Chapter 1 - The childhood years

It was a mid-summer's day in 1894 when my mother held me for the first time in her arms. I was not the first child to cause my mother the joy and pain of childbirth. There already were two boys and a girl for whom my parents had to care. Two more boys would come after me; the youngest lived for only a few months.

My cherished village Niedernhausen is set in a lovely valley called Fischbachtal, framed by the wooded bluffs of the western Odenwald in the province of Hesse. The well-preserved castle Lichtenberg, a simple yet elegant Renaissance structure built in from 1570 to 1580, towers majestically over this tranquil valley inhabited by a contented people.

I have many fond childhood memories of my love-filled home, built next to a rushing brook. I recall that I had difficulties learning to speak, and still remember the construction of the water pipeline in our village in 1899. Although I have no recollection of my first school day, the many hours which my dear mother spent helping me with my first homework are still fresh in my memory. I had a particularly good memory, and when I look back on my early schooling I cannot speak of anguish, but only of joy.

Alas, before long events tarnished my happy childhood. On a Sunday morning, the fourth of advent 1902, my good mother gently passed away after a three-day illness. It is a cruel blow to lose one's mother at such a tender age. The day before Christmas we buried our mother, greatly supported by the local community. Thus, on Christmas Day five forsaken children stood at the grave of their cherished mother, one who had but one failure: she left her loved ones all too soon. Of course, now we five children had to contribute to the household, which meant much hard work.

In the autumn of 1906 my eldest brother Philipp, not yet twenty years old, joined the army in Darmstadt. I remember the day of his departure well. Soon after, in February 1907 another twist of fate cast a dark shadow over my youth. Snowflakes covered Niedernhausen's pasture and meadows like a white carpet, when a malicious illness befell our dear, overburdened father. We children nursed him as well as we could, taking turns with the night shifts. In spite of all that, we lost him. He was 46, in the prime of his life. We accompanied our dear father on his way to eternal rest on 21 March, a sunny spring day.

My father's untimely death hit me the hardest, because his demise meant I would have to bury my long-standing dream of becoming a teacher for lack of funds, particularly as Philipp was an underpaid soldier.

When I took my brother Johann, two years younger than me, to school for the first time since my father's death, our sensitive teacher, Herr Eidmann, said the morning prayer himself. A quarter of a century on, it still rings in my ears like a sacred legacy: "Those who have faith in the Lord will receive new strength as they shall rise with wings like eagles" and so on.

My indebtedness to this tutor is infinite; he had a decisive influence on my life. In those difficult days he and his good wife stood by our orphaned family, in deed and counsel! Could there be any teacher in our village whose name deserves to be spoken in the same breath as that of our Eidmann?

What he imparted to his pupils went far beyond of what other teachers had to offer in those days. He instilled in us a deep appreciation of our gorgeous, spirited German literature. The lessons dealing with Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" remain memorable. He assigned the various roles with such feeling; he understood how to guide his pupils into the work and stimulate them to read it.

Our Eidmann was so proud when we performed the "Rütli" scene during a ceremony marking the planting of a limetree in honour of Schiller in our village square on 5 May 1905, the centenary of Schiller's death. The idea to plant the tree, of course, was Eidmann's.
When we were through with Wilhelm Tell, we studied Goethe's epic "Hermann und Dorothea" in the same way. He made this work so dear to me that to this day I often reach for "Hermann und Dorothea", Goethe's ultimate creation.

Indeed, Eidmann's lessons were consistently gripping and interesting. Often he would hold biology lessons in the open, in free nature. And how we learnt to write essays under his guidance! Eidmann even promoted agricultural studies. Those involved in the home insustries would always get new ideas from Eidmann.

His greatest accomplishment, however, was the local home-museum, which he brought to life and soon to a remarkable standard.

Regardless, our imprudent mayor contrived it that Eidmann left our village (on the 5th of December 1907, to be precise) to work in a new, presumably more agreeable, environment. Nobody perhaps regretted his departure more than I, who had entertained the mute hope that Eidmann might find ways and means to help me become a teacher.

I was useless at agrarian work. This was established fact by the time I was confirmed on Pentecost 1908. But I improved in that field once I had come to terms with the realities of my fate. The ensuing years were quite tedious. The only intellectual activity I could look forward to was the annual winter school. There, I studied with much enthusiasm and on serveral occasions was presented with beautiful books, inscribed with dedications from the school commission in recognition of my "outstanding performance and exemplary demeanour". I am still very proud of these books, and keep them in my book cabinet today.

I also visited religious instruction classes under Pastor Vogt for three years without any interruptions, which he verified in writing. I have never quite forgiven Vogt for not using his influence to advance my further education.

When in the autumn of 1911 our village schoolmaster, Nikolaus Adam, set up a gymnastics club, I joined up, body and soul. I did not missing one single hour of gym. I also eagerly participated in the theatre plays staged by the club.

Still, the years went by languidly. Having given up on my dream of becoming a teacher, I set my sights on becoming a soldier. As a soldier, I would get to see a little bit of the world.

Chapter 2: Don't let the war end...

Where I come from, only the wealthy and the homesteaders have an automatic right to exist. Those without the dubious fortune of being a first-born son sooner or later would have bid their home farewell. Where parents could afford it, sons would attend teacher college; hence

dozens of teachers have emerged from our village of only 500. The less fortuitous ones, such as myself, mostly enlisted in the army, or capitulated and applied for positions in the civil service.

And thus on 3 January 1914 I reported as a volunteer to the 8th Company of the Leibgarde Infantery (Attendant Infantry) Regiment 115 in Darmstadt, the same regiment my brother Philipp had served in. I weighed 145 pounds and my chest measured 90-102cm, even though I was only 19 years old, so I was recruited immediately. What a lucky day that was!
The outbreak of the World War in August that year would rob the memory of that day of its shine. When the mobilisation was announced, I expected my draft orders any day. But days went by and weeks. Reservists, soldiers, infantrymen, even recent conscripts were incessantly drafted, but not me. And so I endure the first weeks of the great global inferno in our peaceful Fischbachtal.

I was deeply touched by some of the agonising farewells I observed. Here I think in particular of our streetguard, whose young wife cried her eyes out for weeks. I still see the credulous farmers who barricaded the portals to the village to intercept the ominous cars allegedly transporting gold from France to Russia. And, just like any other clueless German, I was excited by news of every victory. Like my compatriots, I knew nothing of the terror of war. Indeed, I was constantly worried that the war might end without me having been there. So I was delighted when my draft orders finally came. On the last day of October, my schoolfriend Karl Beilstein, who had also been drafted and also lost both parents early, and I visited the graves of our dear parents. In the early morning of 1 November, Karl and I, with fellow Fischbachtalers Philipp Kleinschmidt and Georg Schmunk rode in Schmunk’s carriage to the station.

The four of us were excited as we walked through the gates of the infantry barracks in nearby Darmstadt that misty Sunday morning. These were the same barracks which I had reported to in January and where I was supposed to serve as a volunteer. Initially we shared the same room, were trained together. We were soldiers with body and soul. I coped with the training comfortably. Nothing could tarnish my life as a soldier during these first few weeks.

On 1 December, some of us moved into private quarters. I moved with my few belongings into the proud villa of the provincial director, Geheimrat (Privy Councillor) Fey. Here I encountered a whole new world. Those who cared for us in that house were dear people. There was the estimable, aristocratic couple Fey; the kindhearted Olga from the Palatine province, and the ever cheerful Kätchen from Saarbrücken. We had a good time there, and these people pampered us. The Christmas celebration, which took place on the fourth advent, were a particular highlight. My comrades, Funk and Zorgiebel, and I were fitted out in all kinds of woolen clothes and suitable underwear for the front.

On Christmas I also received my first leave, which I spent in the Odenwald, and in Gießen with my brother Georg, who had completed his compulsory military training in 1913. He worked for the railways and got married a few weeks before war broke out. Since I didn’t attend the wedding, I visited him during my Christmas leave. I was welcomed warmly. My brother and his wife wanted to offer me something really special on my first evening there, so they took me to the cinema. To my hosts’ disappointment I fell asleep during the show. My interest in the movies would never get much keener, but I was instantly enamoured by the theatre, having visited one for the first time during my military training.

We left Darmstadt, which we had become so fond of, on 8 January 1915. That Friday we joined the big transport to the Western Front. Fervently we marched into the field. But we were still anxious that the war would end without us having arrived there.

Before we left Darmstadt, the Feys sent me the most beautiful flowers to the barracks. My brothers Philipp and Johann accompanied me to the station because I was the first of us brothers to go to the front. The parting wasn't easy. But the pains of leave-taking were soon dispelled as we three boys from Niedernhausen sat in our train compartment and were met in Mainz with military music. It was a clear winter's day as we passed the left banks of the Rhine towards our destination.

There was so much to see for me, a country bumpkin who had never travelled beyond his own province? From Mainz to Bonn, I stood steadfastly by the window and listened carefully to the elucidations offered by my comrade Nolte, a young teacher from Rhinehesse. These were impressions to last a lifetime. We were welcomed and pampered everywhere, especially in Bonn. At night we passed the Belgian border and at dawn we travelled through Liége, then a famous Belgian fortress. As we went further we passed Namur, St Quentin and Ham.

In the early morning of 10 January we finally made our acquaintance with the notorious cobblestone plasters of northern France. We had to withstand an exhausting march before reaching our quarters in Amy towards evening. At that time our regiment was in position at the village of Beuvraignes, south of Roye. In the morning we were appointed to our various companies. Luckily, we three Niedernhausen boys were placed together in the 4th company, under the command of Lt. Geßler. Because our company was up the frontline at the time we would have to join it very early in the morning.

Chapter 3: Going into War

It was indeed a strange feeling as the first enemy bullets flew over our heads. The western front was iced up at the time. Between Roye and Noyon the German front was penetrating westwards, deeply into the heart of France. Our company moved diagonally through the utterly strafed village of Beuvraignes; the French lay about 200 metres away from us, at the perimetre of the village.

Beuvraignes! No soldier who fought there shall ever forget that name. What a wretched position! How we suffered, from the damp and the mud. Heated trenches were yet unknown . We suffered casualties every day in this position, which soon robbed us of any enthusiasm for the war. But we came relatively well to grips with our duty in the snipers' trenches.

We never imagined, though, that they would make our life as hard as possible when we should have been resting. The billets in Amy were wet, cold and desolate, and no repair had been made. We were freezing at night because we had moved out without woolen blankets. The canvasses of the bedsteads belonging to the youngest soldiers were used as curtains, so we were left with only our overcoats to cover ourselves. But early in the morning we soon warmed up! They drilled us so thoroughly that after just a short while we would literally steam.
In the sugarcane fields beyond Amy we made our first acquaintance with the beast in the superior. This superior, Sgt Dittmar, ceaselessly bombarded us with the most spiteful insults. There and then I decided that, should I ever come home, I would never join any veterans' association with these slave drivers.

Us three childhood friends, however, staunchly stuck together. Like brothers we would share presents from home, and the mail from our circle of acquaintances was handed around us three. But on 5 February, a Friday morning, merciless death tore the first gap into our circle. Our good Philipp Kleinschmidt, who still had joked about the French artillery just before, was hit and killed by a grenade splinter. He was our company's last victim at this dismal position, Beuvraignes. Karl Beilstein and I laid flowers, which had already spawned in the mild, rainy climate, at his fresh grave and said goodbye to our dear school-, room- and war-mate.
The same night the Infantry Regiment Bo. 24 relieved us. We then marched to Nesle, where we spent three pleasant days off. From there we took position between Chilly and Fouquescourt, where a much better fate awaited us. We released the Infantry Regiment 29 and initially lay in billets in Fonchette.

The distance between our line and that of the enemy's was greater and casualties fewer than in Beuvraignes. I always found the sentry duty stimulating, and the accommodation was better too.

One day in March we had just returned from the frontline when I noticed a newly arrived transport in front of our quarters. To my great surprise I discovered among the new arrivals my brother Philipp and two mates from our village, Justus Krell and Jakob Frank. An unexpected, joyful reunion! All three had themselves assigned under the command of my corporal.

A few days after their arrival, without the newcomers having been up the frontline, we were supposed to rest for a while. Our regiment arrived at the billets after an exhausting march during a humid night. We were barely asleep, when suddenly the alarm was sounded. And what an alarm! Our company commander, Dittmar, couldn't get us up and ready quickly enough and "helped" accordingly.

In the bustle I grabbed the much too big boot of my schoolmate Justus Krell, and he tormented himself with my, for him far too small, boot. I can still hear this drab person moaning. For the time being, however, there was no time for a swap of boots. We duly marched to Nesle where we were to be transported.

There, our Jakob Frank had an ill-fated clash with our company's Feldwebel (Colonel) Horn. Jakob had merely made the observation that the other companies had already received coffee, while we hadn't. Horn overheard Jakob's remark and erupted in such a rage that Jakob never had another happy moment in the company. When in April we had to surrender squaddies for the newly established Infantry Regiment No.186, Jakob was the first to be told to volunteer. Jakob, who so dejectedly took his farewell from us, fell in this regiment in the summer of 1915.

After Nesle we went northwards. We began thinking that our journey would take us to Russia, but at Lille the train turned left. It was at a small loading station called Don that we were learned for the first time about the horrors of aerial bombing. After that we dashed over Sainghin towards Marquilles and Herlies. The supply roads were crammed with munitions convoys and ambulances. No wonder: ahead of us General Haig's best troops, the Indians and the Highlanders, fought a heated battle with the Westphalian and Bavarian troops for the conquest of Lille.

During the night from 14 to 15 March, our regiment was put into the first line of defence. We relieved the Bavarian paratroopers, whose haste in leaving seemed ominous. Sandbags desperately piled up as barricades, no dugouts, only swamp and groundwater — this was our

position. Our job was to hold the heights of Aubers, the sole bulwark within miles of flat landscape, which made any traffic by day impossible.

A ghastly sight greeted us at the frontline: Bavarian paratroopers with cut throats and bludgeoned Indians bore witness of bitter contact battle. At daybreak we got more than what we had bargained for! I can still hear it today, that first 28cm shell. One after another came wailing our way. Fragments of one of the first of these shells, which hit the ground near me, killed my faithful childhood friend Karl Beilstein! A little earlier Karl had still written to his girlfriend. As previously arranged, it would be my task to present her with the agonising news. The loss of this comrade hurt especially. Of us three boys from Niedernhausen, who had marched into this war with such excitement, I was the last one left. "When will it get you?" I often asked myself at the time. But my Christian faith and optimism never deserted me. I resolutely continued to do my duty.

