

The Last Train From Danzig

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The Free City of Danzig, now known as Gdansk, lies across the Vistula River which empties into the Bay of Danzig, a southern extension of the Baltic Sea. It was declared a free city following World War I and provided a port of access to the sea for Poland by way of a narrow stretch of land known as the Polish Corridor. This passageway divided East Prussia from the rest of Germany. To reach Danzig from Stalag XI-B Hammerstein, Pomerania, it was a full day's journey by train traveling easterly across the rolling grain fields and then north via the old corridor to the city.

On a cold Saturday morning in December of 1945, Bill Williams and I boarded a train at the Hammerstein station. We were escorted by a 75-year-old German sergeant, Hunt, our guard and interpreter. Bill, whose given name is William Wallace Williams the third, was a U.S. Navy gunner on loan to the Merchant Marine. His ship, on its way to Murmansk, Russia, had been sunk above the Arctic Circle. After several days afloat in a life boat, he was picked up by a German submarine crew and finally wound up at Stalag XI-B. Somewhere along the way he acquired the nickname of "Seaweed." The purpose of this trip was to visit an arbeit kommando (work group) of American POWs on a farm near the town of Lauenburgh, located northwest of the city of Danzig on the Baltic Sea. To reach the farm meant a change of trains in Danzig for the short ride to Lauenburgh. We were due at the farm on Sunday morning to conduct a church service for POWs brought in from several farms in the area. We never made it to Lauenburgh.

The morning we left the Hammerstein station, the Russian armies crossed the Vistula River and began their push toward Berlin. One prong of the drive was directed toward Danzig by following the river in its northward flow toward the Baltic.

As we travelled across Pomerania and entered the old corridor, it became apparent that something big was underway. We were constantly being sidetracked while train loads of military equipment and personnel raced by, heading south away from the area bordering the Baltic. No one on our train seemed to be concerned until we neared the outlying area surrounding the Port of Danzig. Here the rail traffic was much heavier and the roads were crammed with both military and civilian vehicles, all heading away from the city. It was then the train conductors began moving through the coaches, urging everyone to be ready to leave the cars as soon as the train pulled into the station.

Before the wheels stopped turning, the doors were opened and we were literally being pushed out onto the platform. The situation on the platform could best be described as "confusion confounded." There were hundreds of civilians and soldiers, young and old, carrying suitcases, arms

loaded with clothing, blankets and cooking utensils, all trying to squeeze into any opening available to board the train. Bill took hold of Mr. Hunt's coattail and I held onto Bill's belt and in this manner we made our way across the platform to the station master's office.

We were told there were no trains leaving until the next day, but that one would be heading back in the direction we had come. The possibility of getting back on the train we had just left was out of the question. The reason for all the activity was that word had reached the city that the Russians were advancing along the river and were nearing the city. Although Mr. Hunt wore the uniform of the enemy, I had grown very fond of him during the past year. We had made many trips together, much like the one we were on today, and he had shown me many considerations. I thought he was on the verge of a heart attack, due to his deathly fear of falling into the hands of the Russians. To Bill and I, it looked like the end of our POW days and freedom. However, we were a bit premature in our rejoicing. Freedom was not to come until three months later, and six hundred miles to the west.

While Bill and I stood watching the military frantically loading tanks and other equipment onto flatcars, Mr. Hunt had been in conversation with a civilian policeman. Returning to where we were, he told us there was no way out of the city until the following morning, when another train (the last one from the city) would be assembled to take only civilians. When he approached the military police directing traffic as to what to do with Bill and me until morning, he received several suggestions, not the least of which was to shoot us and dump us in the river. The only side arms that Mr. Hunt carried was a small dagger worn by members of the Hitler Youth, and the way his hands were shaking he could not have gotten it out of the sheath. Eventually a civilian policeman suggested he drop us off at the city police station for safe keeping until morning.

Our route took us through several side streets onto a rather steep road leading up and away from the city onto a ridge. From this height we could look down on the city as it stretched northward, hugging the Vistula to where it emptied into the Baltic. We finally stopped in front of an old stone building with iron bars across the windows and, according to the legend cut into a stone above the doorway, it was the "District Jail." After several minutes of rather heated argument between Mr. Hunt and the jail keeper, the jailor stepped from the doorway and led us down a corridor to a cell at the rear of the building. As Mr. Hunt left with the jailor, he said he would see us in the morning. After what we had witnessed at the station and had heard and seen on the way through the city, we doubted we would ever see him again.

