

## **A personal account of experiences in the German Panzers at the Battle of Stalingrad**

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The main line of my talk will be to guide you through the process of how I, a boy from Schleswig Holstein, ended up in the Napoleonic retreat at Stalingrad. I sometimes wonder why we have not learnt from history. Napoleon in 1812 invaded Russia. He started off with 650,000 from East Prussia and advanced towards Smolensk and Moscow, but had to retreat. The Russian army harassed the retreat and when the army returned to Paris, Napoleon arrived with only 1,400 soldiers. Of course, the original 650,000 had not all been soldiers, and only half of them were French anyway – others were Germans and Poles. For many illiterate peasants it seemed a good idea to join Napoleon's army. We thought when we invaded the Soviet Union in the campaign codenamed Barbarossa that we were the strongest and the most intelligent – and we now know what became of that!

I was born in 1922 in Schleswig Holstein. My father was an unskilled labourer. Up to 1866 Schleswig Holstein had belonged to Denmark. The Bismarck and the Prussian Army started a war with Denmark, after which Schleswig Holstein became German. When I was a soldier in Russia the temperature on the coldest day was -54 degrees. I wished the Danes had won that war since I would not then have been a German in Russia suffering from the terrible cold of 1942. In the end, whatever our nationality, we all belong to one big family, which I realise now, but obviously did not at that time.

### **The 1930s in Germany**

Up to the age of 10 (from 1922 to 1932) I lived in the Weimar Republic, which came into existence after the Kaiser was thrown out in 1919. I experienced all that as a small boy.

Obviously I didn't understand anything of what was happening. My parents were very loving and did everything possible for me, but I remember a tumultuous situation – strikes, shootings, recession, 7 million unemployed, blood in the streets. I lived in a working-class quarter outside Hamburg where the people were suffering great hardship. There were demonstrations where red flags were carried, women carrying children and pushing pushchairs, shouting 'Give us bread, give us work', workers shouting 'Revolution' and 'Lenin'.

My father was very left-thinking and explained many things. The ruling class of Germany was very frightened by this situation and decided to do something about it. I witnessed street fighting that I had to run away from, and thought this was all part of life.

On Christmas Day 1932 I was 10 years old. Shortly afterwards, on 30 January 1933, a bomb exploded at the Reichstag. That was when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. My mother kept asking how Hindenberg could allow this to happen, because we all knew the Nazis were thugs. We knew they were just a racist party who talked about revenge and beating people up.

I thought it all interesting and exciting, even though my mother told me they were gangsters. I would see brown-shirted storm troopers marching through town and I thought they were very glamorous. As young boys we tried to sing their songs and proudly marched behind them. In the last three columns, at the end of the marches, came the sweepers and if people on the pavement didn't salute the flag, the sweepers would force them to do it. Later I was in the Hitler Youth and was ashamed for my mother to see me.

**Hitler appointed to quell working-class rebellion**

Hitler was Reichschancellor. Yet 10 years earlier nobody knew him. The Nazi name (standing for Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party) attracted quite a few people disillusioned with the traditional parties. Some were sincere socialists prepared to give Hitler a chance on the basis he couldn't be worse than the parties that had preceded him. When Hitler and his representatives spoke it was always about making Germany great again, attacking Jews and the lower orders as people we must do something about. It was the God given duty of the German people to sort the world out in the German way, even if they didn't like it.

There were no elections. Hitler was appointed overnight. Elections were abolished in order to put Hitler in power. Why? The Nazis had no tradition. So who put them in power? Hindenberg was a spokesperson for the German ruling classes, the military, the arms producers, the Ruhr barons, the bankers, the Church and the aristocratic landowners. My father said that when Hitler came to power he was a servant of the rich. Now I know my father was right. They had put Hitler there in order to quell the rebellion of working-class people against bad living standards. Hitler was not even a German national. He had been a corporal in the army, a vagabond in Vienna. He had had no education, he was just shouting for revenge. How can it be possible in a highly developed country like Germany, which is very cultured, for someone like him to become Head of the German state and supreme military commander? It would not have been possible for him on his own. His party was nothing. It was his paymasters who made it, wanting to prevent a repetition of the Russian revolution.

Hitler had executive power but was not a dictator. He was just a front man. He was not clever enough to run a machine like the German state.