I spent many a difficult hour with my brother Philipp during that Monday, 15 March 1915. Philipp feared that we could both be hit by shrapnel simultaneously, and so repeatedly pleaded with me not to stand too close to him.

The English artillery caused heavy losses in our ranks. Justus Krell was submerged that Monday, said good-bye in the late evening, went to military hospital and never returned to the front. He later worked in a munitions factory. Now, that’s luck! But I don't think that he will ever forget this day either.

We spent many more hours in that position, and when our relieve arrived, we disappeared just as quickly as the Bavarians had.

Chapter 4: Going into War

After a few days rest we returned to our old frontline at Fouquescourt, where we relieved the Infantry Regiment No. 271. It was slightly more cosy here, but we poor infantrymen never got a single day’s rest. Instead, we were made to work hard turning this position into a modern bulwark. Quite a few mummy’s boys drafted straight from the schoolbenches quickly became hard toiling diggers. To illustrate, three paces were designated to each man, to be dug 1,80 meters deep and 1,20 metres wide. That means you have to move it. Much less cushy yet was the drawing of wire fences. But what really softened up these youthful war volunteers was the never-ending carrying of heavy building materials. Personally, I had no problems with that because I was used to hard, physical labour.

There was no time for rest at night either, with a roster of watch and work duties in place. Only those who went on sentry could take turns sleeping. For that reason I always volunteered for sentry duty, although the dangers were much greater. Indeed, it was most precarious between the 6th and 12th of July, while our unit was under heavy sniper fire, with stronger assaults expected. But the French rarely attacked.

We also got little rest in the billets in Fonches. Feldwebel Horn derived great pleasure from keeping us on the move. And our Geßler drilled us like never before. Still, we were content in Fonches. We had formed good relationships with the locals, communicating in French. Here, we got our laundry washed. But the Infantry Regiment 128, which came from the eastern front with an incredible amount of Russian horses, relieved us to our regret on 16 October. Although

everything had been kept as secret as possible the French army had noticed our release, and let us know that they had, even on our last day on the line.

At first, we moved to quarters in Monchy Lagache, which we reached by foot. Here we immediately began with all kinds of parading and contact battle exercises. We also received new clothes one Sunday. On 4 November, after an exhausting march, we reached Le Cateu, where training continued in all respects. A rainy winter had begun, and the rain would continue until the first weeks of the new year. On 9 November we were assigned to the Baden Army Corps for bulwark building. We moved into quarters in Flers where we suffered terribly from lice. We had already made our acquaintance with lice a few months previously. We soon named the Baden corps the ‘Herrings Division’ because we received herrings from them nearly every day. We were quite experienced in receiving the same food for weeks on end. The snow-white pork lard, of which we had received copious amounts in Beuvraignes back in January…in the end no one could stand to eat it. The same happened with jam; we acquired so much of that stuff that we ate ourselves sick. And yet, rations were so short that we always went hungry, especially after a day of arduous duty.

From the 9th of November to the 25th of January we alternated working on the bulwark at Flers and training in Le Cateau. The 25th of November was the archduke’s birthday. We marked the occasion in Le Cateau with a parade, an address and medal presentations. A Lieutenant who had only just joined us (in fact, hadn’t even smelled gunpowder yet and soon left again to become an interpreter in the Turkish army) was decorated with an Iron Cross. There were many servicemen in our company who had been in battle since 1914, who had always fought in the frontline, and who did not yet sport a ribbon. Evidently the unfairness of it all was too much even for the lieutenant, because he decided to calm angry tempers with plenty of free beer. Anyway, we decided unanimously that decorations were not awarded on merit, but by rank.

We spent Christmas also in Le Cateu, where we stayed in a textile factory. My brother Philipp was among the lucky few who were granted leave to spend Christmas with their families. As a married man he was given preference in the allocation of leave, even though he had come to the front after me. But that was fair enough.

Meanwhile I had myself a feast with the parcels from home, which actually were intended for both of us. My dear landlady in Darmstadt, Frau Geheimrat Fey, used to supply with particular generosity. I received no less than nine parcels from my noble sponsor, among them a cute Christmas tree — I received one every year from her while I was in the field. My relatives and many families in my home village would also send always sumptuous parcels.

As so often, I shared these at Christmas with my comrade Ernst Becker, the only lad in our squad who received little from home. This dependable fellow died a hero’s death during the first offense on Verdun. Shortly before he fell, Ernst had received news of the death of his beloved mother. At least she was spared the pain of her son’s death.

On Boxing Day we were deloused at a modern institution in St Quentin, and spent the remaining days of 1915 in Flers, building bulwarks.

We were up very early on New Year’s Day 1916, still building bulwarks. Our Geßler, now promoted, rode past us on his proud chestnut horse, wishing us a "happy new year". We complained a lot that rainy morning. Better put, we moaned. Once again we had been

gratuitously robbed of our precious Sunday. But we were used to that: if we weren't in battle, we would be drilled, or build bulwarks, or be assigned some other pointless task. In principle, there was no such thing as Sunday rest.

On that count, I recall one Sunday in Fonches. A Gefreiter (Lance-Corporal), whom I had often shared quarters with, one night dodged wire-fencing duty and was caught by Geßler as he returned alone to quarters. He was a pastry chef from Hanau, 39 years old and in his first year. Two hours drill was his deserts for his admittedly improper act.

Now this poor baker had to exercise, on a Sunday morning of all days. When this poor, humiliated devil came through our door, panting, sweat dripping and his pants scoured through his thermals to the knees, the tears were welling up in many a hardened man's eyes. Back home in Hanau his wife and children might be sitting in church, remembering their loved one in prayer, while at the very same hour in Fonches he was so cruelly stripped of his dignity...
Finally, on 7 January 1916, I was given home leave. On my journey home I passed Baupaume over Charleville, the base of our Crown Prince Max. In the morning of the 8th, a Saturday, I arrived in Saarbrücken. My train arrived at the station there at precisely the same time that I had left Mainz the previous year. From there I first went to Gießen.

As a railway man, my brother Georg was considered indispensable and thus exempt from conscription. He spent the entire war with his family in Gießen. We three brothers in the field were glad that at least one of us four was able remain at home; one less brother to fret about. My eight-days-long leave left me with many happy memories. On Saturday evening I took the train to Darmstadt where my brother Johann awaited my arrival at the station. I met a good few day trippers from my village there. I spent the night at Johann's place in Nieder-Ramstadt, and travelled back with him to Darmstadt where I visited my sister and my noble sponsor, Frau Fey, at whose villa she persuaded me to stay. Wednesday morning I went to the Odenwald where I remained until Saturday. During those days back home I missed my parents like never before. I would have liked to stay on for Sunday as well, especially as I knew that I wouldn't be able to catch up with my company. Yet, my sense of duty cautioned me to leave in good time. On my way back I was again a guest of the Feys, who took the opportunity to kit me out with new underwear. Moreover, Frau Fey said that she would put in a good word for me with my regiment commander, Oberstleutnant (Chief Lieutenant) Baron von Preuschen. So now, having seen out a whole year in the trenches, I would get something better, she said. She thought of a post as an orderly, attendant or such like. But her patronage yielded no fruit. When my commander eventually remembered me, I had already been wounded.

Chapter 5: The battle of Verdun - and against lice

When, as instructed, I reached Le Cateau, my battalion had already been transported to the territory around Verdun. Those of us who had returned from leave were assigned to the 3rd Battalion and on 24 January, after a long and complex journey, we reached our regiment in a forest between Merles and Romagne, on the northern front of the fortresses at Verdun. When we arrived they were busy building cabins in the woods. We had no idea that these quarters were supposed to accommodate the masses of assault troops which soon would make their appearance.

Every day we went up the frontline on the heights of Flabas and built huge tunnels, which would later serve as exit positions. Soon we realised what was planned here. Mountains of

shells and mortars of the heaviest calibre were piling up here. But we were briefed in detail only a few days before the planned assault.

As the company was designated into platoons, an enthusiasm comparable to that of 1914 was evident. And more cheer was in store for us. A few days before the impending assault we received chocolate, biscuits, rum and so on. There were field services for all religious professions, and most of us received holy communion.

On 11 Februay, the regiment, prepared to attack, took position in the frontline on the heights of Flabas. But poor weather conditions prevented the start of the combat planned for 12 February. Persistent snow blizzards, rain and fog made effective bombing preparation impossible. Day by day the commencement would be postponed, much to our regret.
We remained on the frontline, squatting in a wet and cold trench, tightly packed together; scouts and gunners between us infantrymen. These terribly crammed conditions became increasingly unbearable as the days went by. Every morning we hopefully expected to hear the cacophony of artillery fire above us; a signal that we could emerge from this ice cellar, an accommodation no other creatures but us could have endured for so long. But after a few days we were again pulled from the frontline, and moved into quarters in one of these sparse villages which served as a testimony to poverty, the like of which was nowhere as forlorn as outside Verdun.

On 20 January, a Sunday, we went up the line again and moved into our old dugout. Next morning the glowing sun rose in all its clear winter glory. At 08:00 the German battalions, about a tenth of the combined German army, opened their murderous barrage, which escalated into continuous fire between 16:00 and 17:00. Still, the enemy positions were not ready to be taken, as our fearless scouts discovered in the evening. So the 22nd again saw heavy artillery and mortar gunner battalions hammering on the enemy line, swelling to a literally unknown force by noon. We stuffed our ears with cotton wool and were glad when the clock hit 12. During the preparation of stormpacks, the gun of a young volunteer, a theology student, accidentally went off and I almost received the most beautiful shot in the throat. The bullet grazed my throat but did not wound me. The volunteer later fell in battle.

Just before noon we left our dugout. Leaving the trenches my brother said goodbye to me and asked me, just in case, not to forget his family, which I naturally promised. These are moments in life one never forgets. We still promised each other to stick together during the advance, but that was just a fancy. Bang on noon we all lunged for cover.

The split second when one first sees the masses of an advancing army is unforgettable! The company advancing to our right couldn’t bide its time and was already out of the trenches. I tangled myself through the dense disarray of Spanish Riders, barbed wire and mantraps, the sharp points of which required singular attention, and quickly arrived at the first French ditch. One Gefreiter (Lance-Corporal) of the infantry company collapsed next to me, hit by a sniper’s bullet. I had already lost Philipp from my sight. What value were our good intentions to stick together under such circumstances?

Inside that first French ditch I came face to face with my first live enemy. He was an elderly Frenchmen with a pitch-black beard, flat steel helmet perched on his head, a big sheepskin over chest and back. He cowered in his shot-up ditch, bearing the facial expression of a lunatic, offering no resistance. I was just about to run my raised bayonet into his stomach when he stood up with raised arms. To this day I can hear his: "Pardon, Monsieur". I am pleased that

I merely tore his leash from his body, dragged him out of the ditch, gave him a kick in the backside and sent him off to the captives’ camp in Flabas with a shout of "Tout suite partie Flabas". We were not supposed to take prisoners because the assault would surely have been affected.

A jump over the ditch, then over a second ditch, and then downhill in rapidly advancing waves, always trying to remain in the front. The French machine guns were pounding to my left, shells exploded, bullets were flew all around me and thumped into the ground or into a cracked tree trunk. We urged each other on, and every obstacle was taken with a "Hurrah". We dashed over corpses and the wounded; here we easily took a cabin, there another only after shelling the enemy. The few survivors of the French paratrooper battalions 56 and 59 were rushed into captivity.

Two badly injured French paratroopers still stick in my memory. One of them had his whole guts hanging out of the belly, while fragments had torn away the lower jaw of the other. Lying next to each other, they were still fully conscious when I passed.

On and on we advanced, rushing up a slope through thick shrubs, taking from lively machinegun volleys. We lay ahead of the French army’s notorious C-C defence, which offered strong resistance. This was a masterpiece of military defence with all the means of a modern forest fortress, one that the French had developed in years of territorial wars. But it was eventually taken through the flanks. The cabind from which spew forth rapid fire were taken thanks to two snipers who had followed us. On the double we reached the southern periphery of the Caures woods. Unfortunately our artillery shot too short, so we who were upfront had to retreat.

In the evening we dug ourselves in, about 150 metres from the forest boundary. Around midnight I eventually bumped into my brother Philipp, about whom I had been so worried all day. We were so happy to be reunited that we hugged like little children. At night we cowered together in a hole. Snowstorms soon set in, but we slept anyhow and braced ourselves for the coming day, which would eclipse the previous one in ferocity.

The storm on Beaumont was scheduled for 13:00 the next day, 23 February. Our company, with its three consecutive waves, initially looked like a parade ground in peace time. Behind us two field artilleries had moved up, and the artillery commander roused us to get to the front of the artillery. So we rushed to get out of the woods as fast as we could.

Evidently the French had been waiting for that moment. Immediately they opened nonstop fire us at the perimeter of the forest. Soil splashed interminably. Thick clouds of dust and gunsmoke hung in the air above the field. Still, life or death: Forward! But it really was just a gradual progress of crawling and jumping from trench to trench. I spent a long while in a shell crater with Oberleutnant (Colonel) von Sydow, commander of the 2nd company. To our left, the mortar gunners laboured forwards. As soon as a lull in bombardments would allow us to even lift our heads momentarily, we would bolt onto the slope.

In the course of leaping from one trench to another, I failed to notice that I was suddenly alone with my comrade Kindinger, a very young man. Because nobody could really advance in this hellfire, the others had retreated from the slope and taken cover. We survived a difficult hour of bombardment, and as soon as we had the opportunity to retreat we hastily joined our comrades.

I had lost sight of my brother Philipp early in the day. He had moved to his left during the advance and fought under Major von Westernhagen, a brave go-getter. When we arrived at the slope we faced Hauptmann (Captain) von Hanneken, a fearless fighter. He stopped the Infantrymen from flooding back, made them dig a trench and fasten machine guns, because a counter charge from heavily fortified Beaumont was predicted. We kept watch the whole night in this knee-deep trench, loaded rifles at the ready. Eventually my brother appeared at my side and we were again thankful for the leniency that fate had shown us. We were under fire for the whole night, and every other minute a huge chunk would strike behind us.

The whole Infantry Regiment 117 was released towards morning. The mist still reduced visibility to about 20 metres. Stiff limbs notwithstanding, we retreated as quickly as we could. Back at base we counted our losses, and were then allowed much-needed sleep. Oh, there were so many who died the heroes' death over those two days, among them many from my home region. They included Fritz Rückert from Kernbach, who had fought on the front without ever enjoying home leave.

