



Rimwood Tales

eBook version

Werner Rettig

XinXii Edition

Copyright Werner Rettig 2011

New Text is now **hyperlinked** for your reading enjoyment

Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: Growing up in the third Reich

[Chapter 2: The late Teens](#)

[Chapter 3: The Journey to Canada](#)

Chapter 4: Ups and Downs

Chapter 5: Vancouver Island

Chapter 6: Raising a Family

Chapter 7: Into every Life a little Rain must fall

Chapter 8: Dreams and Visualizations

The OSM story

First half of pictures Second half of pictures

Introduction

My brother and I always tried to get our Dad to write about his experiences in Russia during the Second World War. He never did and his memories died with him. This all came back to me a couple of years ago when my wife said "Why don't you put down some of the things that happened to you for our grandchildren? This is why I started writing. When I found out about the self-publishing concept it occurred to me that maybe some other grandchildren would like to read it. Since it is such an affordable service I went ahead and published my life's story. I hope you'll find it interesting.

Sincerely

Werner Rettig

Chapter 1-Growing up in the Third Reich

My dear grandchildren your parents and Oma told me many times "That I should write down some of the things that happened to me, before I get too old and forget everything." So here I am writing and I might as well start at the beginning.

The day of my arrival on this planet of ours was Sunday, March 15, 1931 and the Sun was shining, according to my Mother.

This event took place in my grandparent's home in Rimbach, im Odenwald where my parents were staying at the time. Dad told me "That my grandfather was very proud of his first grandson, and that he took me for walks around town before I was 2 years old". In 1933 we moved to Weinheim, called the "Zwei Burgen Stadt" because of our two castles, so Dad didn't have to take the train to work every day, and rented an apartment. I still have some memories of that particular place. It had partially slanted walls, since we were living on the top floor, and I received my first spanking there. Dad told me to sit still, but I would not listen and tipped the chair over. During that year my grandfather in Rimbach died, so unfortunately I never got to know him better.

Apparently he was quite a guy. He was a member of the Rimbacher Wrestling Club and won most of the matches, because of his strength and his unique brute force technique. One weekend a couple of wrestling schemers came to Rimbach and set up shop. They billed themselves as champions and announced "That for a fee anybody could take a crack at them. If somebody

won a match he would receive a big prize." My grandfather's buddies got hold of him and he was the first contestant. With his b.f. technique the promoters didn't have a chance. Opa demanded his prize money but the two partners didn't have any. The crowd got pretty angry and started smashing up the stage. The two self proclaimed champions escaped with their horse and wagon. In 1935 we moved again into another rented apartment. The people next door had a boy my age, his name was Reinhold and we became good friends. We went to Kindergarten together and to the same school till grade 5. In 1937 my brother Günter arrived, much to my surprise. I asked where this noisy baby came from, and I was told "that the stork brought him". Of course I found out later all about the birds and the bees, and you will too, no doubt long before I finish this book.

That same year we were told that "our Great Leader would drive through Weinheim". Quite a few people got all excited and assembled along the main route, my Mother and I amongst them. Sure enough there he was riding in an open Mercedes touring car, giving his now infamous salute. The lady that lived on the floor below us was there with her son in a baby carriage. She went completely off her rocker, forgot all about her baby, and pushed through the crowd to touch her beloved Führer. My Mother and I hung on to her baby carriage and ours and made sure that nothing happened to the kids. Dad didn't have much use for Adolf, he always said "Hitler means war" and he was right.

We always had a garden as long as I can remember. The first few years, when we were living in apartments, Dad rented a plot from the factory where he worked. We spent many pleasant evenings and weekends there. The property had a slight slope towards the West, ending at a fence where blackberries grew. On the Eastern border was an old air duct, built out of bricks. To me it looked like the "Great Wall of China."

One day when I was playing at the base of the wall, minding my own business, a couple of boys were fooling around on top of the duct and dropped a brick on my head. Their aim was perfect and I was bleeding like a stuck pig. My shocked parents rushed me to a nearby hospital, where I received over ten stitches. Luckily there weren't any permanent after effects, although some people might argue that point. Around that time the government started a housing program for lower income families. The houses were going to be built about two kilometers out of town, on some marginal farmland. My Dad qualified and agreed to help with digging out basements.

This would be his down payment, but to be able to do it, he had to get leave of absence from his job. He did get some unemployment insurance money, but it wasn't much and we had tough time money wise. Around noon my job was to bring lunch to Dad, which I didn't mind at all. So it came about that our house started to take shape. Once the basements were dug out and the concrete poured, the bricklayers arrived and had the houses up in record time. Dad went back to his regular job, and our Mother had again a reasonable amount of money to play around with. In the evenings and weekends, we started moving plants from our rented garden to our new one. Only fruit trees couldn't be moved, much to my dismay. I begged Dad "to move at least our very productive peach tree," but he said, "It would only kill it." So we had to start all over again.

One weekend, not too long before we moved into our new house, I just about drowned on the building site. You might think that would be hard to do, since there wasn't any open water nearby. But you never know what fate has in store for you. Some other settlers were visiting us, and to have a place for everybody to sit down, Dad made a makeshift bench by putting a 2 by 10 on some concrete blocks on one end and our dug in water barrel on the other one. Everybody sat down and the only place left for me was at the end of the plank over the water barrel. After the grownups were finished with their Pow Wow, everybody except me got up and went to the other side of the house.