The Nazis set up concentration camps. My father had always said we workers must struggle for our rights because the bastards only employ us if they can make a profit and that they were only afraid of rebellion that could lead to revolution. One day some brownshirts came in 2 cars at 3 a.m. and collected one of our neighbours who was a union secretary. He was taken to a concentration camp. My mother told me about this, and from then on my father instructed me to keep quiet about what he said about the Nazis as otherwise he could be sent to a concentration camp too. Taking one person from our area was a clever way of frightening and threatening all the families. I was 11 or 12 at the time and I thought he was an idiot and that I knew it all. My father thought nothing could be done and he had no choice but to keep quiet. The communists were the first ones to be taken away to concentration camps and then even progressive church people and anyone who spoke against the regime. You went if you dared open your mouth. Fear and terror was the basis of Nazi power.

### **In the Hitler Youth**

I was in the Hitler Youth. A law had been passed saying that there could only be one youth movement and my church youth group was taken over by the Hitler Youth. I liked it. All my friends were in it. My father said I had better stay in it because under the prevailing conditions it would be bad for him, and for me, were I to leave.

When I left school at 15, my father, a railwayman, got me a locksmith's apprenticeship on the railway. The first question on the application form for that apprenticeship was: "When did you join the Hitler Youth?" You probably didn't get the job if you had never been a member – there was indirect pressure (not a law) to persuade youngsters to join the Hitler Youth. But I admit I loved it. We were poor and I had few clothes, sewn by my mother. But in the Hitler Youth I was given a brown shirt. My father would not buy it for

me because he could not afford it, but at the next meeting I was given a parcel to take home. It contained two brown shirts. My father hated it and had to watch me wearing it. He understood what it meant. We Hitler Youth marched with drums and swastikas and I was so proud, accompanied by fanfares. It was a very disciplined environment.

I loved the camps which took place in lovely surroundings, such as a castle in Tübingen. All of us young children had the chance to play plenty of sport. When we wanted to play football in our poor streets, nobody could afford a ball, but in the Hitler Youth all was provided. Where did the money come from? It probably came from the contributions of arms manufacturers. Hitler was put into power in order to prepare for a war which could save Germany from economic collapse.

I remember when there were 7 million unemployed. Within 18 months of Hitler coming to power there were very few unemployed left. The docks started building warships – the Bismarck, the Eugene, the Uboats. Germany was actually becoming short of workers. People thought that was wonderful, but my father said that if you can only get work by preparing for war something was very wrong.

In the Hitler Youth we learnt to shoot and throw hand grenades, occupy and attack trenches. We played great war games. We were being taught round big bonfires where we sang Nazi songs: "If Jewish blood drips off our knife", and suchlike. My parents were horrified that we were going back to barbarism. But I didn't question it. We were being prepared for fighting a war.

A few years after that Germans had occupied vast areas 4 or 5 times the size of the UK. These areas could be held down because German youth had been prepared for it in the Hitler Youth. I believed that we Germans would sort out the mess the world was in.

### **In the Panzer Division**

At 18 I was called up and commandeered to a Panzer division. I was so proud that at such a young age I was chosen to be a member of the Panzers. The training was very hard. I came home wearing my uniform and thought the whole thing was great. Our trainers told us they would drive out our individualism and rebuild us in the Nazi socialist spirit. They succeeded. When I came to Stalingrad I still believed it.

Our officer class in the Wehrmacht was almost all of an aristocratic landowning background, the 'Vons'. War propaganda intensified the whole time. We heard 'we' would have to do something about Poland or they would attack us, to defend the freedom of the world. History is now repeating itself with Bush and Blair. We attacked Poland on 1 September 1939. When bomb blew up in Berlin, we were told this was terrorism being conducted against us peace loving people. It is the same today as we are being prepared for war. It is the same atmosphere here now – lies and misinformation.

I was called up in 1941 when Operation Barbarossa was put into action on 22 June. I was being trained at that time. When the war on the Soviet Union started the Panzers were in France. In the beginning the German army and its discipline were very superior, from a military position, to those of other nations. Our troops entered the Soviet Union relatively easily. My 22nd Panzers weren't sent there until the winter of 1941, by train. In France the weather had been OK and the first part of the journey was quite pleasant

even though it was winter. It was colder in Germany, and in Poland it was snowing. In the Soviet Union everything was white.