We were laying as division reserves in the Fosses Woods on 25 February when we replacements from Germany arrived. Next day we, the first and third batallions, reported to the frontline for another attack.

Thus at about noon we stormed the Poivre Hill (Pepperback), between the villages of Louvemont and Douaumont, which had been taken the previous day. From the peak we had a magnificent view of the Meuse river reflecting the mid-day sun. A huge number of captive balloons were hanging in the sky above both of the Meuse's embankments.

That day things went better — although pressured under heavy combat, we moved steadily forwards. Much of the combat was man-to-man, and we stood without having a grip on anything as we shot at our defiant adversaries. In the end we bagged much artillery and machineguns, and took many prisoners.

At the end of this tough and gruesome day we dug ourselves in at a fir nursery, just in front of the village of Douaumont. We were stuck there until 3 March — these were six terrible days (1916 was a leap year).

We received no food on any of these days, so we had to make do with what the dead soldiers no longer needed. My brother and I had dug ourselves a little hole. It nearly became our shared grave. All around us artillery fire was creating crater after crater. One night, while we were sleeping, a misfired dud went over the side of our trench, missing us by a hair's breadth, although we were tossed about by the airpressure. That night we realised that in war the question of "coincidence or the will of God?" shall always retain its currency.

We stilled our thirst by drinking rainwater, which we would catch in the tightened canvass of our tents. But the spraying soil caused by constant mortar blows constantly dirtied the water, so we used perforated rusk pouches for sieves. Because I had kept many candles in my boot compartment we were in the fortuitous position of boiling coffee in our mugs.

We suffered terribly from lice. Even during the greatest of artillery barrages, we would be busy hunting lice. These beasts were so big, they could be killed only by squeezing them between both thumbs, which would then be covered in blood. Later we came up with the idea of

repeatedly changing our shirts during the day. The snag in the plan was that we had only one shirt each, so we put the plan into action by just turning them inside out periodically. This way we would get at least some respite before the pests contrived to work themselves back to the inside.

Chapter 6: Back Home (for a while)

In the early hours of 4 March we were relieved by Infantry Regiment 116. Summoning our last physical reserves we dragged our tired, drained bodies over the Pepperback. On the other side, we took cover at the wooded slope to await the arrival of our conscientious company leader, Oberleutnant Gessler. To our side stood a 21 Battery as munition wagons brought fresh ammunition. Suddenly, the French opened fire over the whole area, and hit a bulls-eye right into the piled ammunition. Huge explosion erupted, one after another, and all in my immediate proximity. Crimson pillars of fire rose into the night sky, their glow illuminating a scene of wounded horses rearing wildly before collapsing dead. Wails of death, from men and horses, echoed through the dark night. We scattered and ran away since, for the time being, nobody could be helped, not while the explosions continued. Only later did we find out what appalling losses we suffered in that disaster. One company of the Regiment 116 was particularly hard hit, because it was just passing by the battery at the moment of impact.
We remained in the Fosses woods, which remained under heavy fire, as division reservists until 7 March. Here we lay under open skies, only slightly dug in. Then we spent another three days in retreat where reinforcements strengthened our battle capacity. Here we could also survey roughly the total losses in our regiment. Since 22 February we had lost 30 officers, eleven of them dead, and 1100 men, 200 dead. What had happened to our proud regiment in the space of just a couple of weeks?

On 10 March we took readiness position in the La Wavrille woods. Here, too, we were under enemy fire and suffered from inopportune weather conditions. It frequently snowed, with sharp winds blowing over the forest. One day, my brother and I were part of a relay unit. We mingled with infantrymen from Saxony, sitting by a campfire. Around the fire, exhausted soldiers lay in the snow. Of course under their warm bodies, the snow melted, so these poor fellows were soon lying in mud. And yet they slept on peacefully. My brother would often said to me: "If these men’s mothers could see this, they would soon be cured of their war fever."

Another nasty experience sticks in my mind. The forest had to be cleared of the many decomposing corpses and, above all, shot off limbs. During the phenomenal artillery battle, which was waged with the heaviest of calibers on both sides, countless fighters were literally ripped to pieces. Torn limbs were scattered everywhere; guts hung on trees and trunks, flesh still stuck on equipment and rags of clothing. Everybody agreed that the clear-up order was necessary, but nobody wanted to take part. Since no one volunteered, each group had to contribute one man. Each group’s delegate was selected by draw, and in ours the lot fell on a very young lad, who was in tears as he went off to do this ghastly job. His unlucky companions didn’t feel much better, but that was always the case when the dead had to be buried, even though the corpses here weren’t quite as mangled as they had been at Verdun.

There was no shortage of food, though, because for the time being we still received rations for those who fell. But in the cold and damp weather we didn’t really take pleasure from anything. Filthy, lousy and dressed in tattered and torn clothes, we longed for our long-awaited release. On 16 March, I suffered a light wound on my underarm. After I gave my company commander Gessler — this dutiful and strict, but always fair superior — notice of my departure, bade my

brother Philipp farewell, and then proceeded to the main collection depot. Late in the evening we were transported in an open rail wagon to Montmedy. Every one of us, whether heavily wounded or lightly, was glad and relieved to escape the hell of Verdun.

Nobody had any sympathy for the bullheaded strategy of our military high command, which was not dissuade by botched operations and which, to save face, let a fresh stream of blood flow every day. What the battles outside Verdun cost in human terms can be estimated only by those who were condemned to fighting in that hell.

Classification of the wounded began immediately after arrival in Montmedy. When I received my pass stamped with a red ‘D’, I knew that this denoted Deutschland [Germany]. So, in the early morning of 18 March, I sat on the hospital train in the direction of Trier, where we had a lengthy stay. We laughed at the poor people who showed such fear of French airstrikes. From Trier we travelled via Koblenz and the beautiful Lahn valley up to Gießen. Although we stayed there for a while I could not contact my brother Georg, who was on duty at the station. Soon the train was in the Thuringia area where we stopped at practically every town. Obviously nobody had any room for us. And so on Saturday evening we reached Coburg, in Bavaria, where we received a very warm and thoughtful welcome. Since we were the first batch of Verdun-wounded arriving there, people paid us a measure of respect.

I was assigned to the reservists’ infirmary, in a wicker-works factory on the outskirts of that small town at the river Itz, a subsidiary river of the Main. My stay in Coburg was entirely agreeable. Working together in this infirmary were a compassionate doctor, two caring nurses and ever helpful personnel. So it was no miracle that my wound healed well and I soon recovered.

I liked Coburg itself as well. Often I would go to the Fort Coburg, situated to the east of the town, where Martin Luther stayed during the Augsburger Reichstag in 1530. On Sundays we went on excursions outside Coburg. One Sunday my brother Georg visited me, accompanied by his friend August Sturm.

We received many visitors in the infirmary. The Duchess of Coburg-Gotha distributed her portrait among the wounded. And then there were the clerics of both Christian denominations — to my left and right lay Catholics. The Lutheran pastor asked me only one question: had I seen lots of dead Frenchmen? I have often pondered this question. What did it have to do with the Protestant pastor’s task of salvation. This gentleman didn't even ask whether we Germans had also suffered heavy losses.

Over Easter all those fit to travel were given leave. I received three weeks, a remarkably big favour by the chief doctor. I reached Darmstadt after a marvelous journey through beautiful scenery. On the way to my sister I bumped into my brother Johann, who had undergone pioneer training in Kehl, on the Rhine, and who also arrived in Darmstadt on this Maundy Thursday. I spent some blissful days on leave with Johann. After that we met again only after the war, in August 1919. Johann went back to the western front, where he stayed until armistice, and we were never on leave again at the same time.

How beautiful my home was, especially now as the fruit trees blossomed. Home, that place one so longed so for during the hellfire of Verdun… How one looked at it with completely different eyes. Our teacher Eidmann was right to remind us of the beauty of our home and to exhort us to always bear this in mind. My home is beautiful and I stand by her with pride. She

resides in my life, blows in my breath, beats in my heart and burns in my blood. My home is rooted in my soul.

How heavenly it was to live this life so breezily, that life which I had been granted anew every day during the hell of Verdun! Now I began to appreciate even the mundane things I used to take for granted. Even the habitual church-going became more than mere routine. "In how much need hath the merciful Lord given me wings".

Here I have to think of my comrade Georg Schmunk. He was a year older than I and went to war with me in 1914. After a few weeks he suddenly disappeared. Upon inquiry, we were told that Schmunk now worked as a cobbler. We were astonished because he was as much a cobbler as we were. He was a peasant like myself; but he was the only child of wealthy parents who themselves had no siblings — so all accumulated wealth had stayed in one place. Money talked with the military, so Unteroffizier (Corporal) Koch from our company's administration worked things out. We were not even upset with these people because it made no difference to us whether Schmunk went into the field with us or not. He couldn't change our fate anyhow. But he was embarrassed by this swindle and curtailed his contact with us. Karl Beilstein, who later fell, once managed to persuade Schmunk to go out on the town together. Karl had it in mind that Schmunk should foot the drinks bill, but the shoemaker was still a scrooge. So Schmunk remained a cobbler in Darmstadt. We met again on my Easter leave. On Good Friday we went up for communion at the same time, but he warily kept out of my way.

Incidentally, he wore civvies. I was surprised that he didn't ask me about the fate of our fallen comrades, Karl Beilstein and Philipp Kleinschmidt. In the end, the war carried on too long even for Schmunk. When they couldn't keep him in Darmstadt any longer, he was posted to the ambulance division. That was considered a safe posting, because this formation had hardly suffered casualties. But his company arrived in the Verdun region in summer 1916. Due to the long distance capabilities of the French fort artillery, half of the route was under enemy fire. And here our Georg Schmunk fell victim to an enemy shell, soon after arriving in enemy territory. When I received the message of his death I was just as distraught as I was at the demise of my other comrades. I also felt great pity for the parents. These people suffered terribly from the loss of their only son. But I maintain that it might have been better had they let fate run its natural course. It was simply our duty to serve the besieged fatherland without consideration for ourselves [a heft dose of irony here — Editor].

When I returned to Coburg, the good days were evidently over. One of the most notorious commissions had caught up with our infirmary and certified for duty anything that could more or less walk. So I bade farewell to Coburg and reported to my reinforcement reservist unit in Darmstadt.

Chapter 7: Christmas on the Front

In Darmstadt, where in 1914 I had become a soldier with such zeal and passion, I experienced a bitter disappointment. Circumstances changed in the interim. In the reinforcement barracks, where the wounded and now healed Verdun-fighters congregated, they made it a point to systematically harass the squads in the garrisons. Superiors, who were the embodiment of amiability in the field, knew no front comrades anymore. How they tormented us, using all the tricks in the book. Moreover, in doing so they committed the basic error of employing some

superiors who had not been in the field and who therefore could not understand the psyche of the front veteran.

There was one superior who had yet to smell gunpowder, but who was all the more partial to alcohol at home. His "popularity" was demonstrated especially during company division. As soon as we were to step forwards according to height there would be lots of pushing and shoving to the left or the right so as to avoid our friend. Every man thinking himself tall ran to the right, everybody else ambled to the left. Nobody in the middle. One Friday afternoon I had the misfortune of being shoved into the group of this superior. And this coincidence nearly sealed my fate.

This home warrior decided to rehearse instant penetration from a forest edge. When the back and forth simply would not come to an end, I lost my temper and, barely conscious of what I was doing, yelled towards the sniperline: "Right, there'll be no more running". The words had barely escaped my lips when I began to regret my imprudence. The superior had of course heard my order and immediately lunged towards us to catch the culprit. We lined up in a straight row. Beginning on the right end, everybody said with great composure: "It was to my left." But the eighth man, worried about his Sunday leave, fearfully explained that the caller could be found to his right. Although they turned us seven into proper drillground acrobats nobody turned traitor. We were even taken alone to the barracks and interrogated individually there, but the culprit could not be found. That's comradeship! After all, I had only said what everybody else thought. But I was lucky because they would have thrown the martial law book at me had my comrades not acted with such selfless courage.

I soon had enough of life in the garrisons, so I decided to ask my field troop division to post their requisition for me. This way I'd also be reunited with my brother Philipp, who still was in the field with the 4th company. Another motivation, to be honest, was a view towards promotion and decoration. Four days after I was wounded my regiment went into retreat, and at the ensuing emperor's parade nobody of those who had been in the first storm offensive at Verdun went away empty-handed. And in those days decorations were still greatly valued.
On my request I received a dispatch that a Vizefeldwebel (Deputy Field Corporal), who was to go on leave, would pick up me and some other comrades on his way back. Transports didn't go from the reinforcement reservists battalions to regiments in the field, because they had already started to arbitrarily throw everything together in the field. Unfortunately, the Vizefeldwebel who was supposed to pick us up had lost the whole thing, and so I and my comrades were stuck in Darmstadt, presumably to be taken to the front on any transport, but not specifically to our old regiments.

I had already been declared war fit — A1, only my dental treatment had to completed. In consideration of all the stomach and ingestion ailments at the front, all soldiers in the garrisons had their teeth checked and, if required, treated. And among these poor devils was I. A dental clinic had been installed on the ground floor of the military hospital. Young dentists, who had largely been drafted with the many horseback troops stationed in Darmstadt, arrogantly let their spores chime in the surgeries and narrow corridors and exercised their trade without mercy or compassion. What vicious men lurked in these gentlemen! I had the misfortune to fall into the clutches of a particularly raw fellow. I shall never forget the extraction of two molars. Incidentally, they often extracted teeth that could still be filled. In that regard the patient had no say. So I lost a number of molars while only one tooth received a filling. The dentist who treated that tooth was a good soul, altogether the opposite of his colleagues. He noticed how

heartlessly his associates had treated me and apparently tried to make amends. He extended the treatment of that tooth until mid-August.

The Saturday my dental treatment was completed, a transport was hurriedly being compiled. I was among those assigned to that transport. It became known that we would join the Reserve Corps IX at the infamous Somme. Consequently, some tried to get out of it at the medical. But I let fate run its course, true to my wartime motto: "Don’t shove, don’t shirk". Having said that, the prospect of joining the inferno at the Somme within a few days did not exactly inspire me. We knew that the battle of the Somme, which had raged in all its fury for a few weeks already, was no less fierce than the combat at Verdun.

