

THE HOUNDS of WAR

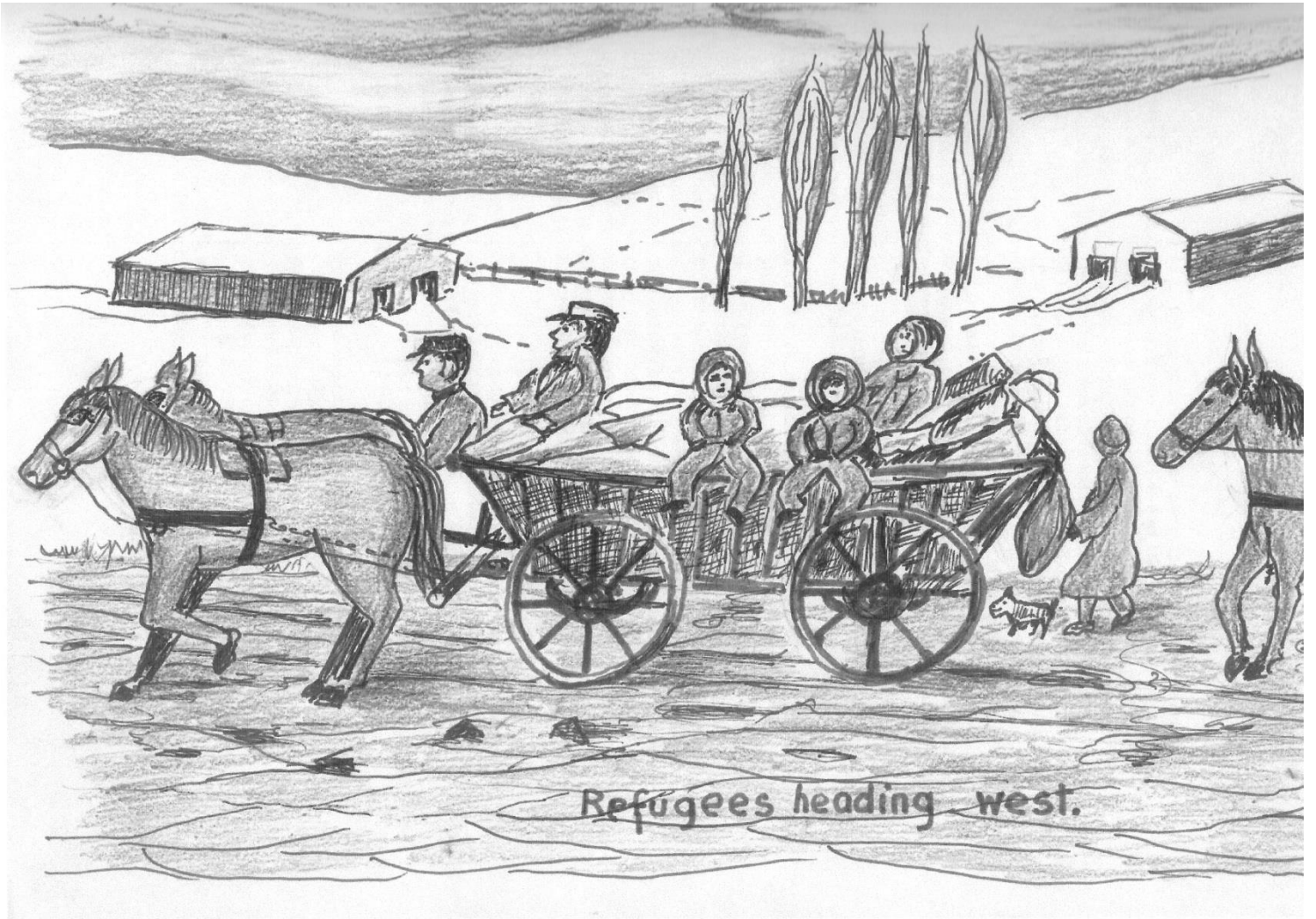
An Old Russian Saying: "One is born once and one must die once.
It is the Will of God. We are in God's hands".

It was bound to happen and one day at noon it did without any warning – order turned to disorder. Fear gripped people's hearts and minds, some of whom were to be liberated but some incarcerated and shot. That morning there had been sounds of distant gunfire, but no air raids or long range artillery fire. Simply at noon there was a rumble on the cobbled street outside and looking out of the window there was a tank. It had been driven into a narrow cul-de-sac and it was trying to reverse its way out. Some of the crew jumped down and were directing the manoeuvre and then with high revs it was gone. Everyone agreed it had been a Russian tank.