All of a sudden the plank tipped up and I went backward, head first into the barrel with it. I still can see in my mind the air bubbles rising to the surface. Fortunately somebody asked, "Where is Werner?" So Dad went looking for me. As he came around the corner, he saw my feet sticking out of the barrel and he yanked me out just in time. Everyone was glad that I was still alive. So was I. The year my brother was born brought other changes too. I started grade one and later on we moved into our new house. An incident that might seem strange to people, happened early in grade one. One day I entered the classroom and cheerfully said "good morning." Right away the teacher shouted "Rettig come here" and he proceeded to give me a caning. He said "The official greeting is Heil Hitler and you better remember that." From that time on I forgot all about Good Morning, and was very careful to say what I was supposed to say.

The years before the war were a lot of fun. There were many boys of my age in the settlement, as it was called. In the winter when lakes and ponds were frozen, we played ice hockey with tin cans and homemade sticks. When there was enough snow, we went sledding on the road that goes up to our two castles. One is an old ruin named Windeck, built in 1100 and destroyed by the French 1674. The other one called Wachenburg is fairly new as far as castles go. It was started in 1907 and built with the help of university students; it is still used today for yearly student meetings. That particular road is very steep and you had to know how to bring your sled to a stop near the bottom, where there is a right angle turn. Anyone, who didn't, hit a rock wall. Every year some kids did, sometimes with fatal results.

In the summer we pretended to swim in the pond at the end of the settlement. The pond wasn't very deep and we always could put one foot down. We practiced diving from the banks and got pretty good at it. One day, we were diving in our public swimming pool, which is located on the other side of town. One could dive across the corner at the deep end, and climb out again on a short ladder, which was fastened to the side of the pool. It was a lot of fun, until I missed the ladder and found myself at the bottom of the pool. Fortunately I didn't panic and did the only thing possible, namely walk towards the shallow end and climb out. For a while I was very weak, since I had swallowed a lot of water. After that I concentrated on learning how to swim.

I believe that I saw my first giant airship in 1935, when I was 4 years old. It was called "Graf Zeppelin" was 236 meters long, and had a top speed of 128 km per hour. This fantastic airship made 590 flights, including 144 across the ocean, for a total distance of 1 695 272 km. In 1936 the air ship "Hindenburg" appeared in the sky. This one was 245 meters long, and traveled at 125 km per hour. These two airships always flew past our town, going to South and North America and back. My friends and I got very excited when we saw one gliding by, wishing we could fly

in one of them. Unfortunately the Hindenburg caught fire in 1937 and we never saw those two airships again. The Graf Zeppelin was grounded after the Hindenburg disaster. However a sister ship to the Hindenburg was launched, but could not carry any paying passengers. This ship was called "Graf Zeppelin II" and we saw it a few times.

On our way to school sometime in 1938, Willy, another boy from the settlement and I heard a loud explosion. When we got closer to town we also saw smoke behind our school. Since we were a bit early we went to investigate. We found that a synagogue had been blown up. Neither of us understood what was going on and we became even more confused when we entered the main shopping street. There we saw a bunch of mad men in brown shirts destroying Jewish store windows with sledgehammers. This became later known as the "Crystal Night."

Such things happen when people become intolerant, narrow-minded, develop tunnel vision and behave in general like a bunch of stupid fools. Nothing constructive can come from such behavior. One hopes that the human race someday evolves to a point where such things are impossible, although, at the moment that time seems a long way off. The following year war broke out, and things were never the same again. At first we didn't notice too much difference at home, except that some grownups left to join the armed forces. Eventually Dad had to join up too. When he left he "told me to help and look after my Mother". We had a large garden, chickens and rabbits, so I had my work cut out. My brother wasn't much help since he was six years younger. In school we had to take time out to collect herbs in the fields and forests for medicine. These we spread out in the attic for drying.

When I was ten years old I had to join the "Jung Volk" just like every other kid on the block. We learned how to march, played soldiers and other silly stuff like that. Willy and I were never allowed to carry the flag, since both of our fathers were judged politically unreliable. Usually Eugen, whose father was a party member, carried it with Willie and I beside him. In school we had trouble too, with teachers who were party members. It seems that anybody not connected with the party was a secondary citizen. Of course at the time we didn't realize what was happening and believed that we weren't working hard enough. The sons and daughters of party members always had the best marks. Luckily we had other teachers too and in their classes my marks were a lot better.

In 1941 the first bombs fell in our neighborhood. The whole town came down to collect souvenirs in the form of bomb splinters. This particular hobby came soon to an end when the real bombing began. At first it was the English at night, and later on the Americans during the day too. After that there wasn't any shortage of souvenirs. That same year our great leader ordered the invasion of Russia, even though he had signed a non-aggression pact with Stalin. In the beginning things went pretty well, but some planner forgot or didn't know that the Russian winters are pretty cold. The soldiers tried to do their best in summer clothes, but the Russians came now into their element. They knew how to dress for the winter. School children were organized to collect winter clothes for the soldiers. We went from house to house and brought the clothes back to school, to be shipped to the front. Some way to fight a war.