As soon as the jailor had left, the other prisoners began asking questions as to what we Americans were doing in Danzig at this time. There was an assortment of nationals in the various cells, but most of them were Poles and several spoke fairly good English. We had no problem communicating with them. As usual, one of the first questions put to us was, did we have any American cigarettes? From our supply of several packs we made sure that each cell occupant that smoked got at least one cigarette. It wasn't long before the

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jailor smelled the smoke, came to investigate and demanded his ration of the smokes. It is amazing how one drag on an American made cigarette could change a man's whole attitude toward those, who moments before, had been the enemy. As the evening wore on, we had hot water to make coffee from our can of powdered Nescafe, which we shared with the jailor. In return he managed to secure extra potatoes and sausage, along with a loaf of white bread, so our evening meal was quite different from the thin barley soup served the other inmates.

Bill had carried his accordion with him, so as soon as we finished eating, he limbered up the accordion and in no time that old jail sounded like an old time Baptist camp meeting. I have learned since that much of the population of that part of Poland was of the Protestant persuasion, which accounted for the ability of most of the inmates to pick up the melodies of the hymns and sing along with us, mostly in Polish. As I recall, the jailor himself got so caught up in the spirit of the good time we were having that he failed to turn off the lights until a military patrol came banging on the door. Long after the lights were turned off we could hear the noise of heavy vehicles and tanks slowly fading into the distance as the military evacuated the city.

We were awakened by the jailor just as the sun was making its appearance. During the night fog from the sea moved in and completely covered the city. The only landmark that indicated a city existed below the blanket covering of fog was two immensely tall spires of the Marien Kirche, which I learned later had been erected during the years 1443-1505. Fifty years later I can still see, in my mind's eye, those twin spear-shaped towers emerging from the fog and pointing ever so majestically toward heaven.



To our surprise, Mr. Hunt did show up and we began our hike back to the railroad station. This route took us by the base of the spires we had seen above the fog. The superstructure of the church building was immense. The upper portion of it extended out of sight into the fog. The huge doors were wide open and the stone floor and supporting columns showed considerable damage caused by the tanks and other vehicles that had been housed within this area once used for worship.

The scene at the railroad station, when we arrived, was the same as the day before. During the night another line of cars had been brought in, much longer than the one we arrived on, and was made up entirely of passenger coaches of all shapes and sizes. The crowd trying to gain entrance into the cars consisted mostly of civilians, with a few odd uniformed home guards. Our khaki colored uniforms went unnoticed and by following close behind Mr. Hunt, we worked our

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way through one of the less crowded doorways. The pressure from those behind carried us into the passageway and then into one of the small cubicles so common to the European passenger coach.

Bill was ahead of me and was pushed to the end of the seat, and I landed on his lap. Mr. Hunt had disappeared into another cubicle somewhere further along the passageway. The meager room left between the facing seats was soon filled with several young people who stood, holding onto straps attached to a rod suspended from the ceiling. While we were inescapably being forced into the corner of the compartment, the engineer was blowing short blasts on the whistle, indicating the train was about to get underway.

As the engineer bore down on the throttle to start the cars moving, the forward motion caused all those standing to collapse onto those of us who were seated. Poor Bill was carrying the weight of myself and that of a young woman who had been standing in the space in front of me. I turned to Bill and tried to console him the best I could the young woman who had fallen against me and the lady sitting next to Bill heard our conversation and, for the first time, noticed the miniature Stars and Stripes on our uniforms. From the commotion that followed, one would think that we were trying to attack them. Had it been possible, we would have been thrown out the window, but we were so packed together there was no way such a move could have been made. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was heating up until Bill's quick thinking cooled things down. He managed to retrieve from somewhere on his person a pack of Winston cigarettes. As I said before, it is amazing how one American made cigarette, like music, can soothe the savage breast. We added to the cigarettes a few chunks of GI ration chocolate we carried for just such emergencies, and it was not long before our presence was accepted. Later, as we rode through the night, we were invited to share the standard traveler's meal of bread, sausage and some form of jam.

It was the afternoon of the following day, after several changes of trains, when we arrived back at Hammerstein and Stalag XI-B. If the scene at the station in Danzig was chaos, what was going on inside the wire of the stalag was pandemonium. Word had come from the camp commandant that the prisoners were to be ready to evacuate the camp at daybreak the following morning. As we worked through the night, sewing together knapsacks and building a sled, we could hear in the distance the sound of the oncoming Russian Army's big guns.

At daybreak we were lined up at the main gate and began a three month, 600 mile march. We zig-zagged across Germany, finally to end at Stalag XI-A outside Neubrandenburg. There the pursuing Russian Army completely overwhelmed and badly mauled a demoralized German Weiermach.