We believed then it would be an honour to die fighting for the fatherland. We came through a town in the Soviet Union called Tanenburg. A battle had taken place there earlier, involving tanks. We looked at the scene for which we 18-year olds were unprepared. We did not know what to expect, just knew we had to obey orders. I began to wonder, for although most burnt out tanks were Russian, one of them was a German tank just like mine, and I couldn't help wondering how the driver got out, for it must have been quite difficult. And then I realised he could not have got out, but must have died there.

For the first time I realised that I did not want to die. It is great to talk about big battles, but what is the reality? My national socialist spirit can't control the flight of bullets. That is how I came to have my first doubts.

We went to Crimea as part of Manstein's 11th Army. In late winter / early spring our attack started. I fought my first battle. We won. But when I was driving my tank one day a sobering incident occurred. I had been told never to stop the tank. Stop and you're dead. I approached a narrow bridge which I had to cross. While I approached, three Russian soldiers carrying a wounded companion were being escorted by German guards. When they saw me they dropped the wounded man. I stopped in order to avoid running over him. My commander ordered me to go on. I had to run over the injured man and kill him. I became a murderer. I thought it was OK to kill in battle, but not a defenceless person. This too gave me misgivings. But it drives you mad if you keep thinking about it. After the battle we were all given medals. That was wonderful. We cleaned up Crimea. It was exciting to take villages, to conquer an army. Then we were

taken back by train to the mainland where we joined General Paulus. That was in the spring of 1942. I took part in the drive to the River Volga. We beat Timoshenko. I took part in lots of battles. Then we approached Stalingrad.

On the way we had political commissars calling us together from time to time for a situation report. Our commissar was a major in our unit. We sat on the grass around him. He told us there was no need to stand in his presence. He said "Why do you think you are in Russia?" I wondered what the catch was. Someone said: "To defend the honour of the fatherland". The major said this was Goebbels rubbish, and that you didn't fight a war over slogans but over real things. When we have destroyed the proletarian rubbish army, he told us, the fighting in the south would be over. Where would we go then? The answer was to the Caucasian and Caspian oil fields, 800 km from Stalingrad. What then? We had no idea. Well, if we went 700 km south, we would get to Iraq. At the same time Rommel, then fighting in the Nile Delta, would go east, and would also arrive in Iraq. Without getting our hands on these major oil resources, he told us, Germany could not become a major power. And now I look at the situation today – it is also all about oil.

#### **"Disturbing experiences" talking to a communist prisoner**

At one point I was slightly wounded. I was taken to hospital where I was declared unfit for the front line.

I will now quote from my book, *Through Hell for Hitler* (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1990, p.77-81), of which a new edition is about to be published:

“A short train transport on straw in covered wagons took us back to a Lazarett in a town called Stalino. Though an infection set in, I had a great time there. A few weeks rest from the front was worth a pot of gold.

“Most of the hospital staff, including senior surgeons, were Russian. The treatment was efficient under tough war conditions, and when I was ready to leave, a Russian doctor said to me with a sly grin: ‘Go east again, young man, after all, that is what you have come here for!’ I was not sure whether I liked his remark, or indeed, whether I had any great wish to go east. After all I was not yet twenty years old, I wanted to live, not die.

“Though I was fit enough to leave the Lazarett, I was not yet in a condition to rejoin my Division, which was then battling its way towards Rostov. I was sent to join a unit which was guarding a prison camp somewhere between the Donetsk and the Dniepr. In flat country the large camp had been set up in the open. Kitchen, stores etc. were under canvas, while the uncouth thousands of prisoners were left with nothing to cover themselves with but what they could lay their hands on. Their rations were very meagre, and so, though not quite as bad, were ours. However, the summer weather was fine and the Russians, used to living rough were able to withstand the conditions. The whole camp was bounded by a large circular trench, which the prisoners were not allowed to approach. Within the camp, at one side, was a Kolchose consisting of a number of buildings. The entire Kolchose was ringed by rolls of barbed wire and had only one entrance which was guarded. Together with about a dozen other semi-fit invalids. I was assigned to guard this inner compound.