Not too far from the west-end of our settlement was a brick factory. Paul and Lothar lived there with their families. We went to school together and I ended up spending quite a bit of my free

time in and around the Ziegelhütte as the place was called. There was an unlimited supply of clay and we made all kinds of containers for our chickens and rabbits. These we put in with the bricks, before the ovens were sealed, and retrieved them when the workers opened them again. As the war went on a POW camp was built in town and it was soon filled with French soldiers. My friend Paul had the job to escort a group of Frenchmen from the camp to the Ziegelhütte and back again. He did this every morning and evening, except on Sundays. These guys seemed pretty happy with their lot. The work wasn't very hard, and for them the war was over. In time they even built cages and raised rabbits. Paul told me, "that on the way to work, they stole whatever was suitable from farmers' fields to feed them."

The Frenchmen became even more willing to go to work in the morning, after a group of young Russian women arrived to work in the brick factory. These girls were working on the floor above the ovens and there were always some that were empty, waiting to be filled again. That floor had fairly large holes in it and boys being boys, it was natural that we were soon conducting a little bit of cross-culture research. I believe we wanted to see what color their underwear was, but we never saw any. In any event it must have saved a lot of time washing clothes. Eventually they realized what we were doing and started chasing us. Luckily we were good runners and they never managed to catch us.

In the back of the factory the fresh bricks were dried before firing. There were rows and rows of shelves separated by aisles. Once in a while we saw a Frenchman and a girl sneaking into that area. Naturally we were wondering what went on and started doing a little research in that corner of the Ziegelhütte. What we discovered was very interesting and aroused our artistic streak.

Basically what happened between the shelves is also known as the Mating Game. By that time we had grown tired of making containers and decided to make some sculptures. It wasn't too hard to do, since we were very fortunate to have live models. They of course didn't have a clue that we were watching, since we could be pretty sneaky too.

So it came about, that we had a wonderful representation of the previously mentioned game. We decided to have an exhibition, and chose a bridge railing in front of the factory. Sunday was the best day, since there wasn't too much traffic on the road. After we had the two lovebirds set up, we spotted a couple approaching on a bicycle. They will be our first art critics" said Paul, as we went into hiding under the bridge. As it turned out, they were also our last ones. The woman flew into a rage and smashed our creation to bits and pieces with her umbrella. From our point of view, it could be said that our first show was a smashing success.

The bombing got worse as time went on and the wail of air-raid sirens was hard on the nervous system. Our school's basement was the official air raid shelter. We spent more time in it than I like to remember, and it is a wonder that we learned anything at all. At night one could not sleep very much with all that racket going on. Part of my prayer at night was: "Dear God, please end this war soon so we can sleep again". A neighbor's basement was the designated air raid shelter for our family, amongst others. My brother was always shaking like a leaf, just like the neighbor's dog, which was usually hiding under a bench. Fortunately our town didn't suffer

too much from the bombing; just the railway station got attacked regularly. We lived about two kilometers from it, far enough to escape damage.

It was a different picture in the big cities; they were systematically reduced to rubble. Mannheim was 15 km from us and at night one could see how the system worked. Two so-called spotter planes would mark a section of the city that was scheduled for attention that night. They dropped four slow burning, descending markers, one at each corner. We called them Christmas trees since they looked rather colorful. The bomber formation, usually a few hundred of them, would follow.

When they were over the designated area, the bombs were released. It doesn't take too much effort to visualize what was left below. It is said that there is a little bit of good in everything. The total destruction of Germany's Cities, allowed the construction of wider streets after the war. England in contrast was a bit shortchanged in that department and is to this day stuck with a lot of narrow roads.

Sometime during the war, I forgot which year it was, parents in the cities were urged to send their school age children to relatives in the country. My mother sent me to Bersrod in Oberhessen, the village she was born in. I moved in with my grandparents, and went to school in the village. The school had only two rooms and two teachers taught all the grades. Just the same I learned a lot, since there weren't any air raids, a welcome change. My grandfather made his living partly by farming and by making furniture for people. He was a carpenter by trade and had a wonderful workshop, with all kinds of hand tools lining the walls.

My grandmother looked after the household, the two vegetable gardens and the animals. There were two cows, six sheep, always a pig or two, a flock of geese and chickens. In the morning, before going to school, I helped Oma milk the cows. This was simple enough; all I had to do was to hold a cow's tail. Those two cows provided milk, manure for fertilizer and powered Opa's wagon, plow and harrow. It wasn't a very efficient way of farming, since all the fields were a long way from the village and also scattered all over the countryside. But somehow they got by; life wasn't as hectic as it is now. It was fun sitting beside Opa on his trips out into the countryside. The two cows were slowly pulling the wagon, without too much noise and no exhaust. It took a long time to get to the place of work, but I didn't mind at all.

One of the jobs I really liked was collecting branches in the forest. These were bundled and stored until Oma baked bread. There was a big communal oven in the center of the village, the size of a small cabin. The oven itself used up half the room; the other half was a work area with benches and tables. When our allocated time came, we took the branches and the bread to be baked to the place. A fire was started right inside the oven and kept stoked up till it was hot enough. Then the baking chamber was cleaned out and the bread put in. The freshly baked sourdough bread was a real treat, as was the onion pie Oma made with the same dough, every time she baked.

