

Sawtry, England

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Next morning at 9:00 a.m. about thirty of us were loaded onto a truck and taken to the train station in Leeds, where another 150 or so fellow prisoners joined us from nearby camps. We would be traveling south, to a destination as yet unknown to us.

We occupied three carriages of a passenger train. Since it was daylight, we could enjoy the beautiful Yorkshire countryside, with its dark dry stone walls, which brought back vivid memories of our mailbox at the Clayton building site, the walkway and the little bridge. The past 19 months seemed like a dream that had come to an abrupt end.

I noticed the color of the stone walls changing from dark to white and knew that we had left Yorkshire behind and were now in the county of Derbyshire. My foreman Bill once told me that without looking at a map you could tell by the cream-colored walls when you were in Derbyshire.

Although I loved seeing the country, my thoughts were with Sue. I looked at the picture she had given me for a long time. It made me wish she were sitting next to me. So before I started feeling too sorry for myself, I struck up a conversation with the man sitting next to me.

He came from a camp near York. He told me that he thought he was being moved away because he had become friendly with the farmer's daughter at the commando where he had worked. The farmer didn't like that, so he sent a letter to the camp commander, asking for him to be taken off the commando.

I wondered how many more were on this train for similar reasons, and if our camp was going to be specially guarded, or if there were no



Typical Yorkshire Landscape

work commandos.

One of the guards came walking through the carriage. I plucked up the courage to ask him where we were going. He said Peterborough, about 160 miles from the camp in Yorkshire. We would arrive there early the next morning.

It turned out to be a long night for me. I even found myself thinking that it might have been better if Sue and I had never met. But I quickly dismissed that thought. Everything had worked out well so far. It must have been meant to happen.

I fell asleep for a while. When I woke up I felt hungry and thirsty and I had no idea how far we had traveled. Most of my fellow prisoners were asleep. Although the carriages were filled to capacity, I felt alone and a little homesick.

Somewhere during the night the train came to a halt. Our carriages were moved to another rail, where we got off and stood in line for some food and tea, provided by an army canteen. Not long afterwards, we were hooked up again and the journey south continued. I felt much better with food inside me and fell asleep again. When I awoke it was daylight.

We rolled into the city of Peterborough, where we got off the train and boarded three large army trucks. The trip continued to our new camp on Wood Walton Lane, Sawtry, near Connington in the county of Huntingdonshire.

As we were unloaded and went through the large main gates, I could see that it was a very large camp. What surprised me more than anything was the fact that there was no barbed wire. A very high chain-link fence was all that surrounded the camp. Neither did I see any guard towers. The buildings were wooden barracks. I was pleasantly surprised by the relaxed atmosphere. It reminded me more of a regular army camp than a place holding prisoners of war.

Once inside, the gates closed behind us and we had to line up to be individually searched and questioned. I was looked over by a captain. First he found my photo of Sue and wanted to know who she was. I told him she was a longtime friend. Then he wanted to know how I came to be in possession of the photo. I replied that they let me keep it when I was taken prisoner. He looked doubtful, but after a little hesitation he handed it back to me. He also found the folder in which I kept all my English papers. Besides that, all I possessed was a toothbrush, toothpaste and my

most treasured English-German dictionary.

After having a good look at my folder, the captain asked me to describe our train ride from Leeds to Peterborough. I was puzzled but told him as well as I could about the countryside and the different landscapes in Yorkshire and in Derbyshire. I later found out that he really wanted to know how well I could speak English. After he was finished, he asked me for my name and wrote it in his notebook.

We next had to wait in line to be interviewed. There was a row of tables set up, behind each of which sat a German prisoner of war. When my turn came, I was asked my name, rank, home address, and religion. The man behind the table then wrote everything down.

Then something very unusual happened. The man who sat at the next table got up, came over to me, and told me that he came from the city of Betzingen, which was no more than five miles from where I grew up. He also belonged to the same church as me and it turned out that we had attended confirmation class together. What a small world! There we were, over a thousand miles from home, and I meet a man who sat with me in confirmation class so many years before.

He asked me to come and visit him in his barracks as soon as we were through and pointed to a small hut in the middle of the camp.

The barracks were very similar to those at the Westfield camp. They were wooden and had a potbelly stove in the middle. However, they were larger, accommodating about 80 of us. This time I had the bottom bunk. All the men in our barracks were from the Yorkshire area and we were all new arrivals.

That same evening I went to look for the small hut, standing all by itself in the middle of the camp. My new friend, who was called Helmut Haas, lived there all by himself because he was the mail orderly of the camp. He also took care of a book in which he had to record all the punishments for the whole camp. Every incident had to be registered. As far as the mail was concerned, every one was allowed to send a letter to Germany once every six months. It was his job to collect the letters and take them to be censored. Also, first thing in the morning, it was his duty to go up to the British office and collect all the incoming mail, which he had to distribute to the respective British personnel and all the prisoners of war.

