until the next roll call at 5:00 p.m. Lunch, the one German meal served each day, consisted of a dipperful of stew or soup made of cow bones; stringy horse meat; rotten cabbage; rutabagas and barley; six shriveled, boiled potatoes the size of walnuts, eaten through with black rot and worm tunneling; and another slice of bread with currant jam. For the evening meal, hot water, ersatz tea and bread again. At a generous estimate we managed about seven hundred calories a day.

Under such conditions there was not much we could do but exist. We accumulated sack time, we talked and swapped stories, argued and griped, played cribbage and cards, worked at tinsmithing. When the weather permitted, we walked outside within the limited confines of our barbed wire enclosure; sometimes we just stood on the rise next to one of the latrine buildings and watched in fascination the new, German jet fighters, which occasionally whooshed by overhead. But mostly we planned menus; long, detailed 12-course meals that someday we hoped to eat again.

Sex was never a topic of conversation. We had discovered long before that it ranked far down the list of man's basic drives; we concluded that Freud had never been cold or really hungry. It was a depressing, monotonous, gray existence. Yet we were thankful to be there instead of still undergoing the hardships of the month before. In comparison to those in the other compounds of the camp, like our own enlisted men, the Italian forced-labor prisoners, and especially the Russians (in five years some 15,000 of them were said to have died at Luckenwalde in two typhus epidemics and from tuberculosis), we were a privileged minority. And, of course, all of us at Luckenwalde were infinitely better off than many displaced German civilians or the Jews, Poles and political prisoners in such camps as Buchenwald and Dachau.

Out of sheer perversity we wish, at times, that some of our loud, militant critics, the Huey Newtons, Cleavers, Seales, Hoffmans, Jane Fondas and Angela Davises, who find life in America so degrading and unbearably inhuman, could spend a year of living under ordinary prison camp conditions.