After a few relaxing months, it was time to go back to Weinheim and the wail of air raid sirens. My buddies and I were now judged old enough to do some work on the home front. We had to go to Mannheim and help clear the streets of rubble, just enough for traffic to go through again. The bombing had tapered off a bit in that city, for the very simple reason that there wasn't

much left to bomb. It was a different story in Ludwigshaven, just across the Rhine. It was still being bombed heavily, partly because it had a large oil refinery, which had been destroyed several times already. However, every time an air raid stopped, the rebuilding started and the refinery was soon back in business. One wonders what could be achieved if we used Love and Harmony as guidelines, instead of Hate and discord. During one of those work assignments, I believe it was toward the end of 1944, we were told "to proceed to the Mannheimer Schloß to act as cheerleaders for the minister of labor," who was to give a speech that day.

The Schloß was an old castle, which no doubt had seen better days. The roof was gone, but a few walls were still standing. There was a wide staircase leading to a very large room with a stage. We were told "To line both walls of the staircase and shout Sieg Heil" when the time came. This we did and the procession of party big shots proceeded to the stage. A rousing speech followed, "There was absolutely nothing to worry about and the Wunder Waffen wonder weapons would soon turn things around." Naturally some of us had doubts about that prediction, especially after we went back out into the rubble and looked at all the devastation. Another speech, by our propaganda minister Goebbels, just after D-Day came to mind. He said at the time: "Now we have them where we want them!" This might have been partly true, but obviously they didn't know what to do with them.

Our life wasn't all doom and gloom, we had some time to play too and even act stupid, now and then. I will now relate one of those acts, and if there had been a prize for stupidity, it certainly would have been Number One for us. Paul and I played sometimes with Karl, who was two years older and always, bossed us around. One day we were out in the meadows behind the settlement, when we spotted something that didn't seem to belong there. After further investigation it turned out to be an unexploded phosphorus bomb. The sensible thing to do would have been to report our find to somebody responsible for bomb disposal. But instead Karl, the Boss as we called him, told us "To go and get four big sticks and put them in the ground cross wise and put the bomb on it." What seems even more unbelievable, is that we gathered up more wood, made a big fire under the thing and danced around it singing "Heis brennt die Aquator Sonne auf die öde Steppe nieder." (Hot burns the equator sun - - -) Paul and I got a little bit worried as the fire got hotter, so we left and took cover in a nearby ditch. Once in a while we looked over the side and saw the boss still dancing around the bomb. Our guardian angels must have worked overtime that day because we are still alive and can talk about it.

This whole episode shows that during wartime the senses get blunted, one simply doesn't give a fuddle duddle any more. One of our classmates lived right across the street from the railroad station. Instead of going into a shelter during an air raid, he would sit on a garden wall and watch the show. Unfortunately one day a bomb splinter sealed his fate by severing one of his legs, and he bled to death.

Since we were 2 km from the station, we could safely watch and see the bombs come down. We often wondered how the anti-aircraft guns could possibly miss, with all the airplanes in the sky. Once in a while they would shoot one down, at one time right above our house. The crew jumped out and provided a spectacular sight, well over ten parachutes right above us. The lady

next door thought paratroopers were coming and shouted: "Frau Rettig this is the end." Of course it wasn't, it came a few months later.

Dad, still in Russia, was getting worried about his tools and sent instructions to hide them. He was afraid that enemy soldiers would steal his beloved tools. We dug a very big hole in the garden, oiled and wrapped the tools in old sacks and stacked them in the hole. Some heavy planks covered with soil completed the hideout. For a while I thought the tools were safe enough, but after another letter from Dad I started to worry again. In the end we dug a hole in our basement and transferred everything into it. After I had put planks over the hole, we heaped our winter supply of coal on top of the hiding place. Convinced that nobody could possibly find Dad's precious tools, I felt free to worry about something new.

As the invading armies came closer, we had to put up with fighter-planes too. Those guys attacked anything that moved. Cars, trucks and farmers in the fields, nobody was safe. Quite often they would fire their guns right above our house and the empty shells would rain down on us. At one time, when Dad was home for a week, just as we were having lunch, one of those things hit our roof with a loud bang. When we went to investigate, we found that one of our heavy ceramic shingles had been split in half. After that, Gnter and I took cover whenever we saw one of those planes approaching our airspace. Another time a horse was shot, the farmer saved himself by jumping off the wagon. The poor beast stood there most of the day on three legs, until finally somebody was found to dispatch it to greener pastures. Towards the end of the war our Air Force didn't have too many planes left, so it is hard to believe that our anti-aircraft batteries in Mannheim shot one of our remaining fighter-planes down. But this is exactly what they did.

The pilot made a belly-landing in the fields next to our settlement, killing two horses and a rabbit in the process. My friends and I rushed over to see if we could help, but the guy was all right. He was just bloody mad at the trigger-happy gunners in Mannheim, and could hardly wait to get back there to give them a real dressing down.

After Luxembourg was overrun, the Americans set up a radio station there. It was called Radio Luxembourg, and along with Big Band music they broadcast propaganda and advice for German soldiers. The one most often used was "the magic words for the German soldiers are I surrender." It was by listening to this station that I learned my first few words of English. Of course we were not supposed to listen to enemy stations, the penalty if caught was the death-sentence. My room was facing the street, so I always listened standing beside the window, watching for enforcers.