“Guard duty generally was considered by most active soldiers as a mind-killing exercise and a punishment. Above all it was boring, and the goings on in the Kolchose compound were a decidedly strange affair. The clue, I suppose, was to be found in

Hitler's infamous "Kommissar Befehl", according to which all political prisoners, Politruks (Political Army officers) and other members of the Communist Party were to be shot. For the Communists, the 'Kommissar Befehl' was what the 'Final Solution' was to the Jews. I suppose that at that time most of us accepted that Communism was a crime, that Communists were criminals, and that there was no legal necessity to prove any further individual guilt. It dawned on me that I was now guarding a camp which had been set up to erase the evil of Communism.

"Of all the prisoners who walked into the Kolchose compound, none walked out again. Whether they knew this would be their fate, I am not sure. Quite a number of them had been given away by their fellow prisoners in the large outer camp, and even in doubtful cases, when they claimed that they had never belonged to the Party or were Communists at all – or even that they were anti-Communists – they still did not walk out again. We being only the guards, the compound was run by a small detachment of the Sicherheits Dienst, the SD which was under the command of the SS equivalent of a Major. In each case there was a vague investigation, after which the execution was carried out, always at the same place against a wall of a burnt-out cottage, which could not be seen from anywhere outside. The burial place, consisting of a few large trenches, was further to the rear.

"Having soaked up a full Nazi 'education' at school and in the Hitler Youth, this first experience of direct contact with Communists in the flesh was very baffling. The prisoners who were daily brought into our compound, either alone or in small groups, were very different types of person from what I had expected. Indeed, they were different from the masses of the prisoners outside who on the whole looked and behaved like typical East European peasants. What struck me most about these

Politruks and Party members was their intelligence and pride. I never, or hardly ever, noticed any of them whining or complaining, and they never asked for anything for themselves. When their time for execution came, and I saw many go, they did so with their heads held high. Almost all of them impressed me as persons whom one could trust, and I was sure, had we been living under peaceful conditions, that I would have liked some of them to be my friends.

“Our daily routine was monotonous. One either stood at the gate with someone else for a couple of hours, or walked about the compound alone, the heavy loaded rifle always hanging ready over one’s shoulder. Usually there were about a dozen to twenty ‘patients’ under our care. Their ‘home’ was a cleaned-out pigsty, which was itself surrounded, within the compound, by barbed wire. It was a prison within a prison within a prison. Our system of guarding them gave them virtually no chance to escape and on the whole we had little trouble with them. Since we were amongst them during all hours of the day and the night, we came to know them all by sight and often by name, and of course, we were the ones who handed them over for ‘investigation’ and delivered them for their last walk to the firing squad.

“One of the prisoners had a fair knowledge of German, which he had learnt at school. I have forgotten his family name but his first name was Boris. As I spoke Russian fairly well in a pidgin fashion we had no difficulty conversing on most subjects. Boris was a Lieutenant, a Politruk, and about two years older than me. We discovered that we had both learnt the trade of locksmith, he in Gorlovka-Artemovsk Region in a large engineering complex, and I at the Railway workshops in Hamburg. On our advance I had passed through his town. He was blond, about six feet tall and had laughing blue eyes which even in this desperate situation had not lost their friendly twinkle. Often,

especially at nights, I felt drawn to chat with him. As I called him Boris anyway, he had asked me if he could call me by my first name and I think that it surprised us both to find how easily we could get on with each other. We mostly talked about our families, our homes, our school and apprentice days. I knew the names of his brothers and sisters, how old they were, what his parents did for a living, and even some of their personal habits. He naturally was very worried about how they were faring under German occupation, and I was in no position to console him. He even gave me their address and asked me, that if ever I was going their way, to look them up and tell them. 'But tell them what?', I thought, and we both knew that I would never go, and that therefore his family would never find out what had happened to their Boris. In turn he learned all about my family and all the things which were close to my heart. I told him how in a harmless way I had had a girlfriend for whom I had felt much love. He smiled understandingly and told me that he too had had a girl-friend who had been a student. We felt very close at moments like this – until we suddenly then both realized what a gulf there was between us, that I was standing there with a rifle on my shoulder and that he was my prisoner. I knew, of course, that he would never hold a girl in his arms again, but was not quite sure whether he was aware of that. I knew that his only crime had been that he was a soldier and a Politruk, and my instinct told me all right that there was something very wrong somewhere.

“Surprisingly, we talked very little about life in the army, and as regards politics we found we had no bridge of common understanding, not even a common denominator from where together we could analyse. So close in so many human ways, we both realized that in that we were a world apart.