All the prisoners were classed as either 'A' (which stood for 'anti-

Nazi'), or 'B' (which stood for 'in between'). 'C' stood for 'Nazi'. There were no 'C' classifications allowed in this camp.

That must be why there were no guard towers or barbed wire around the camp, only a tall fence. It had no political problems. Helmut told me that every week about 50 men from the 'A' category were repatriated back to Germany and then replaced by men from other camps around the country. We, the men who were sent here from Yorkshire, must be classified either 'A' or 'B'. I later found out that my classification was 'B' because I had belonged to the '*Jung Volk*' but was not a Nazi sympathizer.

My new friend confirmed my suspicion that many of the men who were sent away to another camp had been caught fraternizing. He then asked me if I could speak English. I said, yes I could, and mentioned that the captain who interviewed me asked me questions about the trip down here. Helmut explained that they were looking for a replacement for him to take care of the mail because he would be repatriated home in a month's time.

Helmut had dealings every day with the captain who interviewed me. He promised me that first thing next day he would tell him that he thought I was the perfect replacement for him.

We talked for almost two hours. I told him all about the girl I knew from Yorkshire and our meetings outside the camp. He thought we should definitely keep up our relationship and he would see to it that we could continue to communicate with one another. In fact, he insisted I write a letter to Sue as soon as possible. Since it was his job to collect the mail every morning, he would look through it and take out the letters addressed to me. She could even send a parcel because he would make sure I received it. My heart leaped with joy at these exciting possibilities.

Before I left, Helmut made me a cup of coffee. I was amazed at the privileges he had as a mail orderly. When I got back to my barracks everyone was busy introducing themselves. Some were familiarizing themselves with the layout of the camp.

I myself looked for a quiet place where I could write a letter to Sue. First I lay down on my bunk so that I could collect my thoughts. I felt almost as if I were in a dream. When I finally got up to write I realized that I hadn't any writing paper. The only solution I could think of was to go back and ask Helmut if he could lend me some.

I went to his hut and found him busy making entries in a book. He

had writing paper and envelopes and suggested I sit down right there to write, so I would not be disturbed.

I wrote Sue a long letter. There was so much to tell her. Helmut kept my letter so he could mail it for me first thing the next morning.

It was getting late. The man on the top bunk wanted to know where I had been all evening. I told him that I had met an old friend from back home and we had a lot to tell each other. Soon afterwards the lights were switched off and I was fast asleep.

The following day was more or less uneventful. I found out that many of my fellow prisoners were working; most of them were on farm commandos, and many on road works and various building projects. I walked all around the camp and was amazed how large it was. What surprised me more than anything was that there was absolutely no barbed wire to be seen anywhere. Of course there was a soccer field and I noticed some cats. It looked like quite a few of the men kept pets.

I needed a haircut so I looked up the barbershop. That was usually the place where all the rumors started. The barber confirmed that there were repatriations almost every week. He knew Helmut, the mail orderly, and had heard a whisper that Helmut would be repatriated in a few weeks time.

As I walked by the camp entrance I saw some trucks dropping off men who had come back from their work commandos. That meant it must be close to 5 o'clock and I wondered what was on the menu for supper. As it turned out we got two slices of white bread and a kind of watery pea soup, much better than what we had at the other camp. I missed the sandwiches and cigarettes, which Sue used to bring me. Above all I missed Sue.

I didn't want to bother Helmut too much so I decided to wait until he contacted me. With a camp of that size he would have his hands full taking care of the mail for everyone. He had mentioned that some days it took him all evening to get everything done.

Later that evening I was sitting on my bunk teaching myself some more English when Helmut walked into my barracks looking for me. He told me that the captain had one other potential candidate for his job and that he would interview both of us. My interview was to be in three days time, at 9:0 a.m. in Helmut's office.

He thought there was a good chance that I would get his job. The

captain would make a decision the day I was interviewed because the new orderly had only three weeks to be trained.

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Three days after we had arrived at the camp, a man whom I didn't know came into our barracks asking for Karl Kern. I introduced myself and he handed me an envelope addressed to me. It was in Sue's handwriting and I could not figure out how a letter from her could end up here so soon after we had left Yorkshire.

I asked the man to sit down and tell me how it came about. He explained that when my group arrived at the camp, it was discovered that there were two men with the 'C' classification. They were sent back to Yorkshire and two others with a "B" classification were sent in their place. He was one of those two men and he had worked with Seppie for a time. When Seppie heard that the man was coming here he immediately thought of Sue. The same day he asked my former workmate, the timber-man, to tell Sue to write a letter to me by the next day, and he would have it delivered to me.

All the parties involved agreed to help out and the man carried the letter in his shoe all the way here. I was so grateful to him for what he did. I could only hope to be able to do something for him in return some day.

I couldn't wait to read my letter, so I just turned sideways in my bunk and started reading. There were quite a few pages. Sue told me about the timber-man approaching her and how she wasn't sure if he was