In early 1945 the Americans crossed the Rhine and were just a few kilometers away. Naturally we all wondered if and how we would survive the next few days, especially after they started shelling our town. After three days of shelling we ran out of bread in our house. Willy's family had the same problem. The two of us decided to go into town and try to get some, shelling or no shelling. The shells were coming in about a minute apart; we went flat on our bellies whenever we heard one coming. Slowly we made our way into town, past burning buildings and finally found a baker who sold us some bread.

Since we were in town already we thought a bit of meat would come in handy too. Just as we were talking to a butcher, a shell exploded nearby and a big splinter hit a steel gate across the street with a loud bang. Willie rushed over to pick it up, but dropped it very quickly since it was still red hot. The butcher refused to sell us any meat, so we slowly made our way back to our own neighborhood; at least we had our bread.

At the West End of our settlement, German soldiers dug in, trying to hold the Americans back. Most people didn't like the idea of being defended at that stage. They told the soldiers so, but they had their orders and wouldn't leave. The next day the Americans arrived, advancing slowly through the fields. Our soldiers started shooting, halting the advance for a little while, just long enough for their tanks to catch up. The tanks opened fire and demolished the first three houses. Word went around from house to house to quickly hang out some white bed-sheets, or the whole settlement could be destroyed. This made a lot of sense to me and I raced upstairs with a couple of sheets, and hung them out of the windows.

Dad told me after the war that I could have been shot, because a party member was threatening to shoot anybody he saw hanging out white sheets. With people like that in the neighborhood one doesn't need any enemies. In the meantime my Mother and brother were taking shelter in our basement, since there was a lot of shooting going on. Eventually, some of the German soldiers retreated, others surrendered and I realized it would only be minutes before the Americans arrived. Our house-door-key was fairly large, and I figured the best thing would be to put one into the door lock from the outside; otherwise the door was going to be smashed in.

Taking position behind the door I waited, wondering what was going to happen. It didn't take long and the door opened, the end of a rifle came into sight and behind it an American. This gave me a chance to practice the few English words I had learned. When the soldier saw me, I put my arms up and said "I surrender." My Mother and brother came up from the basement and said "I surrenda," obviously they hadn't studied as much English as I had. Next door soldiers were trying to smash the door in; I rushed over and gave them the key, which Frau Löchner had given to me when she left.

When I went back to our house, I found a group of soldiers tearing everything apart. They confronted me with Dad's fire department uniform and his brass helmet. I managed to explain to them what it was for, and also where the shell-casings came from, which I had collected. Just then, there was a commotion going on in our yard and everybody rushed out of the house. An American soldier had been shot in the leg; he was just a young guy and seemed quite shaken up. His buddies asked Mother to dress his wound and he calmed down a bit afterwards.

After they had left I went out into our garden to see what was going on. Once in a while I saw a settler walking by with his hands up in the air; it all looked very comical to me. Then a group of soldiers approached signaling to come over to them. When I got there they told me "to put my hands up and walk towards the end of the settlement." On the way there I passed women looking out of the windows; one said "Werner why don't you put your hands down?" As soon as I did that, a soldier rushed over and hit me in the back with his rifle-butt. This definitely convinced me to keep my hands up till I reached the other POWs.

These were all older men who had managed to stay home, the two youngest were Karl and I. Two soldiers guarded us for about an hour, then told us "to stay right there" and left. The older men took these orders seriously, however Karl and I set out to explore the abandoned German positions. Apparently the German soldiers had just started breakfast when the Americans attacked, since we found partly opened tin cans and loaves of bread. We were very hungry and ate what we could, the rest we hid so we could pick it up later. We went back to where we were supposed to be and found that nobody had left.

In the meantime my Mother feared that I was starving to death and sent a neighborhood girl with a big lunch, so it could be said that I was very well fed that morning. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to us and Karl and I decided to go home. So did the rest of the group, after another hour or so. The fighting went on for sometime in the main part of the town that afternoon, but nobody bothered us in our area. Some of the old-timers took advantage of this, and started to dismantle the barracks next to the searchlight that had been installed in the fields. Within an hour or two, the barracks were gone, the lumber and roofing stashed away out of sight.

When Karl and I realized what was going on, we went over there too, but we were too late for building supplies. We partly dismantled the searchlight, there were some nice little motors in it and I also took the protective metal-cover from it home. The next day the local mouth to mouth information network reported "that there were boxcars full of noodles and other goodies at the railway station." Mother thought it might be a good idea to do a little shopping, since noodles would surely come in handy. So the two of us set out on our scrounging-trip with high hopes. When we came into town, we had to walk through a street that was lined on both sides with American soldiers. What they were doing there I don't know, but they started to whistle as soon as they saw my Mother. She turned bright red and took my hand for protection; I in turn tried to look as mean as possible. We were both glad when we were past that bunch of admirers {my Mother was a very good-looking woman} and finally reached the railway-station.

Again we were too late, farmers with wagons and of course the people living nearby, had carried everything off; the boxcars were totally, absolutely empty. We did see some boxes of noodles in the yard, like a small retaining wall and a woman with both arms over them shouting: "they are mine, they are mine." Since there was nothing left at this location, we decided to go home, however we choose another route, in order to miss the Yanks.