“Then came Boris’s last night. I had found out from the SD that it was his turn to be shot in the morning. He had been to ‘investigation’ in the afternoon, and I could see that he had been beaten and hit in the face. He had also been injured in his side, but he said nothing – and neither did I – for what was the point? I am not sure whether he was aware that he was to be shot at sun-rise, and I certainly did not tell him. But being an intelligent man, he must have come to some conclusion on why his fellow prisoners were led away after investigation and never returned.

“I was on night duty from two to four, and the night was beautifully warm and quiet. The air was full of the music of nature, with the frogs in the nearby pond croaking as if in concert. Boris was sitting on the straw outside in the pigsty, with his back leaning against the wall playing, very quietly on his small mouth-organ, which fitted unseen in his hands. It was his only possession left, every thing else had been taken from him. The tune he played when I arrived was beautiful, a typical Russian melancholic one, something about the wide steppe and love. But then there were shouts from some of his fellow prisoners inside, telling him to shut up, and he looked at me, should he ignore it and go on playing? When I shrugged my shoulder, he knocked the mouth-organ in the palm of his hand and said: ‘Nitchevo, let’s talk instead!’ I rested my elbow on the wall and looked down on him. There was a deep tension in me, and I did not quite know what to talk about. I was sad, wanted to be friendly and perhaps help – and did not know how. Why it happened, I do not really know, but somehow he looked in a challenging way at me and for the first time our conversation turned to politics. Perhaps deep down I wanted an explanation from him at this late hour, wanted to know what it was he so fervently believed in – or at least admit to me that he had been wrong in his belief all along.

“And what about your World Revolution?’ I said ‘it is all over now, is it not, and it has been a criminal nonsense – a conspiracy against freedom and peace from the very beginning...?’ At that time, let us remember, it looked very much as if Germany would triumph over Russia. He kept quiet for a while, just sitting there on his heap of straw, still fiddling with his mouth-organ. I would have been satisfied, had he shown me some anger. And when he raised himself very slowly and came to the wall to look me straight into my eyes, I could see that he was very agitated indeed. His voice was calm, though with a shade of sadness and disappointment, but not for himself – but for me. ‘Genry!’, he said: ‘You told me all about your life, you come as I do from the poor, the working people. You are friendly enough and not stupid – but on the other hand you are very stupid because you have learnt nothing from your life. I can clearly see that your brainwashers have done a very successful job on you for you have swallowed so totally the propaganda fed into your mind. What is so very tragic is that you are supporting ideas which by their very nature are directed against your own fundamental interests and which have made you a willing, sad tool in their evil hands. The World Revolution is ongoing history. Even if you win the war, which I don’t think you will, the World Revolution will not and cannot be stopped by military means. Your very powerful army can do much harm to us, can kill many of our people – but it cannot kill ideas! Its movement might seem dormant to you at the moment, but it is there and will come to the fore again out of the awakening of the poor, the downtrodden ordinary people the world over in Africa, the Americas, in Asia and Europe too. People in their masses will one day understand that it is the power of capital over them which not only oppresses and robs them, but stifles their human potential, which either uses or discards them as mere pawns to make monetary profits out of them. Once the people grasp that idea, it will mature into an almost material force in popular uprisings like spreading wildfires and will do what has to be done in the name of humanity. It will not be Russia who will do it

for them, although the Russian working people were the first who have broken the chains. The people of the world will do it for themselves in their own countries, against their own oppressors, in their own ways and in their own time!

“His outburst gave me no chance to interrupt and it allowed no argument. Even though he had spoken quietly, it shook me to the core. Nobody had ever touched a chord of understanding in me that way and I felt naked and defenceless. And to give me the final knock, he pointed to my rifle, saying that ‘that thing’ could do nothing against his ideas. ‘And if you think that you have the intellectual capacity to respond to me meaningfully’, he concluded, ‘please don’t use any of your silly slogans about country, freedom and God!’

“Anger, almost suffocatingly, welled up in me. My natural reaction was to put him in his place. But then I thought better of it, I remembered that within a few hours he would be dead, and that perhaps this had been his way to take a last swipe at me. My guard duty was now up. And not wanting to make a final show of saying ‘Do Swydanya’ or ‘Auf Wiedersehn’ to him, I gave him one last look, perhaps with a mixture of anger and sadness in which he might have detected a glimmer of almost lost humanism, turned on my heel and slowly walked over to the stables which were our quarters. Boris did not move at all, not one sound came from him and I did not turn once in my stride. But I knew for sure, I felt it, that he was watching me intently as I trotted away from him with my ridiculous rifle.