On Monday we were kitted out and towards evening we moved to the station, but this time without music because this was a small transport. Of my relatives, only my sister was at the station. I comforted her with the comment that I would definitely return. And, as strange as it may sound, the farewell was not too difficult for me this time. Thanks to my deep faith in God I looked with confidence to a uncertain future. We travelled the same route as on my first journey into the field, but sadly it was night when we passed the beautiful Rhine. Next day we were already in northern France, approaching the rapid fires of the battle at the Somme. But we were quite surprised when, in Auby, we were assigned to the Field Recruits depot III of the Reservecorps IV. Bemused, we wondered what old soldiers were to do in a recruit depot! But we were not supposed to have opinions, not even about peculiar orders. Besides, hearing the continuing fire from the front to our west, we admonished ourselves to be satisfied with this curious turn of events.

They made fools of us in many other ways compared to Darmstadt. And, to be honest, only here did I really become a complete soldier. They drilled us thoroughly! The most depraved slave drivers and tyrant had assembled here. The worst were Sergeants Albrecht and Settgast. They hailed from East Prussia, barely commanded the German language (but the Polish one so much better), and were frequently intoxicated. These men were literally feared as despots. They clearly sought to demonstrate their most vital presence through persecution. But far and in between there were better people than these grinders. My squadleader, Unteroffizier (Corporal Rhode), was the mirror opposite to Settgast. Throughout my military career I did not meet a more refined superior. He was a young academic, spoke seven languages fluently and was a nobleman from head to toe. And yet, Rhode was an atheist. As a young man I could not resolve this inherent contradiction. Until then I had always believed that an unbeliever was by definition a bad person. I had to revise my perspective on such things entirely after making the acquaintance of Rhode. I met him again later on the front, and he still didn’t see the subordinate, but the comrade in me. I learned to be tolerant towards unbelievers and believers of other faiths, and have maintained this attitude to this day.

Early in September we were drafted to build bulwarks in the front-division at Lens-Halluin, which to me represented a nice diversion. I preferred even the hardest physical labour to the never-ending exercise. Towards the end of September we were transferred to the Somme division, where we got to see the senseless slaughter of the Somme battle. We considered ourselves lucky when we were transferred again in mid-October, when went into quarters in Lichtervelde in East Flanders. There we were drilled immediately upon arrival. Still, I liked being there. In November we moved on to Ghent, where we moved into very modern barracks. So I slept, on the second anniversary of my military career, in barracks, albeit this time in enemy territory.

Ghent, the capital of the Belgian province of East Flanders and divided into about 40 islets by the many canals, made a lasting impression on me: its size with a population of about 200000, and its many remarkable buildings, such as St Baaf's Cathedral, which features a famous altar by Jan van Eyck, the lavish mariner's guild house, the massive Palace of Justice and so on... Ghent was occupied by the German forces on 12 October 1914 and had since served as a communications capital for the German armed forces. The troops stationed here enjoyed themselves so much that an apt saying was: "Just don't let peace break out." Sadly we were given little time for sightseeing. Our "training" concluded with an inspection before the Commanding General of the Reserve Corps IX, Infantry, General von Boehn.

I left Ghent on a Sunday, 11 November, part of a large troop unit. Oddly, the slavedrivers were left behind. We travelled by rail up to Stade on the Flanders front. We spent the night in barracks, and next morning we were allocated our respective regiments. I joined the 6th company of the reserve infantry regiment No 84. The only acquaintances I had there were a former regiments comrade, Hannes Heyer, whose feet had been frozen at Verdun, and Wolmerscheit, a fellow Hessian from Wiesbaden. Heyer was a Catholic textile worker from Riedebene and my age. The fellow Hessian, a militia man, used to belong to a squad in Kiau-Chou in China before the war. He was a postal worker, the typical pre-war Prussian civil servant who would brag about shutting the counter on time to the second, customers or not. Yet, he was a dependable fellow.

With these two I joined the 6th company under its commander, Lt. Schulz, and his Feldwebel (Field Colonel) Heinecke, a tall fellow who was feared throughout the regiment. The company consisted mainly of northern Germans: Mecklenburgers, Schleswig-Holsteiners — especially "Potato Danes" who were almost exclusively named Hansen — and Hanseates [from the hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Lübeck and Bremen]. That we, as southern Germans, couldn't understand the various dialects stands to reason. They all spoke the "Platt" dialect of northern Germany, even the company commander (of whom vicious tongues suggested that he couldn't speak any high German). But we three southern Germans were also teased about our dialect. At least we commanded the various grammatical intricacies of the German tongue and were thus able to put the odd teaser into check-mate. But soon we learnt their dialect.

Our battalion was in when we arrived, and so we had to go up front on our first evening. Before that, though, a portentous line was written into our paybooks: "Presently employed troop reinforcement division Reinforcement Battalion Reserve Infantry Regiment No 84 in Lübeck". This meant that, if wounded, I would be sent not to my home garrison in Darmstadt, but to Lübeck. This was soul destroying. Wherever I went I couldn't get that word "Lübeck" out of my mind. What was Lübeck to me? Of course I knew that Lübeck was one of the three Hanseatic cities and that it was on the Baltic Sea, but that was about it.

Our position was directly at the Ysercanal, not too far from the Hetsa floodgates. So we lay before Langemarck, where Germany's youth perished in battle in the late autumn of 1914. Langemarck is 7-8km north-east of Ypres. In 1914 it was a town with a population of 5400, but now was almost levelled. Only the station building remained relatively intact. The trenches were built above ground, because of groundwater, which was something completely new to me. In France we were always dug in deep into the ground, sometimes 30-40 steps deep. Here we were all groundfloor occupants. On the frontline we were so close to the English that we didn't need to fear the enemy's artillery. Instead we got more fire. When that set in, then the whole trench population started moving, because, night or day, one could observe the "sugarcones" swinging in the air and with a bit of luck get to safety. Nobody would remain in

the trenches during combat, because trenches offered no safety against these heavy boulders. Still, I soon made myself at home in that position.

Our billets were in Hooglede, which we reached by rail, about 30 km from Langemarck. The quarters weren't too bad. During rest periods, always seven days, we were often taken to a soldier's cinema in near-by Roulers. But I never stayed for long in the cinema as I had little regard for the flickering screens. So I always sat near the door and got out as soon as the air was clear. Then I'd go to town, where there were many nice coffee stands in the streets serving good cake.

Unfortunately, the few Reichsmark we received as salary would never last very long, and I could never decide to ask my relatives for money. Consequently I often took a loan from my comrade Kaufmann against my 5 Mark coin, which I had kept for a rainy day since joining the army. Kaufmann always had money. Then, when we we'd receive our salary, I always got my fiver coin back. I have kept that coin to this day. My superior was a Lt. Reh, with whom I was on good footing from day one. When in position he often stood with me on guard at night, and had me tell him of our offensives at Verdun. He was an intrepid, bold and valiant daredevil with great interest in such things. He had nerves of steel and kept calm even in the most intense situations. Before the war, Reh was an agricultural inspector. He volunteered in 1914 to the Husaren (husars) and, when he couldn't get ahead there, transferred to the Jäger (hunters). He was a lieutnant when he joined our regiment. I stayed with him until 1918, and he was always a fair superior.

We spent Christmas 1916 in position at the Ysercanal, having taken position a few days earlier. This was one desolate Christmas Eve! I was with my comrade Heyer in a damp concrete trench, groundwater beneath us and rainwater above. Our field ovens wouldn't burn, we had bad luck with the food provisions. On guard stood an old, married Gefreiter (Lance-Corporal) who was terribly homesick and continually shot in the air, adding to the general sense of dejection. During my break at midnight I sat in front of my lit Christmas tree (my noble patron Fey sent me one every year), when a messenger appeared and asked if I would like to get instructions as a gunner. I declined because I never volunteered on principle.

Chapter 8: Two Close Shaves

In spite of my reluctance to volunteer for gunner training, I received orders, along with seven other comrades, to report march-ready to the company commander at 6 am. It was completely dark as I fumbled my way over the narrow jetty. Lt. Mommsen explained that we had been seconded to the Military Gunner Academy IV in Genk for the purpose of a four-month course. One of those present had already received machine gun training and a replacement had to be appointed. I arrange that my friend Hannes Heyer would be the stand-in.

So early on Christmas Day we marched to Polcapelle, where the administrative office was while we were in position. From here we had first gone to the trenches. And it was here that they had written that fateful sentence about Lübeck in my paybook.

We were deloused in a bathhouse in the Houthulster woods, and at night I shared a warm horse stable with the 18-year-old Walter Heidorn. On Boxing Day we marched to Stade, where the commanders of the entire division assembled, and went by rail to our destination. In Bruges the train halted for an extraordinarily long time. We disembarked and went to town against orders, only to arrive late in Genk.

In Genk, directly on the Dutch border, total peace reigned. There was no hint whatsoever that a war was going on. Indeed, even warplanes were unseen and unheard of as the powers that be took care not to violate the borders of neutral Netherlands. This arrangement suited me very nicely. My friend Lt. Reh was already here (every battalion contributed one officer), and since I had no problems following is lectures, I was always in his good books. All those who could not follow the lectures would be seconded back to their regiments after a few days, and replacements would be requested. Rations were also very good here; we received exquisite lunch and 50 grammes of good butter every day. Alas, the four weeks went by quickly and we sadly bade our farewell from Genk.

When we returned to our regiment we were disappointed to learn that we would not form a separate company. We received rations, salary and quarters at our old companies, but in position were subordinated to Lt. Reh. Now our old companies considered us a nuisance. The Feldwebel (colonel), the tall Heinrich, and company commander Lt. Schulz treated us accordingly. The latter had previously held me in high regard and promised me early on that he would soon promote me. He wouldn’t have let me leave for the academy had he not been away on Christmas leave. Now, upon our return from Genk this Schulz coldly declared that I had nothing to expect from him any longer. The treatment we received from these two superiors was simply spiteful. But Reh’s attitude and the satisfaction of applying a new weapon helped me get over many a degradation.

We remained in the trenches at the Ysercanal until late March. When our regiment took rest position in early March, we gunners were assigned to the releasing regiment, as that comprised no gunners. Strange as it may seem, we were very pleased with the decision to stay in the trenches. One did get used to life in the trenches and come to terms with the dangers. One couldn’t fight fate. But at our company we wouldn’t have had a decent break, they would have trampled on our dignity every day.

Our losses in that position weren’t particularly high, and yet I narrowly escaped death twice. As so often in life, destiny played its game. In February 1917 we lay in reserve position at Langemarck. Hannes Heyer I shared a pretty little trench with just enough room for two, which some wit had dubbed "Café Bauer". One day, about noon, I was on the way to the latrine when I suddenly turned around to get myself a cigar. I wanted to do the job with some steam! Ironically I rarely smoked — most of the rationed tobacco merchandise went to Hannes because the cigars in the boxes bearing the stamp "For our brave greycoats" could only be enjoyed by strong smokers, and this I was not. I still cannot explain what moved me to light a cigar at that specific moment. But when I stood there with Hannes, both of us lighting a cigar, a huge boulder of a mortar crashed into the jetty leading to the latrine. Shrapnel and lumps of earth rained on us, but did not harm us. Still, I immediately realised that I would have died a hero’s death in the most infamous of all places had my irrepressible need for a cigar not distracted me from my intentions.

Before that, a similar incident occurred in November 1916 in position at the Ysercanal. It was a cold night and I stood guard, waiting for my release. Just as I bent slightly to look at my pocket watch, I received a thumb on my helmet, throwing me off my post. A ricochet bullet had shot through the sandbag (over which I spied the enemy), and bounced off my helmet. Had I not looked at my watch at that instant I would have had the most exquisite hole in my head. Moreover, I had only owned this timepiece for a few weeks. My wristwatch had stopped working while I was in Ghent, so I bought myself this watch. Had I still had my wristwatch with

its illuminated face, I wouldn't have needed to bend and my face would have been the target of the ricochet. Coincidence or God's will? The answer to that question depends on the personal convictions of those who have experienced such flukes. The true believer in Christ, as I have professed myself everywhere and anytime, would say God's will.

At the end of March we were withdrawn and brought by rail to the front division at Arras. First we moved into quarters in Remy, not far from the Arras-Cambrai road, which we reached after an exhausting march. In the absence of motor vehicles we had to pull our mortar guns ourselves — going uphill this was no joke. The French civilians made much fun of us, thinking that we were artillerymen having to pull our light armament ourselves.

In Remy, we were astonished at new orders from the resident commander. To our indignation, he ordered that the civilian population were to kill all their dogs. I can still see the French farmers, their faces distorted with anger as they strung up those poor creatures, some of them absolutely magnificent, on the trees and beat them to death. I

Have never been able to figure out the reasons for such a bizarre measure. Rumour had it that the poor dogs had disturbed the commander, who resided in the local castle, in his sleep.
The following day, Good Friday, we took position west of the Arras-Cambrai road. Here assault fire had already commenced. The assault on our position by artillery batteries increased daily and ferociously expanded into a mighty drumfire by early 9 April. That artillery fire was beyond human comprehension, truly unbearable. The English infantry assault, which followed on Easter Monday, was plainly as well prepared as a dominant artillery ever could be. This assault was supported by flotillas of tanks. Incredible masses of cavalry stood on the heights prepared to spill over the hinterland once the breakthrough was accomplished. But we defended desperately, although the support from our artillery was inept. Again, inestimably heroic deeds were performed on our side. What alone our Lt. Mommsen accomplished before he fell! Or Major Koller, the commander of our battalion, this superb human being, who also fell that day.

This was not a battle but a slaughter. But we defended our position. On 10 April, the English troops in front of our division rested, but the flashpoint was to our right at the village Monchy, with its castle and park. Merciless battles raged for the occupation of Monchy throughout that Tuesday. Eventually we lost Monchy, and retreated by about a kilometre southwest of the village. We still had to brave a few days of this cauldron before being relieved. How many losses didn't our division suffer during these few days? No survivor will ever forget the Easter battle of Arras. It took just a couple of days to extinguish once lively regiments. There is no question that these regiments, which fought and were devastated to their innermost core at Arras, witnessed the deepest depths of human suffering.

Tired and exhausted, dirty and lousy, we got to rest in a small village near Valenciennes. Here I slept in a featherbed, the only time I did so in enemy territory. But as we had to leave our rucksacks behind at Arras, I was terribly embarrassed to climb into the white bed wearing my filthy, lousy shirt. But that's how it was: if one wore clean clothes, then one would get into a lousy quarter; if one was lousy, then one would get proper quarters. It was the same in other areas as well. If one had potatoes one had no pan; if one had a pan, one had no potatoes. So one could never have fried potatoes.

I still remember how my comrade Finnern, a young weaver from Neumünster in Schleswig-Holstein, and I stood in front of our beds and discussed if we would sleep with or without shirt.