That night we moved our abode into a large building that had cellars. Here were gathered several other displaced persons, young women and old, transfixed with the possible onslaught of the morrow. I talked with a Polish couple, a mother and daughter, who spoke beautiful English and had been sent here to work. We seemed to gather strength from each other as we talked and bedded down as best we could for a fitful night's sleep.

Daylight brought the rumbling sounds of more tanks and occasionally we could hear sporadic gunfire. Suddenly the door was pushed open and there before us were shouting Russian soldiers with guns at the ready. They were more interested in the male occupants. The foreign words snarled out as the questioning began. They eyed me with suspicion for I was wearing clothing that was greyish in colour and not the khaki that they would expect. The young Polish girl stepped forward and spoke to them in Russian. "I am Polish. This is a British airman who has escaped from the march." The leader glared for a while seemed satisfied with the information and we breathed again as he trooped out with his patrol. Thus the angels were on my side once more and today's had the form of a lovely, soft spoken foreign girl, for the alternative would have been to be shot first and ask questions afterwards which was the fate of many Germans especially the SS.

Treptow was now in a state of great civic disorder with looting on every street. To the multitude of downtrodden and displaced persons this was manna from heaven after years of terrible deprivation. Crowds gathered round the tank crews whose wants were quite specific – changes of underclothing, dungarees and especially wristwatches. Their own types were pocket watches looking like small alarm clocks. Now they had these wonderful miniatures it was their delight to remove their tunic-like shirts and display arms covered from wrist to shoulder with the best wristlet watches. Drink was freely available and many merry frauleins flaunted their charms before the young soldiers simply to be pushed away by them and treated as if they had a contagious disease – fraternisation was not in these well-educated soldiers' rulebook. In any case most of the tanks were soon on the move again heading for the port of Stettin on the Baltic coast, hoping to cut off this great area of East Prussia between Stettin and Danzig.



Refugees heading west.

It appeared to be part of the Russian army's tactics for the tanks to operate many miles forward of their infantry for it wasn't until two days later that some advanced units began to arrive. I was struck by their differing ethnic backgrounds – some white, others dark and some with Mongolian features. They wore quilted coats and trousers, a cloth peaked cap and their only equipment was a gun and a cloth bag. Their advent and imposed curfew brought the looting to a halt and established order in this, one of the first towns they had captured from which the civilian population had not been evacuated. By order of the Russian officer in charge, ex-prisoners like myself were told to get ourselves out of the town quickly and move out into the country areas of the eastern suburbs. We knew that the whip was going to be cracked, certain individuals were to be rounded up from suggestions by the displaced persons. Rape and pillage did occur for we were in the midst of total warfare where no Geneva Convention applied to these rules of war.

I billeted myself on a German couple, peasants who farmed a smallholding. The fact that I was British gave them a sense of security which, as it happened, proved to be valid as witness the following incident.

One day the door of the cottage burst open and in came a trio of young Russian soldiers with Tommy guns at the ready. They were high on drink and glared at the occupants and contents. Their eyes fastened on the couple's teenage daughter. "Nemnitz?" they shouted. Thinking that they were asking the girl's name I replied, "Nein. Nix Nemnitz" the question being repeated and answered. They muttered to each other and seemed satisfied and when the farmer offered a ham their minds were distracted from one flesh to the other and they barged their way outside. The family was overjoyed, gave their thanks, shook my hand and patted me affectionately. Such are the rewards of ignorance for it was later that I discovered that they were asking if the girl was German for they knew they were for the high jump if they molested a non-German person. So for the next two days I was treated like a lord and feasted on gammon steaks, chicken and eggs!

Word now came through from the Russian authorities in the town that people who wished to move east to Warsaw would have to make their own way there without any help from them in the way of transport – no escorts, no passes – just get up and go. So it was farewell to Treptow and my comfortable lodging. It may be the long way round to get to Blighty's shores but on your way boy, the best of British luck and after all you are in the middle of a war zone.

The antics of the Frenchmen I had met in the town and with whom Rene and Ali had thrown in their lot were bizarre in the extreme. Somehow they had acquired horse draw wagons, loaded them up with loot and even had their girl friends as part of the baggage. For my part, three British soldiers had turned up and together we set about providing ourselves with faster transport than the lumbering wagons, each of us choosing a trusty horse from the many available. We were not exactly the Household Cavalry but even riding bareback we set off at a steady gait into the unknown forests and fields of East Prussia. That evening and on several subsequent ones we came to a deserted farm

steading. Cattle were bellowing in their sheds. We assumed the oncoming Russians would discover them and use them as a ready source of meat, it being part of their rapid advance strategy to live off the land as they advanced and not wait for supplies being brought forward from depots.