During the next few days the Americans settled in. The war of course wasn't over yet and would go on for some time. In the more expensive neighborhoods, the owners were kicked out to make room for officers and staff. The rest of the soldiers set up shop on the meadows behind our settlement. They erected large tents and did whatever soldiers do. One large tent, which was set up next to a ditch, attracted our attention, since sacks of stale bread were sometimes thrown out. This came in handy since food was by now hard to come by. The food for the soldiers was prepared in this tent and the waste was thrown into the ditch.

None of us was in the pig raising business, therefore the slops left us cold, but the coffee grounds were a different matter. Luckily they were dumped away from the other kitchen waste, and we figured that they would still make good coffee. The well fed Americans were greatly

amused when they saw us filling tin cans from the top of the heap. Actually, the coffee tasted pretty good, since we were used to a coffee-substitute made from roasted barley, I believe. This temporary camp didn't last long, the soldiers moved into the old German army-barracks in Käfertal, near Mannheim.

Next to the brick factory, where clay had been excavated, where giant holes. They were now turned into a garbage dump by the American army. As often as possible I went there to see what was available. Sometimes there was quite a lot, especially when the old army barracks were cleaned out. Amongst my loot were Teletype machines, field-telephones, a radio transmitter and receiver, and several giant-transmitting tubes. Our small hand-pulled wagon was really handy for transporting the stuff home. Of course there was quite a bit of competition between the various scroungers. A couple of older men were real bullies and took whatever they liked. Some of the guys actually started unloading the trucks before they entered the road to the dump. It was real teamwork, half of them would climb onto the truck and start throwing stuff down, the others would put it away.

However, one day they picked the wrong truck; the driver had no intention to drive into the dump, and he and his buddies thought they were being hijacked. They slammed on the brakes and jumped out with their rifles ready. Luckily they didn't fire a shot, but this episode effectively ended the truck jumping business. Then somebody decided that the dump needed an overseer. An old Nazi was chosen and installed in a small trailer. Right away he tried bossing everybody around, which didn't go over too well with the older boys and they decided to teach him a lesson, by blowing up his trailer. When I arrived the next day, only the frame of the thing was left, apparently the explosions started a fire, which consumed everything except the metal. The overseer soon left and things went back to normal. Some of the garbage had been set on fire, but that didn't stop the Americans from dumping live ammunition on top of it. The predictable result of this foolishness was the ever-present spectacle of exploding shells. One day a woman was digging near the burning area when, suddenly, there was a loud explosion and a piercing scream. When we realized that she had a bullet in her leg, we flagged down a jeep, whose occupants were kind enough to take her to the hospital. Sometimes we could get hold of shells before they ended up on the fire, which gave us a supply of powder. On one occasion, when we were taking bullets off shells and dumping the powder into a pail, one of the old bullies came over to see if he could steal something from us. Just as he looked into the pail somebody threw a lighted match into it, and in a flash, the old scrounger was transformed from white to black. For some reason he didn't bother us much after that.

I too had a couple of accidents during my scrounging days in the dump. One day a truck had backed up for unloading and I went over to investigate. Just as I walked behind it somebody pulled the pin on the tailgate and an old stove, which had been leaning against it, fell right on top of me. One leg made a big hole in my right thigh. My brother and some of his friends put me into our little wagon and hauled me to a doctor. Another time, when I thought that I was standing on solid ground; my right foot went through a thin spot into a burning mass below. When I pulled it back out, my boot was filled with red, hot embers. That time I was at home for seven weeks with third degree burns. We had another source of powder, which we called the mother lode. Across the meadows to the north of us was a secondary road, mostly used by

farmers. Along that road the German army had stockpiled boxes and boxes of ammunition for field guns. Some of the boys got pretty good at taking the shells off the cartridges by hitting the shells on a big rock. This looked a little dangerous to me and I always kept in the background, although if a shell had exploded, it would have been Good by Charley for me too.

All this powder opened up a whole new field for experiments, especially in solid-fuel rocket propulsion. We used gas cans from the American army, admittedly not the best shape for rockets, but they were readily available. The powder from those big shells came in all shapes and sizes, some of it in cute linen bags. After we filled a can with powder and put it bottom up on two flat rocks, the test rocket was just about ready for lift-off. The final step was to insert a long thin stick of powder, light it and run to a nearby ditch. The flight path wasn't perfect of course, but the cans reached considerable heights.

We had a lot of fun with our rockets, till one day some Americans spotted us from a nearby road. They bounced over an old trail in their jeep, jumped out and started chasing us. We were all good runners and escaped, except for one lead footed participant. To add insult to injury, they now had the names of the rest of us and we decided to halt the experiments for a while. Two of our buddies had the strange idea to blow up a gardener's tomato plants. Late one evening they put powder under every plant, added electrical detonators, wired them all together and terminated the main wires behind a fence. Next morning when the gardener came out, they gave the poor guy a real shock by blasting his plants into the neighbor's garden. Those two wise guys had a bit of a shock too, when they got caught and had to spend some time in jail.

At the end of our street, a company of Americans had taken over some houses and practiced their marching skills in our neighborhood. One day when they came to our house, the sergeant shouted "company right" and those blasted Yanks marched right through our Liguster hedge, around our best peach tree and filled their pockets with peaches. One of Mother's sisters, Aunt Lieschen, who was staying with us at the time, shouted and screamed at them, but they just laughed at her. Such is life in an occupied land.