We were decorous and didn't want to infest the beds with lice. Anyhow, I went to bed with shirt and Finnern without. In the morning we carefully searched the bed for lice, but unavoidably the quarter mistress still found some lice. She made an unholy racket. In spite of this wench, who incidentally stole from our bread, we were mortified.

During rest days we got no rest as we were drilled daily from early morning till late at night. However, we gunners still had it better than the infantrymen did. We just could not get rid of that dreadful feeling called hunger. Most of all, though, we were upset at the early start of duty. Because of that the days dragged by and the hunger tormented us longer. We always said: "Those who sleep late, God nourishes; those who rise early, their bread vanishes."

Chapter 9: The Battle for Flanders

After we received fresh reinforcements from home we again took position at Arras in late April. Our new position, at the village Cherisy, had a hint of the Siegfried defence line, prepared for the past eight months. The first few May days saw moderate charges by the English at Monchy. The third day of May, however, was big fight day. Fifteen English divisions penetrated along an approximately 30km long front. Cherisy was lost that day and recaptured. The night to 4 May brought no respite. Cherisy was lost and recaptured again. There was particularly bitter fighting over the village Bullecourt to our left. Here the Australian youth in particular shed blood. During the following days the bitter battle for Bullecourt continued. These attacks were repeated no less than twelve times over the next two days! If by chance it quiet in our division, then it would be all the hotter at Monchy and Bullecourt. One can only guess how many victims English penetration assaults onto the blood-drenched battlefields of Arras claimed. Arras ate away at the strength of two nations. Its soil is fertilised with the blood of hundreds of thousands of young soldiers…

Towards the end of May the number battles declined markedly. Yet, we still had to suffer a lot from the lively firing activities of the English. What alone it meant to carry our munitions through hostile fire! One box containing six mines weighed 60 Pounds. If earlier two men would carry one box, we now had to haul each box single-handedly. That way we saved one trip per box. Only those who have ever undertaken such hikes will understand what it means to lug such a container on one's back on an empty stomach, sprinting through the night on turned soil. Most of all we suffered from dreadful thirst as well as from the stench of horse cadavers and unburied corpses and body parts at Cherisy. As a sideline we collected the loot which the Tommies had abandoned during their unsuccessful assaults. At the haul collection points we received good and welcome pay, which we needed to supplement our measly salaries. Even though there wasn't much one could buy in the canteens, our wages never lasted long enough to purchase even the smallest things.

In this position I also nearly got arrested. When we first went into position at Cherisy I once went on a short break for some "urgent business". While away, an unknown "comrade" stole my iron, or emergency, rations. I reported the theft at once to my superior. When a little later we failed to receive rations for a few days, four of my comrades consumed their iron rations. This was strictly forbidden, but deprivation knows no law. Personally I also had great hunger, but had I eaten my second ration as well, nobody would have believed me and claimed that I staged the theft to eat both rations. Later we went into quarters in Dury for four days. The four offenders were jailed by bread and water for three days; so that "the stain of fat in the bellies of those gluttonous pigs shall disappear", as company commander Schulz announced.

I again thanked providence, because the thieving comrade rendered me a great service, otherwise I would surely have been the fifth member of the club. I would have taken this especially badly as I still had the desire to be promoted. With a served sentence I would have spoiled my chances with Schulz for once and all.

We returned to Flanders from the Arras front in early June. We took quarters in Werwicq, a town of about 10000 citizens in the Belgian province of Westflanders. It is on the river Lys, which flows from the northeast to the southwest linking the towns of Menin, Werwicq, Comines, Warneton and Armentieres. These are all names that obtained significance in the battles which were to follow.

The German position embraced in a crescent formation the villages of Wytschaete and Messines. On 7 June the English commenced with huge mine explosions and with the ensuing attacks a new grisly battle drama emerged. The entire civilian populations of Werwicq and the other towns, which had now come within the reach of English fire, had to be evacuated after our arrival.

A drama I had so often seen at the front repeated itself, one that always deeply shook me. The madness of war really came to the fore when one observed how the civilian population suddenly had to leave behind all they owned. These poor people couldn't take much with them because they were not provided with any means of transport. One could often see deeply touching scenes when elderly people couldn't be separated from those things that were dear to them. A cat, for example, or a birdcage. They had to leave their valuables behind. And our superiors had use for those. Officers of all grades always had use for anything. And even when the plunder had taken on such ugly proportions that the high command ordered a ban of parcels from the front, ways and means were always found to get the loot home. For example, messengers would be sent on holiday to deliver many parcels to the officer's dear wife.
The rank and file soldiers had different problems. We were tormented by hunger and so we scouted the well-kept gardens and fields around Werwicq in search for anything edible. It's a shame that nobody let the fruits and vegetables ripen. Young peas and such like would be eagerly picked, notwithstanding that eating the unripe harvest could play havoc with many stomachs. We ate baby potatoes as early as 7 June, long before they should have been harvested. To regain the disciplined that had been relaxed in Arras, field manoeuvres would be held.

On 1 July I received 10 days leave. I was sent off bearing heavy loads of boxes and parcels, for delivery to my superiors or their relatives. And so I left Werwicq for my dear home. In Darmstadt I had no connection and since I yearned to sleep in a featherbed again I went to a simple hotel near the station. But when they realised that I had returned directly from the front, they tried their best to get rid off me. The proprietor feared that I might carry lice. It required all my powers of persuasion and a reference to my leave form to at last get a bed. I don't think I need to describe just how I felt that night. But I would notice several times during me leave just how grateful people at home were to the front soldier.

At home I met all my siblings, except Johann, who had fought in a gunner battalion on the western front since the beginning of the year. He had just had his leave and our intention to meet at home went unfulfilled. Ironically, his train back to front was just leaving Mainz station as mine came in. The short holidays went far too quick and one Sunday I found myself again on the way to the western front.

By the following evening I already had returned to my division, and went up the line the night after, near the totally devastated village of Hollebeke. Here we were without trenches, and therefore helplessly exposed to English artillery fire. For weeks it never went quiet, day or night. The English allowed themselves an astonishing waste of munitions. Without a plan, they just shot at the whole landscape, especially with dangerous flame-throwers, so that we often wondered why we didn't suffer more casualties in this hell. Repeated assaults by divisions from the Canadian Corps were however deflected. We offered defensive fire with our guns and soon had shot away all our munitions. The commander of our neighbouring regiment personally offered his appreciation of our precise shooting; we had given flankfire and thus shot at the division in front of that regiment. Early on 28 July, my birthday, the English scattered us with gas handgrenades. I swallowed some of that ghastly stuff and had a terrible birthday! Towards evening Lt. Reh ordered me to withdraw, against my will, because I could hardly stand on my legs. My stomach had been emptied off all its contents and I was just a shadow of my usual self. But after three days I was fit and glad when I met up with my comrades, who had gone into recess by then.

I was supposed to get a couple of days rest, but we had to go into position the same evening to take over the front section of a fellow regiment which had been ground down defending continual attacks. It was pouring with rain as we went up the line, and it rained for as long as we stayed in position. Mortar guns and munitions stood in mud and water, and there was no dry spot for us anywhere, never mind dry shelter. Those days were real torture. The battle of Flanders reached its climax at the time. From Bixschoote to Warneten, a huge front raged in battle. Interminable artillery combats day and night, attacks by our infantry and counter attacks by the English dominions, rain and more rain! What forlorn creatures we were. There is language in the world that has the words to describe to the layman the anguish which battle-hardened men had to endure in that bog. One fellow lost his nerve; in bright daylight he raced through the morass, blank-faced and in spite the raging fire. No one ever found out what happened to him.

In peace times one would guard against all those little common threats, a cough or a cold, headaches or stomach cramps. Here nobody paid any thought to the flu. Every single individual here tried to somehow keep his wretched life. So many, friend and foe, died here; shot to death, beaten to death, stabbed to death, burnt to death, bled to death, torn to pieces. How overjoyed we were when our release approached.

After some days of rest we travelled by train from Flanders back to the Arras front, where we immediately went up the line in the village of Bullecourt, which had been reduced to a heap of rubble in the Easter battle. Uncounted numbers of tanks, some more damaged than others, still stood between positions. But here we at least had safe shelter, which was however infested by lice. Although we would be in position for 14 days, and only seven days in rest, we had lucked out in comparison to Flanders.

Lt. Reh had secured my promotion to Gefreiter (Lance-Corporal), since Lt. Schulz had done nothing for me in that respect. Consequently I was now chief mortar gunner in position, and also didn't have to stand guard any longer, which improved my lot considerably. Towards the end of September I was commanded to attend courses at a pioneer company, where I spent some nice time.

On 2 October, Hindenburg's birthday, I returned to my company. My mate Hannes had been promoted that day, also to the rank of Lance-Corporal. But neither of us had yet been decorated. It was already the autumn of 1917, and we were in our third year on the Western front. Almost everybody in our company had a ribbon in his buttonhole, even among the youngest recruits. At that time, companies received so many medals that even people who had hardly smelled powder were decorated. The entire company wondered why Lt. Schulz systematically excluded Hannes and myself from citations. The reason was that he was a Mecklenburger, from Alt-Strelitz, and we were Hessians, and to him we were foreigners.
But when Schulz went on leave, his deputy, Lt Grage -- a popular and respected officer, who sadly died the hero's death shortly after - saw to it that this inequity was rectified. Grage had looked us up previously in our quarters and openly declared that he would put correct this wrong at his earliest opportunity. But they weren't going to suffer that ignominy in front of the assembled troops. So, contrary to custom, the medal ceremony took place in an administrative office. This admittedly took the shine off the medals. I would have been proud had I received the Iron Cross at Verdun, where I had earned it and where I would have received it had I not been wounded a few days too early. But now…

We were finally released towards the end of October. We left this quiet position only reluctantly. Within a few days, however, it would become the object of a mighty battle. Assisted by its tank squadrons, the English managed to penetrate the suburbs of Cambrai. The troops that released us were ground down. Most of them were taken prisoners. Captivity! The fate that I always dreaded. And again I had a lucky escape. I was happy to endure all the perils and struggles of the front, anything but captivity.

Chapter 10: Hunger and Plunder

According to plan, we left Arras and arrived in Belgium. Our billets were in Menin and Halluin, which we already knew. These are two industrial towns on the border to France. We mostly slept in huge textile factories, whose valuable machinery had been destroyed. It wasn't particularly pleasant here during the wet and cold months of November and December.
Our position was to the left of the Menin-Ypern road, between Zandvoorde and Cheluveld. There wasn't much left of these villages after all the preceding bombardment, however. One might have passed through without an idea that once people had their homes here. Everything was levelled, except for heaps of rubble where the churches once stood. There was no road, no pavement, no tree, and no bush left. Everywhere nothing but the desolation of the modern battlefield. Thousands of lakes created by shell craters rendered the landscape unpassable at night. Many brave soldiers bearing food or munitions in the darkness of the night drowned in these craters. Especially we minethrowers would be wandering here nightly to bring munitions or materials to our position. But the camaraderie among us was so well developed that during these transports everybody, from the lowest ranks to the highest, would carry equal loads. Fortunately we knew no hierarchies in these situations. Still, I was glad when I didn't have to go to the frontline on a few occasions. Lt. Reh had selected me to teach our new recruits some theory in shelling. At least with Reh I was on a good thing.

We spent Christmas in our billets, but on Boxing Day we were drilled in the snow. As usual, we had our Christmas party on the 23rd. I'll always remember this one. Our division commander was on leave, and a General-Major von Lossberg deputised. The general had announced his arrival to coincide with our Christmas party. Thus there was much excitement: cake was organised, Glühwein (or grog) made and so on. Of course, the grog was supposed to be kept hot, and the cake put away to keep its nice appearance. Only when the esteemed gentleman

entered would we eat, drink and sing, so that he could report with conviction: "Our troops are in excellent spirits!" However, the order to hold back with the eating and drinking did not reach us in our distant barracks. By the time Lt. Schulz came to us to confirm the implementation of his orders, we already had enjoyed ourselves. What an outburst followed! Every swear word he could master, and these were not few, spew from his mouth. And as the leader of the barrack, I was a special recipient of his outburst. But a man like Lt. Schulz couldn’t ever insult me. And so no general came to visit us. They gave him the scheduled theatre act elsewhere though. We spent the remaining days of 1917 in position, directly on the Menin-Ypern road at the village of Cheluveld. Beneath the road was an old mineshaft, which we shared with another machinegun squad. We spent a cosy NewYear’s Eve with these comrades.

One man had to be delegated to pump water, which had to be done at all times, day or night, because in Flanders groundwater represented a real danger.

On New Year’s Day we were supposed to be released. While preparing things for our relief, I was slightly wounded. I bullet got stuck in my throat, but didn’t penetrate deeply, so I was able to extract it myself. Again I was lucky in a perilous situation. A bandage around the throat, and after the few days later everything was back in working order.

When we came back from the line, we were assembled into an independent minethrowing company, which was very welcome. Especially we from the 6th company were happy, since we had been treated like annoying outsiders for a whole year there.

So on 4 January 1918 we went for advanced shooting instructions on a range near the Dutch-Belgian border. We dedicated those four weeks to our regeneration, really. The duty wasn’t particularly arduous, although food was in short supply. Nevertheless, this did not justify the housebreaking and theft from the civilian population by some of my comrades. What they didn’t steal! As soon as a farmer would leave their ovens unattended, a soldier would steal it from the given, whether it was baked through or not. At night, soldiers would clear out the pantries of these people, who themselves had little. In broad daylight they would steal chickens.

One day a lieutenant from a navy regiment chased after my comrade Kaminski to steal the chicken Kaminski himself had just poached. The chase went over ditch and knoll, but Kaminski eventually got away. One night two comrades stole a piglet out of the barn of a local farmer, much to the anguish of our comrade Unterstell from Gelsenkirchen, who had formed such an intimate friendship with the farmer’s daughter. Even our Lt. Reh got in on the act. One night he relieved a farmer of two heavy horses, which were immediately sent to the front. One died on the way, the other would become our field kitchen horse. It was for that purpose that Reh had selected these horses, because our Russian horses weren’t strong enough to handle the heavy kitchen. One wouldn’t have thought such mass theft possible. I never took part in such activities, and always tried to stop my comrades. But I frankly admit, though, that I did eat from the bounty. I was always hungry, after all.

In our leisure time, Hannes Heyer and I would often walk to the banks of the Maas river, which languidly flowed along beyond the village where our quarters were. The Maas formed the border between Belgium and Holland. On the other side of the river Dutch youngsters would play, oblivious to how fortunate they and their country were not to be caught up in this dreadful war.