“And in the horizon there rose the first light of the coming morning.

“We guards also bedded down on straw, and I always loved my first sleep after coming in from duty. But this morning I could not sleep. I did not even undress, just lay there

and watched dawn creeping up. I twisted and turned, felt sorry for Boris – and also for myself. There was so much I simply could not understand. And then, with the sun already up, I heard the shots, a short salvo, that was all.

“I got up at once and walked over to the place where I knew the graves were ready. Morning had arrived in all its pristine beauty and the birds were singing as if nothing had happened. I met the firing squad coming back with their rifles, looking bored. They just nodded at me, obviously wondering why I was going in that direction. There were two or three prisoners already shovelling earth over the bodies. Beside Boris there were three others, already partially covered. I could still recognize him, his tunic looked crumpled and his boots had been taken off but he still wore his leather belt, and I could see blood on it. The diggers looked at me, obviously wondering what I was doing there. Their expression was sullen, but I could also see fear and hatred in their eyes. I wanted to ask them what had happened to Boris’s mouth-organ, had they taken it or was it still in his pocket? But then I changed my mind, thinking that they might suspect me of wanting to steal from the dead, and I walked away from it all, back to my stable, and I tried to get some sleep.

“I was much relieved when shortly afterwards I was certified ‘fit for frontline service’ again, and set off to rejoin my Division, which was hammering at so many gates. There, at least, things were straight-forward. Hard and tough as life was, there were no disturbing experiences to deceive one’s mind and conscience.

“The lads were glad to see me back. With the Volga now so close, the Russians were fighting fiercely and showing what their army was made of. Several in my company, all close friends, had fallen. Our CO, Oberleutnant Steffan, had been shot in the head. As

much as it hurt me, I could understand all that. But the execution of Boris – why? It seemed like putting Jesus on the cross all over again.”

### **Approaching Stalingrad**

We thought 1942 would be a great summer for us. We tried to catch the Red Army in pincers but they always withdrew. We thought they were cowards, but it was not so.

In the Don Bas region we came to a town where there were lots of factories. The Soviets had stripped it bare and moved all the machinery east of the Urals. That is where they mass-produced the T34 tank – the most successful tank in the history of the world. The production of the T34 turned our hope of victory into defeat.

Along with our army we had some economics officers, they wore green uniforms. They went into these factories and I saw their faces drop as they saw they had been stripped. They had counted on seizing that machinery.

I had not been to Stalingrad before. We could not capture Russian soldiers for they had melted away to form partisan groups. We had foreign troops on our side, such as the Romanians. We used these foreigners to protect our flanks behind Stalingrad, but our allies were not as well disciplined or as well armed as we were, so they got attacked. Our division pulled back behind the Romanian army, and we fought when the Russians broke through the Romanian ranks. It was November 1942. We felt something strange going on while we were on guard duty. The Russian T34 was the best tank of the second world war, and I knew the sound of its diesel engine, and thought I heard a lot of them in the distance. We told our officers that tanks were moving. The officers,

however, told us that the Russians were finished and that we were frightened for nothing.

As we got into position for battle, we knew it was an overture to the opera. The real thing was to come. The artillery stopped for a moment and we heard the tanks revving up. They came early in the morning with their headlights on, shooting. They came for us. I thought of the officer who said I had only heard one tank being driven back and forth, not the hundreds now advancing. In front of us was a ravine. The Russian tanks dived into it and when they came up I knew it was over. I jumped into an earth bunker like a coward, shivering with fear, and I got into a corner where it would be less easy for the tanks to crush me. They just drove through us. There was a great deal of shouting – Russian voices, some Romanian. I did not dare move. It was 6 a.m. At 8-8.30 a.m. quiet descended. One of my comrades, Fritz, had been killed. There were the agonised shouts of the wounded. The Russian dead and injured were taken away, but the Germans and Romanians were still lying there. I was 20 years old, and I didn't know what to do.