On May first, 1945 I started my apprenticeship as an industrial electrician at the factory Carl Freudenberg, the largest employer in Weinheim. We started out with about two hundred people, about double the number needed. Every month we had to pass a practical as well as a written test, anyone who failed was out. They had the option to work in the factory as laborers, or quit. The first year we did mostly metalwork and our practical tests required precision filing. The written tests were about metal properties, tool angles etc.

The war was still going on in some parts of the country when I started my training. It ended on May 7 when Germany surrendered. Every morning on the way to work I had to pass American signs announcing anybody caught with transmitting equipment shall be HANGED. This began to work on me after a while, I had survived a war and a hanging was not included in my plans. To remove any evidence, I smashed up the big transmitting tubes, dismantled the transmitter and receiver, and hid the parts under the hay in our loft. After that I could sleep again.

In July Dad finally came home again after his release from a POW camp. His outfit had managed to escape the Russians and had surrendered to the English Army. They were not

given much food and he looked pretty skinny when he showed up. Apparently they still had some flour left when they became prisoners, so Dad and some of his buddies built an oven to bake bread. It was a primitive affair, built with rocks into the side of a bank, but it worked very well, according to Dad. They also made soup from any edible weeds they could find, not too filling, but they survived.

Two of my uncles, officers in the German army did not. Some came back after spending years in Russian POW camps, like my godfather, and were unwell for the rest of their lives. We never found out exactly what happened to my two uncles, both perished on the Russian Front. Such is the price of war; millions of people dead, countries reduced to rubble, just to satisfy the egos of a few madmen.

Food was rationed after the Americans arrived and many times I went to bed hungry. Farmers found themselves very popular, since people from the cities were willing to trade anything for food. Our money was practically worthless, you could use it to buy the rationed stuff, but nobody else wanted it. Cigarettes became the new medium of exchange; at work I could get a sandwich from farm boys for one cigarette. Shortly after Dad's return we decided to go to Bersrod, the village my grandparents lived in, to try trading some black current concentrate for potatoes. We filled a suitcase with bottles of "Mother's Special," another one with provisions and set off. The trains were only running as far as Frankfurt, because the bridge over the river Main hadn't been rebuilt, but it was still possible to walk over it. We continued our journey on foot to a railway-station on the other side of the river, where we boarded a train to Gießen. Unfortunately there weren't any trains going to our destination, and we had to walk the rest of the way.

On the road just outside Gießen a truckload of American soldiers stopped when they saw us; the driver jumped out and told us "to open the suitcases." When he saw all those bottles he probably thought he had hit the jackpot, since he opened a bottle and took a big sip out of it. Obviously he had expected something different, since he spat everything out and told us "To keep the poison." Nobody bothered us for the rest of the trip, but our suitcases got heavier and heavier as we traveled on. Eventually we reached Bersrod, spent a few days with my grandparents, did some trading and filled our suitcases with potatoes. Then we had to carry the potatoes back to Gießen, take the train to Frankfurt, carry our load across the bridge again and board a train to Weinheim. I do believe this episode was too much for Dad, because he never went trading again. One of our neighbours found a village east of Heidelberg, where the farmers were willing to trade and he asked me if I wanted to come along. The first time I came back with 150 pounds of potatoes, traded for a pair of coveralls. On one of those trips we came to a farmer's house where food for a wedding was being prepared. There were tables loaded with pies, cakes and all kinds of goodies. The farmer saw our hungry looks and offered us "something to eat." He led us to the barn where he had just boiled a tub full of potatoes for the pigs, and told us "to eat as much as we could." We filled ourselves with potatoes and also some fermented cucumbers, which he brought us. This was one of the best meals we had during that time; when one is hungry any food is gratefully received.

Dad was happy that the Americans hadn't stolen his tools, but I completely forgot about the big hole in the garden. One day I heard shouting and swearing behind the house and went to

investigate. He had fallen through the by now rotten boards and threatened to do all kinds of things to me after he got out. Naturally I wasn't in any big hurry to get a ladder, and calmly explained to him "why that hole was there in the first place." After a while, when he seemed more reasonable, I helped Dad to get out of it.

What annoyed me a bit was that we were not allowed into the workshop; especially after all the work we did hiding the tools. He even took the keys to bed with him, but he also snored loud enough to rattle the windows. This gave me an idea and I sneaked into the bedroom with a piece of soap, when the snoring was loudest, and made an impression of the workshop key. It was then a simple matter to make a key for myself. Eventually Dad found out that I had a key too, so he added another lock to the door to keep me out. After that I built my own small shop in a corner of our chicken-house. Naturally it was locked up tight too when I wasn't there, which irritated Dad to no end, since once in a while he needed my heavy duty 3/8" electric drill.

During my first year as an apprentice the emphasis was on filing. We made all kinds of tools: hammers, screwdrivers, chisels, squares, center-punches etc. We also had a forge in our workshop where we made various items for the bricklayers. Once, I spent a whole week drilling holes into a large piece of sheet metal to make a screen, which was needed somewhere in the factory. The most difficult filing job was a square plate with a hexagon insert; it took me three weeks to finish.