We often spoke of the time when we saw the Maas for the first time (though in another country), in the bloody battle on the Pepperback hill outside Verdun on 26 February 1916. As young Germans we sang in our national anthem "von der Maas bis an die Memel", without giving it much thought – certainly not with any thought of what terrible things we would one day experience on the Maas. Verdun, whose soil is fertlised with the blood of a million people, was never far from our minds. Nobody who fought in these devastated woods and on the heights and in the gorges at Verdun will ever forget how deviously death claimed its victims there. Here in Belgium, the Maas served as a constant reminder of Verdun. Our posting here was therefore also a time for reflection and contemplation.

The four weeks passed by far too quickly. Oddly, we still suffered casualties, though this time the enemy was a bronchial epidemic.
Towards the end of January we moved to the village of Vichte in western Flanders. Our withdrawal was clearly greeted with a sense of liberation by the civilian population. I can still see these poor people standing in front of their houses, cursing as we marched by. One cannot blame them; they had very little reason to grieve over our departure.

In Vichte we moved into quarters on different, sometimes distant, homesteads. Those comrades who had developed a predilection for the art of stealing naturally sought to continue with their new trade. However, it seems that the local farmers had made some bad experiences with our predecessors. They guarded their possessions with fierce watchdogs, so there wasn’t much to steal. Some soldiers wished the commander of Remy were here, the one who had ordered the execution of all the dogs on Good Friday 1917.

My squad had it easy getting hold of potatoes, always much desired. The owners of our quarters had hidden huge quantities of potatoes beneath straw in our room! Of course we soon found them, and regarded it as logical that we should relish them. But the farmer couldn’t find out that we cooked his potatoes on his stove (at least not until we left Vichte). So every night two comrades would go out with an empty sack to "look" for potatoes. When they returned after a while, we would hand them a full bag of potatoes through the window, and they’d hand us the empty sack. So when they came through the front door with their dirty boots, it appeared as though they had stolen the potatoes elsewhere. The farmer was always immensely pleased that we were such decent fellows not to eat his potatoes, but somebody else’s. He never suspected a thing, because we were extremely mindful that the straw would retain its original shape. Alas, we never saw the farmer’s face when he inspected his potato reserves, but we often reminisced about our great swindle when we went back into position in mid-February.

We were now to the right of the Ypern-Menin road, and had pretty much occupied every section of the Flandersfront at least once. This one was a proper swamp. A several kilometre-long jetty led to the frontline. It was not much fun running on the jetty when the enemy started shelling it. Where was one to go? One couldn’t really take cover in the mud and water off the jetty.

We were released every three days, but these three days felt like an eternity. I usually worked with Sgt Rabenhorst, a man who had nerves of steel. But even Rabenhorst couldn’t handle the never-ending thunder of the artillery, this harrowing music that had reverberated over this landscape for months on end. And wherever one looked, one could witness the gruesome consequences of the modern battlefield. Bellona, the goddess of war, surely cast a no darker shadow over any place than Flanders -- apart, of course, from Verdun. Endless stretches of

land had been turned into scorched fields of ruins, the desolation of which occasionally broken by devastated villages and shot up tree trunks. The only thing I saw that had not been destroyed was a picture of the Mother of God.

Our position consisted of one shell crater after another. It is a miracle that we did not suffer more losses, in terms of lives and material. We did, however, lose our weapons master here. This was rather too close to home, because these men had a relatively safe and less unpleasant job than we did. They rarely had to go to the frontline, and even then for only a few minutes to fix this or that, before they got out of the firing line again. With a bit of luck, most of these comrades could survive the war. Our weapons master was the only son of a widow from Mecklenburg. After the war he was supposed to take over the business of his late ironsmith father. It was possibly in consideration of these circumstances that this popular and modest young man was given a fairly safe post.

He was killed by a sniper's bullet as he was trying to leave the frontline one morning. We were even more shattered by his death than usual. We especially empathised with his poor mother, who now had lost her only son. We buried him in a large war cemetery in Flanders, of which there were so many and where thousands of soldiers, friends and foes, rest united in peace. Our chaplain based his sermon on Luke 7:11-17, and when he said: "he was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow", even the roughest warrior couldn't hold back the tears. One might have thought that after all their horrid experience such soldiers might have lost every ounce of compassion…

Chapter 11: A New Enemy

When the big spring offensive between Lyon and St Quentin began with such promise, we didn't want anything more than being released to fight there, just to take part in a moving battle. Even the most insignificant soldier gets sick of just defending. One didn't always want to be an anvil; one also wanted to be a hammer occasionally. Of course, in such considerations the question of hunger always played a role. If one conquered an enemy position, one also won the enemy's foodstuff. It was a given that the survivors of a successful attack would always eat well for a few days. And that's what we all really wanted. Rations were getting shorter and shorter. In that we didn't suffer as badly as our poor horses. Our horse grooms would always long for spring, which would hopefully produce rich meadows. We might have mocked orders from up high that apart from the driver, nobody was to travel on a cart, even if it was empty, but it was not without merit. Emil Schmidt, the wit of our company, insisted that orders were in the works according to which horseback officers would have to lead their horses in future.

In late March we were indeed released from this gutted terrain. As we left we confirmed with satisfaction that the picture of the Virgin Mary was still there, undamaged. As we marched southwards over he border to France, we were confident to have left Flanders for good. After strenuous marches we reached Tourcoing and Roubauix, the centre of France's textile industry. Tourcoing (population 80000) and Roubauix (pop. 110000) are typical French provincial towns, with broad, well-kept boulevards and narrow, bending alleys. We were billeted in the dormant textile factories. We liked it here, but didn't get many days off.
On Good Friday we continued our march towards Lille. At the time, the German army often feigned troop movements. One moment we'd march with caps, then with steel helmets. In the course of that deception, we marched twice through Lille. As it was my job to arrange our

company's quarters, I would often go in advance of the company. This spared me a few uncomfortable marches on the awful roads of northern France.

We were also receiving supplies for our mine-throwers, confirmation that we would take part in an offensive soon. We practiced storm offensives between Seelin and Don before being told of our next engagement: to conquer the Portuguese positions between Armentieres and Festubert. So, even Portugal, that small country with a big history, was at war with us. Portugal's inexperienced troops had been posted to a swamp where a German offensive was not anticipated. But our high command, which had frequently made the near impossible possible, decided to let us spoil their cozy existence. We went into position in the night to 9 April. The sun had already risen by 4:30 when we arrived at the frontline. Heavy fog hung over the terrain which soon would become the scene of gory consequences. We had hardly had the opportunity to get acquainted with our new position when our artillery began firing its the first salvoes. After intense but brief fire we commenced attack at 8h45. But advancing was very difficult. We literally got stuck in the mire several times, and had to pull each other out of the mud and water. We were lucky that the Portuguese were not as skillful at defending as we were, else we would have suffered! It required all our strength to pull our guns and munitions through the morass, and towards noon we reached a road on which we could speed things up. By noon we had advanced 8 km of a 15 km stretch. We made a rich haul that morning: thousands of prisoners, among them Portuguese brigade commanders, and more than 100 artilleries. In the afternoon we still broke through Richenbourg, which was inhabited by civilians, and only the English gunners' stiff defence prevented us from advancing further. We took out some of their machinegun nests out, but then ran out of ammunition. It was while scouting one such post when our faithful mate Karl Brinkmann from Hamburg, who took part in the entire campaign, was mortally wounded. The death of such a comrade hurt us seasoned campaigners, now in our fourth year, deeply. Also among the casualties was my previous superior, Lt. Schulz. My patron Lt. Reh and his attendant were among the wounded. But generally our losses were few.

We spent the night inside a knee-deep trench under the open sky. For the first time in a long while our stomachs didn't grumble because we had captured huge amounts of food supplies. We savoured these with joy. We also noted how lucky our opponents were! They didn't know the meaning of the word hunger. We ate corned beef all day, and enjoyed the Portuguese wine and English biscuits. We had become gourmets and did not have any false illusions in that regard. That night we were also nearly completely spared enemy fire. The enemy was still recovering and consolidating, because our offensive came as a total surprise. Our accomplishment was indeed impressive.

The army report recounted the following day: "General von Quast's army has taken the English and Portuguese positions between Armentieres and Festubert on the southern bank of the Lys and eastern bank of the Lawe. After storming Bois Grenier and Neuve Chapelle they ran at the first attempt over the bogged pipe range which had been geared for tough defense etc. Under the efficient leadership of Major-General Höfer the bridge over the Lys at Lac St. Maux was taken and the Lawe and area north-east of Bethune was reached. 10 000 prisoners of war, among them a Portuguese and an English general!" The army report concludes with the commending words: "If the German achievements up to today could have been exceeded, then they were topped on 9 April."

On 10 April we attempted to advance here and there, partly successfully, albeit under great sacrifices. We now faced the toughest and bravest of opponents, the Scots. These compact

chaps with their peculiar dress (skirts to the knees, and these bare) offered fantastic resistance and also made an awesome impression in captivity. Each of them built like the other, all in the prime of life. None of them was as old as our Emil Schmidt, who had long passed the 40 mark, and none as young as our Jakob Nehring or Walter Heidern, these children in greycoats who marched into the war straight from school or apprenticeship. In our group, Hannes and I had the best built, but we couldn't compare ourselves to these Scots.

That 10 April was a hell of a day! The one-armed Major-General Höfer was everywhere and represented a splendid model of the heroic leader. I cannot recall having seen any other general going as far forward as him. A Hussar on horseback also warrants mention. This officer rode like the devil himself, through rain of bullets along the foremost frontline. Such are the leaders the common man loves. It is just a pity that they were so rarely found on the front during the last couple of years of the war.

During the late afternoon I was ordered to fetch munitions with 15 other comrades. The munitions were stored at a remote farm, the location of which was shown to me on a map. I found the farm soon, but realised that it was under heavy enemy fire. Every other minute another huge salvo of shells rained down on the farm. An English warplane circled over the farm and controlled the effect of the blows. Evidently our depot had not gone unnoticed. And now I was stuck with a dicey order. At first we took cover about a hundred metres from the farm to determine the intervals of the fire. But these intervals were so short that we realised that we were facing a race with death should we try to execute our order. On the other hand, returning without munitions was not an option either. With seven volunteers in tow, we ran for our lives over the farm. It took a second to lift a crate of munitions on our backs, and as quickly as we had come we disappeared again. We hadn't yet reached our eight comrades, with whom we had left our steel helmets and gasmasks, when a new fusillade hailed down on the farm. This one hit bullseye, ignited and the stored munitions exploded. We had won the race by the length of a nose. Once again I had cause to thank my creator for His merciful providence.

On our way back we again came under heavy bombardment, the like of which I had never experienced before. The ground beneath us trembled relentlessly. A few young comrades, under the influence of the Reservist Trotzki, decided to stay put. But because I led by example and went on, carrying my box, most comrades followed me. And we returned unharmed and with the munitions to our position. Lt. Carstensen had been worried and was evidently happy when we arrived. He was not so pleased about Trotzki and those who stayed behind, although I tried to explain their disposition in understanding terms. But Carstensen did not condone their conduct, and pledged to teach them a lesson if we would ever got out of this mess.
We spent the night behind a haystack, located immediately behind our most advanced line. We slept very well, thanks in part to the copious amount of good red wine we had consumed. Since we had lost all our junior officers in the previous two days, Lt. Carstensen and I took turns standing watch. We didn't want to be overrun in case one of the sentries was overcome by tiredness. We always expected a counter offensive at any given time.

I had a good personal relationship with Carstensen, a good soul. He promised that night that he would motivate for my instant promotion. He told me that he would derive personal satisfaction from my finally being awarded my dues. But it didn't work out that way.

Chapter 12: A Prisoner of War (at Home)

Very early on the next morning, Thursday 11 April, we started a new assault. There were bitter battles for the bridges over the Lawe, which could be passed at some southern points that morning. I must pay tribute the lionhearted courage and tenacity of the Scots, these sympathetic beings, of whom we captured a great number that morning. We were always on the most advanced frontline so as to smoke out the machinegun nests.

Around noon we swapped positions and I helped my comrade Dorn transport a box of munitions, when suddenly grenades came raining down on us. Dorn was hit in his hand by shrapnel. Evidently the same splinter struck my right underarm. We ran behind a farmhouse, where helpful comrades bandaged our wounds. We then bade farewell to Lt Carstensen and our comrades – in my case especially from my friend a fellow Hessian Hannes Heyer, who died the hero's death some months later. And then we retreated as quickly as we could. Nobody stayed in a battlefield any longer as was necessary. Our destination was first the main bandage point at a small church where we were vaccinated against fever. Then on to the collection depot at a devastated factory yard.

Here we also spent the night; a most unforgettable night. That night I felt the human anguish only the lunacy of war can cause. Mortally wounded people, bedded on pathetic bunks, moaned and groaned all night. I can still hear the heavy breathing of the dying warriors, forsaken in the hour of their death. I was relieved when the new day dawned.
We departed by train early in the morning. By afternoon we reached the lazaret in Ath, a town of 11000 in the Belgian province of Hennegau. Here we became human again. We could wash again, received clean clothes, had a good bed, a warm meal, were rid of the vexing lice - all comforts we gone without for so long. The nurses did their best to make us as comfortable as possible. I often marvelled at the accomplishment and competence of these sisters. One in particular stood out. What this sister managed was fabulous. In spite of her advanced age and a debilitating leg ailment she toiled from early morning until late night. She was always present at mealtimes, always the first helping hand in the operation room, and every evening she held a bible hour. And these were just the things we were able to observe. This German woman had my utmost respect.

On Sunday 14 April, an ice-cold April day, all those who were fit for transport were rounded up to be taken to Germany. It was a blessed feeling to receive notice of returning to Germany. Everybody was elated to be back on German soil when we woke up next morning in Aachen. Towards evening, we had already reached Hanover. We had all hoped to land up in a sanitarium, and I wished for nothing more but a second Coburg. But we were going to be bitterly disappointed.

As the sun set, we moved on in a northerly direction. Towards midnight the train stopped in the middle of nowhere and we were puzzled when told to alight. Nobody knew where we were. Our path led through heather-covered woods to a huge barrack camp. Only now did it dawn on us that we had landed up in the notorious Munster camp. If moving wounded front-fighters into such a desolate camp isn't a clever move for psychological reasons, then the accommodation was a final insult. Between 30 and 40 comrades shared one primitive wooden barrack. In them there was nothing but bedframes, on them just heather-filled sacks. We had barely looked around – in fact, we hadn't even come to grips with the reality confronting us - when a young clerk appeared with orders to take our paybooks. This was curious, because no soldier was supposed to do anything without his paybook. And this was the extent of care we received for

the night. After cursing for a while we went to rest on our heather sacks as we were and, tired from the long journey, soon fell asleep.