We felt a sense of guilt and trespass on entering the well-appointed and beautifully ordered farmhouse. In the kitchen larder we found food in plenty to choose from and that night had a right royal feast using for the first time in years a tablecloth, china tableware and decanters of selected wine. That night we slept in wonderful feather beds and in the morning had a sumptuous breakfast – sad to relate we didn't do the washing up.

Late one afternoon we encountered some fierce looking Mongolian soldiers making their way up to the front riding on small shaggy ponies. Their sign language was as plain as day in that we were to dismount from our much superior horses and they having guns and being many, we had little option but to fall in with their wishes. They thought it great fun, but for us it was now Shanks' pony and after all, sore feet would be a change from sore backsides.

We were now entering one of the great pine forests that covered so much of these northern plains where, apart from the trees creating an ominous atmosphere, we were still part of a fluid front line – at one time we would see a patrol of German soldiers and then a Russian one. They made no attempt to contact us nor we them and were only too glad to see them disappear into the depths of the wood.

In the gloom one evening we were astonished to hear the sound of music coming from a small clearing in the wood. Here was a group of Russian soldiers dancing and singing to the music of accordions. In their midst was a log fire and above it a young animal was being roasted on a spit. We ambled by like Bisto Kids sniffing the delicious aroma but no heed was taken of a small group of scruffy individuals passing by. However, we again spent that night in a small deserted cottage that possessed a large stove and that for us was heaven indeed.

We had now acquired cycles and progress was more rapid. One day we came across the most devastating scene I have ever witnessed. It was the aftermath of a battle where a force of German soldiers had tried to stem the advance of a Russian armoured column. Death was all around. The defenders had felled large trees across the road to act as a shield and barrier. Their torn, severed and mutilated bodies lay exposed in stiff frozen postures. Dead and bloated horses lay to their rear amid guns, wagons and machines. The brutality of such land warfare was illuminating and distressing to one who had always flown above such devastation. Here Russian soldiers moved about, burying their dead comrades and erecting red wooden monoliths above their graves. A red star was fastened to the point and some had photographs of the deceased pinned to them. As we passed quietly by we wondered what would be done for the German corpses among whom the gold diggers had already reaped their grizzly harvest of gold fillings from gaping mouths and rings from torn fingers.

Progress was easier now as we ventured along made up roads. At one point we came upon a railway siding crowded with refugees wishing to return to their homelands in the east. After many hours of waiting a train of wagons rolled in. People, young and very old, clutching their baggage, scrambled or were lifted into the box cars. Being young and not burdened we managed to board, but the crush behind us was fearful as more and more crowded in and so to survive the pressure and breathe we had to fight our way out again. Down on the track we retrieved our cycles and trundled on our way once more.

Eventually we met up with some army lorries heading back from the front. The driver of one signalled that we might have a lift, so we threw in our packs and thankfully clambered on board. At the mad speed we were travelling along such congested roads the inevitable had to happen. Our lorry, while trying to make way for oncoming vehicles, lurched into the side of one of the horse drawn wagons. The road was on top of an embankment and down it all toppled – wagon, horses, goods and people. As our lorry pulled up we jumped out and tried to give aid to the unfortunate family. Time passed as we tried to right the wagon and sort out the horses and people. Clambering back to the highway we looked for our lorry, but lorry there was none; the driver had simply driven away, after all we weren't exactly fare-paying passengers and as ex-POWs were at the bottom of the pecking order. To our dismay we realised that with the wagon had gone all we possessed in the world, in the shape of our backpacks.

I often think of the surprise and delight that would appear on the face of the lorry driver who would open them and discover at least ten pounds of Cadbury's fruit and nut chocolate, that which over the years we never ate but reserved as an emergency ration for the future. Did he keep my letters and photographs and are they today still in some Russian household? Then again I try to think less bitterly of him for perhaps he had been obliged to move on by the leader of his convoy. However, there I was sans pack, sans cycle, just one tiny part of the moving, suffering humanity but *Per Ardua ad Astra* and press on, for Warsaw must surely be getting closer.

So light in heart as well as on back, we plodded along the still icy roads until we came to a kind of army transport café which we entered without hassle or hindrance from anyone. Drivers were coming and going and it was here that we saw our first women soldiers. They were short in stature, ruddy faced and exuded formidable strength, especially with their automatics slung from the shoulder. We were puzzled by the remnants of drinks left on the table, mugs half full of white sugar covered by a colourless liquid and having a smell of benzene. Was this a way of making such a liquid palatable to some? We gleaned that Russian soldiers were allowed to get drunk but if they lapsed into a stupor on the ground, and if unable to stand erect when ordered to do so by an officer, they could suffer the ultimate punishment and be shot.