The wounded wanted my help. I had no medical knowledge or supplies and could see they had no hope. I just walked away from them. There were about 15-20 of them there. One German called out that I was a swine. I realised, however, that I could do nothing for them, and that I had to get away and concentrate totally on that. I went to my bunker where there was a stove. It was warm and there was straw and blankets. I went out to get some chopped wood. I heard an engine revving in the ravine. It was a broken down Russian jeep and there was I with an armful of wood. Two officers came to me and I stepped back. They must have thought I was a Russian soldier in a German coat. I

saluted. He gestured that he had a sore arse. I made my fire and I slept the day away. I was frightened to wake up. What now?

I intended to walk in the dark. We had learnt orientation in the Hitler Youth and could find the way by the North Star. I started walking west. I did not know what had happened, or that Stalingrad had been taken by the Russians, or that the German 6th Army had surrendered. I was walking in the exact place where the breakthrough had happened.

I was not quite 20. I had to throw my blankets away – very reluctantly. Snow was covering the wounded. I took things from my dead mates – the best rifle, the best pistol, as much food as I could carry without overloading myself. I didn't know how far I would have to walk to reach the German lines. I ate as much as I could and started walking. For 3 days I slept in barns and ate snow.

One day I saw someone and he saw me. I went down on my knees, with my gun, and just waited. I was wearing a Romanian fur cap. He shouted. He asked whether I was Romanian, and I said I was German. He said he was German too. We walked together another two days. We almost got killed when we crossed the German lines as they thought I must be a deserter since I did not know what had happened to my unit.

I belonged to battle group Lindemann. There were no more divisions or regiments. We had lost everything. We put Hitler's scorched earth policy into effect. When we came across a hamlet one day of some 6-8 cottages, Lindemann told us to take possession of the cottages and burn them down. They were very poor, without a floor or anything. I opened the door of one of them. It was full of women and children and the elderly. It smelt of poverty. It smelt of cabbage. The people were sitting on the ground leaning

against the wall. I ordered them out, and they started saying that they would all die without shelter. A woman with a baby asked me whether I, German soldier, had a mother. There was an old man there with a child by his side. I grabbed the child and pointed my pistol at him, and said I would shoot the child if the people did not leave the cottage. The old man asked me to shoot him instead. Lindemann ordered me to burn the house anyway, even if they didn't get out. I did as I was told. Then the people opened the door and came out screaming. I am sure we killed them.

We ordinary German soldiers, conscripts, suffered too. The Russians had attacked us. There were others, even younger than me, walking through the snow hoping to rejoin our units. Russian Stormovik planes came out of the sunlight as we walked through the snow, saw our footprints and came after us. We could see their pilots. They circled and came back to shell us. One of us was hit and torn open – Willi. He was a good friend. His situation was hopeless. We could not carry him or leave him. As the oldest I had to decide. I went on my knees, stroked his head, covered him with snow. Again, I was a murderer, but what could we do?

I was wounded again (three times altogether). I was captured once and escaped. They took me to a German hospital in Westphalia in 1944. Early in 1945 I had to join a unit on the western front to fight the Americans. It was better than fighting the Russians. Because of the crimes we had committed in Russia, the Russians really hated us, and we therefore had to fight like mad to avoid being captured.

I was sent to defend the Rhine after D-Day. Patton's army was moving in on Paris. After surrender, on 17 March 1945 I was taken to Cherbourg by train. They put us in open coal wagons – hundreds of German soldiers. They would not let us out even to go to the toilet, but we had plenty of food. When we needed to relieve ourselves we filled tins.

When the French at a level crossing started abusing us, we threw our tins at them. We arrived at Cherbourg.

I saw the horror of devastation from east to west. What had we done! I saw catastrophic devastation. 50 million people had died! We wanted land, besides which Russia had some 50% of the world's raw materials, including oil. That's what it was about.

Now looking back, I salute the Red Army and what they did in saving the world from Hitler. They lost more casualties than we did. Nine-tenths of the German soldiers who died in the Second World War died in Russia. They asked me to come to a Memorial near the Imperial War Museum a couple of weeks ago. I gave a short speech in which I paid tribute to the Red Army. It was because of this I had to go on the March against war on Iraq last Saturday. That was an uplifting experience.

We Germans thought we were the strongest military force on earth, but look what happened to us – the Americans should remember that. There will be revolution all over the world, even if it does not come in the same way as Boris said it would. There will be a new awakening.