I awoke at about 4:00 because of the cold (it was still April), exercised a little to get warm and went back to sleep. When I got up in the morning I was covered with lice. Our predecessors in these barracks had been Russian prisoners of war, and now the place was infested with lice. We were furious! Come morning all the wounded gathered outside the barracks and protested against this indignity. And because there was no food except for some thin soup, and we were hungry, we overran the cooking house at lunchtime. All the cooks where booted out. Typically, the ever big-mouthed Bavarians shared out the food. Our caps filled with potatoes and hands full of dried fish, we sat outside our barracks and tucked in. We had barely finished when the camp commander came galloping on his horse. This home warrior, a brigadier in paratrooper's uniform and monocle in his eye, had apparently berserk. He would have liked to ride right over us and threatened to let his aspirant officers go at us with machineguns if we didn't return to our barracks immediately. But such threats left us, who knew greater enemies, unmoved. Our mocking laughter and jeers ringing in his ears, he quickly disappeared. We never saw this brilliant superior and "organiser" again.

Our fury had now reached boiling point. That afternoon we were given plenty bread, woolen blankets and, most importantly, medical treatment. Outside the barracks tables covered with white sheets were put up, and surgeons and the essential orderlies took care of our wounds. When we heard that some comrades with serious wounds would be transferred to Lüneburg we all tried to get there.

But Lüneburg was reserved only for those poor devils whose wounds had turned septic and whose limbs had to be amputated. This could have been avoided had we received medical treatment at once on arrival. But the distinguished camp commander had failed entirely. Things improved generally over the next few days, but every one of us tried to get released from this "hospital" as soon as possible. Apart from us, there were others at the camp. Among others there were 24 penal companies consisting of 250 men each. German soldiers who had sinned to a greater or lesser degree, mostly sentenced for desertion, suffered here immensely. These poor guys were dreadfully undernourished, forced to work hard (cultivating wasteland) and the drilled plenty. One had to feel for these wretched fellows; they were also front fighters after all, but for whom the war evidently lasted too long.

Opposite the German convicts were prisoners of war from all nations, kept behind a high wire fence. The English and French prisoners in particular walked around proudly in their uniforms, and they were noticeably well fed - apparently they received plenty of food parcels from their homes. But the Russians didn't have a better deal than the German convicts. Both were clothed in rags and starved alike.

Chapter 13: Lübeck: the word I feared

By the end of April, or it might have been early May, I left the memorable Munstercamp, my wound still not healed. At least I had been deloused. Over Uelzen, Lüneburg etc we reached Hamburg, where we had to spend the night. I was rather surprised at the generous organisation. A first-rate hotel near the station was available for the wounded in transit, and the accommodation was excellent. Soldiers who would depart at a particular time were allocated their own floors, so that nobody would be disturbed unnecessarily by the noise of the departing. I thus got the best impression of Hamburg.

During the late morning of a beautiful spring day I arrived in Lübeck - the city I had always been so terrified of. But I wish to stress from the outset that I became enthusiastic about that city as soon as I saw its seven church towers glistening in the skyline. After inquiring about my reserve troop division at the station, I looked up a barber for a badly needed haircut. Then I walked to the offices of my reservist battalion, where I received orders to report for a medical examination the next morning. For accommodation and provisions I was referred to the Railway Barracks – a euphemism for a cattle hall which had been turned into billets. The accommodation was extremely primitive and I was relieved to spend only one night there. Next morning I was referred to the convalescent unit in the suburb of Israelsdorf for medical examination. During the tram ride I feasted my eyes on the luscious green of the tree-lined avenue and enjoyed Israelsdorf itself. The peace and quiet of this village in the midst of a beautiful wood was an ideal environment in which to regain my humanity after all the stresses and anguish of the Western Front and the great disappointments of the Munstercamp. Here I enjoyed many happy reunions with old comrades from the front. After a few days I received 14 days convalescence leave and could thus spend Pentecost at my dear home.

On both journeys, home and back, I visited my brother Georg in Giessen. In Darmstadt I had to be bandaged up again because my wound had still not healed. Still, my holiday in the beautiful Fischbachtal, which is a paradise when the fruit trees bloom, was unforgettable.

Back in Lübeck I had another medical examination. This was just a routine, because anyone who could more or less walk was automatically declared able. So this is what I expected that morning. But it turned out differently. That examination was fateful and it is evident that my destiny was altered that morning, without my having a hand in it. The examining chief doctor did not have a good reputation. All of my comrades who had to appear before this strict man were quickly declared able. The more they moaned and groaned, the quicker they were done with. If one soldier claimed that he had problems running, then the chief doctor, who had obviously lost any sense of human compassion, would say that the warrior would run very well indeed when a Tommy or Frenchman was chasing after him.

So, when I had to step forward I was convinced that I would be declared able. I showed him my right arm (the wound had already healed), and the doctor asked my to grip his hand. Obviously he wanted to see whether I had regained the strength in my injured arm. Apparently satisfied by my grip he asked if I had any other complaints. When I replied in the negative this otherwise severe man suddenly looked at me benevolently and asked how long I had been at the front. When I replied, "Three years, Sir", he literally exploded. "So, my son," he began while tapping my shoulder, "you have already done you debt and duty, and you shall recover first. Two months unfit!" Grinning sincerely the feared chief doctor released me, and I believe that I must have looked awfully stunned when I left. Only outside did it enter my mind that I had won the doctor’s favour through honesty and earnestness. Had I, who was healthy and strong, moaned and sought to deceive, he undoubtedly would have declared me able. And I would have soon been back at the front. Under these circumstances I delayed posting my prepared request to be drafted into my old company (to avoid changing my division once again given my bad experiences in that regard). Garrison life was still preferable to life at the front.

It was quite comfortable at the convalescence home in Israelsdorf. Those fit to work where assigned to various work commandos in private enterprises, and earned what I considered an awful lot of money. Soon I had a commando as well, at the Lubecaworks. I enjoyed earning money, especially once I realised that industrial labour is not as hard as agrarian work.

Lubecaworks manufactured gasmasks, submarine equipment etc and employed mostly women. We soldiers were primarily charged with the loading and unloading of boats, and played transport worker. Life at the river Trave in the middle of Lübeck was interesting. It was here that I saw my first sea ships, which impressed me considerably. Sadly, the work only lasted for a few days. Late on 31 May, when I was already in bed, I received notice to report next morning to the military section of the prison Lauerhof, where I had been transferred to with effect from 1 June. This directive did not make me very happy. Firstly I would have liked to remain at the Lubecaworks, and secondly I imagined prison life to be rather gloomy. But orders are orders.

With mixed feelings I went out early on 1 June, fetched my outstanding pay, and (after a long search, because I was still unfamiliar with Lübeck) found the Lauerhof jail. The jail made a peculiar impression on me. I couldn't imagine that I'd manage working behind these high walls for very long. The entire senior staff of the military wing was to be released that day, and so it was not easy getting to know the operation. The new administrator, Feldwebel Hacker, was a police detective from Hamburg, a man made for this position. Soon Sgt. Gattung, a charming compatriot from Frankfurt, and Gefreiter Nehmann, from Hamburg, joined us. We worked harmoniously together.

I took over my predecessor's room at the house of some very nice people. I had to start work at 6am and was continuously busy until 7pm. As a result I was usually quite tired after duty and went early to my snug bed – a comfort I had to do without for so long. When I started at Lauerhof, it had some 70 prisoners, about 40 of them awaiting trial. The others were martial convicts. At the time incredible amounts of soldiers were court martialed at the garrisons. The superiors were apparently trying to restore discipline by handing out excessive punishment. Every day we received inquiries for available cells. Indeed, no cell ever stood empty.
It often made me wonder when decorated comrades were delivered to us for petty violations, such as overextending their leave, and had to sit behind bars for three, five, seven or even 14 days, and sometimes longer still. Even the most dutiful soldier could easily receive martial punishment. How close hadn't I come myself? Had that "comrade" not stolen my iron rations at the heights of Cheresy, then Lt Schulz would have given me three days. Or on the parade grounds in Darmstadt, when I had lost my temper -- had my six comrades not been so loyal I certainly would have been punished.

Chapter 14: Prison Life

There is a deep secret hidden in all people. It is their soul and the impulses which regulate their actions. Every man is guided by good or bad spirits in what he does, what he decides, how he judges. How often is one not caught up in uncontrollable events without understanding why? We call this fate, or destiny. Those spared from hard knocks often have the temerity to claim that it was so because of their intuition, that warned them of impending disaster. Arrogantly they play moralists. Yes, people are generally like that when they have been spared the malice of life. I was conscious that destiny had treated me kindly, and therefore didn't feel contemptuous of these poor fellows going through my hands at the jail. I openly confess, I didn't always do everything strictly by the book. Sometimes I would "forget" to turn off the lights in cells, or would leave mattresses in the cells for a day longer than prescribed.

If one takes into account that in the fourth year of war practically every soldier suffered from malnutrition, then one should be opposed to confinement altogether. Receiving only bread and water (as prisoners routinely did), most inmates' bodies were weakened to such an extent that

many fell victim to the then rampant influenza virus. And how senselessly punishment was meted out at times! For instance, at the end of August a Sgt Molge was brought in to sit out a four-week sentence. "Serious negligence" was the cited reason for his punishment. This comrade was already greying, had several sons at the Western Front, one of them in French captivity. He begged with the superiors to spend the four weeks standing watch somewhere, anywhere, instead of going to jail. This means, he wanted to stand watch for four consecutive weeks and thus do the duty of two men. That way, one NCO in the respective company might have gone on leave, perhaps spending it productively at home. But all the pleading was in vain. Molge was brought to us one morning by a colonel. In this case we exercised our discretion. Molge got a awaiting trialist cell and thus had a bed with mattress, pillow and blanket. Four weeks on a hard bunk would have destroyed the old man. We gave him also as much to eat and drink as we could spare. He also received newspapers and books to read and was permitted to smoke. Molge looked better after his four weeks in jail than he did when he arrived. Today, when I bump into the tram conductor Molge, I can see the gratitude in his eyes. But not everybody whom we treated well was that appreciative. Often the German proverb applied: "Thanklessness is the world’s wage" applied.

Apart from Germans we had inmates from all kind of nations. Our military often played disgraceful games with these poor POWs. Doubtlessly the other side sinned equally -- human rights do not rate highly during war. For example, every Saturday evening a Belgian corporal would be brought to us, and fetched again 24 hours later. He was sentenced for refusing to do forced labour. So during the week he was forced to toil in a factory, and then sit out his punishment in jail over the weekend. I often think about that corporal. He was a regal looking man with black hair, a real Walloon, whom they couldn’t get down and whom we could not deprive of respect.

There was also a Russian who suffered the same fate. His deeds were not even that bad. The Russian prisoners received day leave, because our war with their fatherland had already ended. So they were allowed to go out unaccompanied and had to be back at camp at a certain time. This Russian got lost in town one day and reported back at camp a few minutes late. For that he got 14 days. That was in the late summer of the last war year. The Russian was also brought in on Saturdays and fetched again on Sundays. The revolution a few months later put a quick end to such mischief. But this Russian spent many Sundays at Lauerhof, and hungered. Generally, the Russians were all famished. What these pitiful guys didn’t do to eat. When the awaiting trialists didn’t eat their inedible vegetables, we would give the left-overs to the Russians, who would devour them.

But we also had inmates who would refuse to eat, despite great hunger, on their so-called ‘Good Day’ -- usually every fourth day. These were Indians. The cruiser ‘Wolf’ had landed its haul in Lübeck after a successful journey, and put also the crew of a ship it had sunk on land. Thus a great number of Indians arrived in Lübeck. They were accommodated at a camp near the ferry and worked mainly at unloading steamboats. We often received Indians as prisoners. What these people lived off while in jail remains a mystery. Nobody touched any food on their "Good Day". One look into the food container and instantly they would shake their heads and, like a lament, the words "no rice" coming over the lips of these religious men. They spent all day kneeling on the plank-bed, covered in sheets, lulling prayers. So behind high prison walls I learned about people and their practices from all kinds of countries.

Although I came to Lauerhof with mixed feelings I soon acknowledged that this commando wasn’t all bad. Through dedication and a strict sense of duty I had also found favour with the

institution's administration. During those days I felt particularly indebted to my teacher Eidmann, who had equipped me spiritually. This master among educationist, who was a leader to his pupils, a mentor to the prodigy, an innovator, a perfector who himself was perfect - to emulate this man was my ultimate goal then.

Chapter 15: Waiting to go back to War

I expected to be summoned for another medical examination any day. I knew I would be declared able, so eventually I posted off my previously mentioned request to my troop division in late July. Sgt. Maj. Hacker begged me not to do it because he didn't want to lose me at Lauerhof. But I wanted to avoid having to start from scratch in the field. I also received communication from my mortar gunner company that they had approved my request. Sgt. Maj. Möhring also informed me that on my arrival I would be promoted to corporal with immediate effect. My friend Hannes Heyer had also been promoted in the meantime.

But there were greater concerns than that on the Western Front. Enemy pressure had mounted since the unsuccessful bid to cross the Marne, and our losses were increasing. Troop divisions, which could not be replenished, were merged with other units. The same happened at my division. My request to be forwarded to my old division had doubtlessly been lost. In August I was declared A1, yet my superior at Lauerhof moved heaven and earth to keep me. For the time being he exerted his influence over some justice official.

At Lauerhof meanwhile, occupancy had doubled, so we were very busy. Especially the number of prisoners who had yet to be charged surged during August and September. Most of these were infantrymen - none of them wanted to go back to the front. It was conventional wisdom that this war (which most certainly was no express train, as we so often mockingly sang at the front) was approaching its bitter end. Who still coveted the hero's death? Each transport from the garrisons to the western front yielded great numbers of deserters. Because a deserter somehow had to make a living, he'd run up several other misdemeanour charges, apart from desertion. Court martials would thus try the deserter on charges of forgery forgery (leave and travel passes had to be arranged), theft and so on.

As a rule in the last war years, the army would draft such social elements as transients and career criminals - people to whom the uniform of the German soldier represented no honour. Had they worn civilian apparel, they still would have filled the jail. The scum of humanity! Felons of the highest grade whose unfailing marks were all varieties of venereal disease and bodies covered in tattoos. One had to beware of these fellows! One got to know these customers at their first bath in jail, and could adjust one's approach accordingly. What trash didn't assemble at our institution? The quote from the famous 'Discorsi' by the Italian historian and politician Niccolo Machiavelli, "Man never does good except by force; therefore laws are essential", will ever retain its meaning as long as mankind continues to exist. The first two people on earth failed, and the last will not die without sin either.

Yet, we had many little sinners who would not have ended up in jail as others did. Here I think of a group of pilots who had bootlegged petrol and now spent months behind bars. And still their brides remained faithful. Or those troops who guarded food supplies at the harbour, and now were under arrest for a momentary negligence of duty. The war and its consequences repressed civil sensitivities. Here were men who had innocence written all over their faces, who under normal circumstances would never have seen a prison from the inside. There were many front fighters, young and old, many decorated with countless medals, who were at the

end of their nerves. Because they had deserted they could now contemplate this never-ending war from the inside of their cells.

In that regard, I recall one particularly upsetting scene. The mother of an infantryman visited her son. How difficult it must have been for this distinguished woman to see her son in jail. Sobbing bitterly, the woman reproached her son. "My boy, how could you do this to us?" He re-plied: "Mother, I couldn't bear it any longer at the front. My nerves, my nerves!" And so it went back and forth. This young man, who patently couldn't return into the firing line, already had earned the Iron Cross and made an excellent impression and had a brother who was company commander on the front. Inevitably, mother and son eventually embraced.

Chapter 16: Soldiers Stealing from Soldiers

One late September morning I was suddenly released. I reported to a reservist company (absurdly in a ballroom) I had been allocated to. During the first days I my task was to transport awaiting trialists from Lauerhof to their court martial. However, a few days later I was commanded to return to Lauerhof for eight days because my release had earned him special leave. After returning to the company I was charged with delivering a young infantryman from Lauerhof to Spandau prison in Berlin. Due to the inadequate rail connection, it took two days to get there. So I got to know Berlin, if only on the surface. Seeing the avalanche of people streaming through the gates of the munitions factory was unforgettable. I had never seen such a mass of workers.

It had been five months since my last leave and I was supposed to go to the front with the next transport. So I received ten days leave, from 10-20 October. I spent my leave in the Odenwald and in Giessen. As usual, I had to return on a Sunday. I always had this dubious luck. But when I arrived back in Lübeck, the transport I was supposed to be on had just left for the front. Of course, I did not regret this, but I also didn't try to escape my duty to the fatherland. A couple of days after I received a special order that meant that I did not even have to do barrack duty.

With a few Non-Commissioned Officers I travelled to Lennep, a town in the Prussian jurisdiction Düsseldorf, to fetch some recruits. It was a dull journey. On the first day we only made it up to Bremen, although we had left Lübeck in good time. In Bremen we slept at a mass quarter near the station which had been set up for soldiers in transit. There were signs all over the walls warning of thieves. German soldiers stealing from each other! It was shameful. If you took off your boot at night, you could expect to walk on socks the next day. So we kept everything on in those quarters and fastened all other possessions on our bodies to be on the safe side. Who could have predicted this state of affairs in 1914? The length of the war and its symptoms had suffocated all signs of civility in many people.

After an elaborate journey we arrived at our destination late on the second day. The new recruits were men who up to then had been drafted as skilled labour in the weapon and munitions factories. Now they requisitioned, to the last man, for battle duty. When we arrived back in Lübeck I learnt that I had already been allotted to the next transport. During the next days I had to recover, like so many of my comrades, from a bad case of flu.

Chapter 17: Revolution and Collapse

Discipline was crumbling at an astonishing rate in those last weeks of the war. No longer could one talk of restraint. One could literally see the end: the disintegration of the proudest army in the world was irrevocable.

On Monday, 4 November, 500 men bearing machine guns suddenly went to Kiel, where seamen engaged in mutiny. The next morning the comrades who were meant to suppress the mutiny returned disarmed. Now we saw the signs of the time. That morning I went on station watch which was manned only by NCOs and Lance-Corporals. We had the task of disarming the masses of seamen arriving by train, as it was feared that they would bring the unrest to Lübeck. These fears were justified as unrest indeed began towards evening. Suddenly the station was full of soldiers, who unarmed us and invited to join the movement. The station court was occupied by machine gunners; opposite the station, in the hotel International, a quickly formed soldier's council set up their headquarters, and groups of infantrymen, supported by seamen, moved from barrack to barrack, all armed and singing revolutionary songs.

At night hundreds of soldiers moved to Lauerhof and liberated all military prisoners and common law inmates except for a few serious offenders. Incredibly, all this took place without bloodshed. I watched the whole proceedings without participating. What did I know about the political dynamics that had contributed to the collapse? Anyhow, I didn't participate. No more duty was held and I was plagued by boredom. I had worked regularly - even throughout my holidays - and I had no dispensation for idleness.

On Tuesday, 12 November, I had to participate in a meeting of the garrisons. Accompanied by ringing music we marched from the officer' casino - by now the HQ of the soldier's council - to the market square. Here the officer Zeitz from Frankfurt took to the podium, and announced that Germany had become a People's Republic and roared three cheers for the Republic. After Zeitz, the representative of the worker council Mehrlein, later a senator and police chief, addressed the gathering. This was the only event I took part in. The collapse of the fatherland affected me badly. I could not believe that everything we had accomplished and suffered for on the front had been meaningless.

I often think about that rainy evening when special editions of the local newspapers announced the enemy's audacious conditions of surrender. I was crushed! It was over, the war was lost! Four long years we enthusiastically fought a war: all in vain! All my childhood friends and war comrades who had fallen victim to this savage war paraded before me that night. The wonderful Balthasar Schwebel, with whom I played many childhood pranks: Dead! A young peacetime volunteer, he perished on 8 September 1914 at the Marne. Our Georg Späth: Dead! Späth wanted to give the enemy a good hiding, but fell in January 1915 before even coming face to face with an enemy. Georg Frank: Dead! Georg who was wounded at Verdun on 25 February 1916, and still wrote to me from the infirmary about how happy he was to be home; a few days later he died under excruciating pain of blood poisoning. His brother Jakob: Dead! A shell killed him in summer 1915. Dead: my loyal friends and comrades Philipp Kleinschmidt and Karl Beilstein. Both fell at my side in February and March 1915 respectively. Who among my schoolmates survived? Dead: the magnificent Ernst Becker, who fell by my side during the first storm attack on Verdun. Dead: my Hannes Heyer, fellow warrior in many heated battles, fell in late summer 1918 after surviving all the perils of war for nearly four years. Dead: our Chief Lieutenant Gessler, commander of the proud 4/115, a man of highest ethics, a man who

had internalised the philosopher Immanuel Kant's definition of obligation. Gessler fell in March 1918 during the great West Offensive as commander of the regiment's 2nd Battalion, having fought for almost four years. Dead: both my company commanders from the Reservist Infantry Regiment No.84, who also fell after years of faithfully discharging their duty. Dead, so many comrades with whom I shared joy and much more pain over long, difficult years. All for nothing! And the future? For me it was obscured by a veil of fog. What, what was I to do? Return to the Odenwald? My home, which I still loved and cherished, couldn't offer me an existence? So I remained where I was and regarded it as a relief when I was called to Lauerhof jail.
At least my idleness had come to an end. The prison had been virtually cleared of inmates during the night from 5 to 6 November, but during the following days new prisoners had arrived. The new powers tolerated no violence and so our cells started to fill again. Mere adolescents, discharged from the war, saw it fit to loot garment stores for clothes. Lost elements from all the branches of the army, but especially the navy, were imprisoned for theft. By December we had an average of 40 awaiting trialist inmates. The administration of the prison soon fell into my hands, and it did so without my influence. Sgt. Maj. Hacker returned to his post in Hamburg, Sgt. Gattung also won a quick discharge and went home to Frankfurt, and my last colleague, Nehmann, didn't return from a short trip to Hamburg. All three were married and had the obvious need to go home as soon as possible to their families, which they had been deprived of for so long by the war.

At the time I couldn't have imagined that I would occupy this position for a whole year. And I am still astonished that I, who was only 24 years of age, was trusted with such a responsible post until my voluntary resignation. It turned out that I was evidently competent enough to do the job. I came to terms with the ins and outs of the job, as well as the bureaucratic tasks, surprisingly soon. The traffic of written communications with the many offices I dealt with - the martial court, the courts of the various troop divisions, the garrison command, the garrison administration, the public prosecutors, the local courts etc – represented a valuable education. Often I would witness interrogations of prisoners by court martial officials, as well as consultations between prisoners and their lawyers. These observations have come in useful in my present job as a police officer. For that reason I do not regret to have occupied this post, even if it involve many unpleasant dimensions.

Here I slowly became human again. During those long years at the front one would slowly go crazy without even noticing it. One became anxious in crowds. For example, during my first few months in Lübeck I was unable to visit a shop by myself to buy a pair of gloves. It may sound strange, but it is the pure truth.

Chapter 18: After the War – a New Life

The weeks and months at the penal institution Lauerhof went by swiftly. I was busy from early morning until late at night, even on Sundays. My office became my living room for logistical reasons - this way I would always be contactable.

This lifestyle nearly killed me, literally. It was 1919. I had spent the afternoon with delightful people in a forest. I was in high spirits as I returned to the institutions at about midnight. I climbed up the dark stairs of the corrective section, and opened the heavy steel door on the third floor to reach my office. As I glanced at the iron bars, which divided the isolation wing of the military prisoners from the actual corrective section, the convict Raschke stood in front of me, dressed only in pants and shirt. Raschke, the archetypal heavy, had broken out of his cell. In my absence he had used primitive tools to break through the wall at the point of an airvent,

and thus reached the inside of the isolation wing. His plan came unstuck when he tried to slip through the iron bars, because his head was too thick to go through. Had his thick skull not impeded him, he would have waited for me at the stairs, knocked me out with a foot-stool he had on him, taken my keys, freed his most intimate mates from their cells and walked into freedom - no problem since the military posts were less than dependable. Without losing my cool (I had acquired a strong nerve in the war), I went to the office, fetched my gun and returned Raschke to safety, with the assistance of my lackey who locked him into the cage in the cellar. Raschke remained there for a long time, with permission from the justice.

I mentioned my lackey. He was a very young man named Kollmann and came from a small village near Bremen. He was brought to Lauerhof just before Christmas, and according to instruction sat for several weeks in the cage. But he was anything but a hardened criminal, so I took pity on him and transferred him to an ordinary cell. He was always respectful and modest, a steadfast sort of fellow. I'm sure his mother never told him that one day he'd sit in jail.

This is what it happened. Shortly before Germany's certain collapse, the vintage of 1900 was drafted, among them Kollmann. He had yet to go into position on the frontline when the German army began its retreat. The leadership in his division evidently failed, and because he wanted to go home as fast as possible he tried to expropriate a horse in Belgium. But the owner caught Kollmann red-handed and, understandably furious, assaulted him with a baton. Kollmann, believing himself to act in self-defence, pulled his rifle and shot the Belgian. Doom! Kollmann returned to Germany without horse. But he arrived under arrest and was tried for murder. In his childish simplicity he was not even conscious of the gravity of his situation. Only under my pressure did he engage a lawyer, and because the lawyer demanded a down payment, I put that up for him. The trial was held during Easter week and Kollmann was sentenced to ten years in jail. When he was brought back he was crushed and I sincerely felt sorry for him.

In the meanwhile he had become my factotum and despite his conviction I continued to grant him those special favours every inmate desperately covets. Had he escaped I would have been in deep trouble. But Kollmann proved himself worthy of my trust. His lawyer, D Hoffmann of Lübeck, won him his freedom on appeal in June. Now he was saved. Kollmann was so happy, he stayed with me for another two days as a free man. We went out together in the evenings, and of course he stayed with me. When he said his good-byes and shook my hand, both of us had tears rolling down our cheeks.

Kollmann later joined the police in Bremen and maintained contact with me for a long time. What uncertainties his poor mother suffered during those months? It is quite natural that she would have stuck to her son, in spite of his inexcusable deed. At Lauerhof, I often had the opportunity to observe the phenomenon of a mother's love - the purest, most wonderful, most powerful emotion. Family visits at Lauerhof were worth studying. The father would reprimand his wayward son. The sister, the bride or even the wife would sulk, rant and feel piqued over whatever had happened. Only the mothers, who often undertook arduous journeys to be with their sons, would forgive everything. My faith in maternal love is unshakeable.
Occupancy at Lauerhof increased a lot in late summer when about 20 men were delivered at once. They were members of the Iron Division, Baltic fighters. All ranks, even a treasurer, were represented. What some of these farmhands - they were all volunteers - did in the Baltic defies any description. These people, thrown out of their equilibrium by the war, offended against every paragraph in the lawbook. Even today a cold shower runs down my back when I think of

these Baltic fighters. But I want to state clearly that this judgment does not apply to every volunteer corps!

I was thus fully employed and earned well - apart from my salary I also received the so-called ‘manager bonus’ which all civil service managers received. I enjoyed the level of autonomy in my work, and so I was quite contented. But I was never permanently appointed in this post, and I applied for several civil service positions. My noble sponsor in Darmstadt, Geheimrat (Privy Councillor) Fey’s wife, repeatedly offered her help should I choose to come to Darmstadt, where her husband was a provincial director who wouldn’t have denied me patronage.

But if I was reluctant to come to Lübeck in first place, I was now reluctant to leave the city. The next best option was to apply for a permanent post at Lauerhof. But I had misgivings about that. For one, the potential for promotion was too limited, at a ratio of about 40:3. For an ambitious person there was little temptation to apply for such a post. And then it was clear that, over a longer period of time, service behind prison walls is hard. I feared I might become like so many old prison officials, who started out with warmth, then became tepid, and ended up icy. Love for humanity is a special thing, and subject to special rules.

Alas, none of my many applications for posts in the civil service were successful. At that time our prisoners of war came back from captivity and all branches in the civil service had to give them preferential treatment, and rightly so. Whenever I thought I might have succeeded somewhere my hopes would be crushed in the last moment. Then I found out by chance that a branch of the security police was to be established in Lübeck, as had happened in Berlin, Hamburg and other cities. Apparently they did not want to recruit natives of Lübeck, or just a few. For that purpose they had advertised everywhere among old soldiers, except in Lübeck. Still, I got to hear about the job opportunity, and on 16 October 1919, a Monday, I applied for employment with the command of the "green police". To my joy I was employed. So I could stay in Lübeck with the realistic hope of earning a position for life. On 20 October I handed all Lauerhof affairs to my colleague Hinrichsen and next day made my entrance into the new formation.