When I presented it to Meister Wacker, he looked at it for quite a while, trying the hexagon piece in different positions. He said "actually it's not bad, but I still can see a little bit of light on one edge, so you better make another one." This took me again three weeks, but the second one was perfect. When the first year of our apprenticeship came to an end, enough people had been eliminated, and the required numbers of trainees were left. The trouble was that 25 of us wanted to be electricians, but only 10 were needed.

To sort this out we had to take another test, mostly math, and finally 10 of us could report to Meister Moll, the chief electrician. He assigned everyone to a journeyman and we all went off to work on different projects in the factory. This was 1946 and material was hard to come by, for instance no electrical conduit was available. We had to use water pipes, fill them with sand, and heat them in a forge so we could bend them. Electrical panels were not available either and we had to make our own out of anything suitable we could find.

We learned a lot from our journeymen, but we also had five hours of lessons a week to start out with. A journeyman who really knew his stuff gave these lessons. Later on when trade schools started up again, five more hours of lessons were added per week. For us this was more or less a rerun, since we already knew what the teacher was trying to teach us.

Eventually the time came to prepare for the final examinations; these consisted of a practical and a written test. My practical test required the installation of the electrical controls for a big chipper, conduit, wiring and hook up. For the written test we had to go to Mannheim, like everyone else from the surrounding areas. Our factory was very versatile, they started out in 1849 to make leather, and eventually made shoes, fibers, floor-coverings, sausage-casings, seals, hard-board, parts for cars to name just a few of the products.

It was very interesting to work there since we were always called from one department to another. The electric shop was in one corner of a big building which was also home base for millwrights, machinists, plumbers, black-smiths and welders. Carpenters and bricklayers had their own workshops in another area of the factory. In April of 1948 I received my trade-certificate and was now a fully trained industrial electrician.

My first paycheck as a journeyman was in the new currency since the government had introduced a currency reform. Finally our money was worth something again, although my 2000 Reichmarks in my bank accounts were exchanged for only 200 Deutsche Mark. The mortgage my parents had, was not devalued, they had to pay the full sum in Deutsche Mark. The moneylenders won again.

Chapter 2-The late Teens

After the currency reform, life became more or less normal again. On weekends there were dances everywhere and people started to have fun. The weekend after we received our first paycheck in real money, two of my friends and I decided to go to a local dance. Since we were hungry, we ordered Wiener Schnitzel and a bottle of Schnapps to go with it. Neither of us had ever tasted the stuff before, but since the older folks always talked about it, we thought we would give it a try. It was the wrong choice. After a couple of dances my knees started to buckle and I got real dizzy. Quickly I ran to the bathroom, and up came the Schnitzel and the Schnapps. Never before was I as sick as on that night. This experience was so unpleasant and painful, that to this day I won't go near anything like it.

At the time, my only way to get around other than walking was with an old bicycle, which I had constructed from parts found in the dump. My friend Peter had helped me with it. He was four years older than I, and had set up shop in a pigpen, behind the house where he lived. People believed in self-sufficiency in those days, and a large number of houses had built in pigpens. In our settlement, every house had one. We never raised any pigs, but used it for a workshop too. Now that I earned a reasonable amount of money, I decided to buy a new bicycle. With it I went all over the countryside, even gave girls a ride home sometimes. On one night, on my way home from a dance in Rimbach, a very large dog came out of a farm yard and started chasing me. After taking one look at the beast, I pushed down the right foot pedal with such force that I bent it. Luckily the road went slightly downhill and I managed to escape my would-be attacker. The next day I went to the bicycle-shop where I had bought the bike and asked "for a pedal replacement." The cheap so and so would not give me one free, he said "it was impossible to bend a pedal just by riding a bike." If that dog had chased him, he would have changed his mind.

Shortly after we became journeymen, we were assigned apprentices. There was one I remember very well. Our job was to install a very large metal-lathe in the machine shop. There were quite a few wires to be pulled in, all black. Things were still a little hard to get; otherwise we would have used different colors. Before we bundled the wires, we put number tags on each end. After we had pulled the wires into the conduit, I had to go somewhere. When I came back the super-apprentice had cut off the wire ends with the number tags; he said "the wires were too long." I

must have been very loud when I gave him a dressing down, because every machine in that very large shop came to a halt.

In 1949 I was assigned to a 12-hour night shift as maintenance electrician. The job was OK, but the hours were definitely too long. I had to look after the main factory and also a smaller one across town. It was a good thing that I had a bicycle, so it didn't take too long to get around. The same year a friend and I bought 50 Lotto tickets each and agreed to split any winnings. One of my tickets was a winner, 1800 Marks, which was quite a bit of money in those days.

We couldn't cash the check in our town and had to go to Mannheim. The clerk, an elderly man, seemed very reluctant to hand over the money. He asked, "What we were going to do with all that cash," to which I replied "just let us worry about it." Casually I grabbed the money and stuffed it into my pocket. Out in the foyer we divided it, a 100 Mark bill for Hermann, and one for me till we each had 900 Marks in our pockets. A week or two later my friend bought a brand new 250cc BMW motorcycle.

I put most of my money into my bank account and gave some of it to my parents. We had a lot of fun with that machine, exploring the southern part of Germany. After a few months Hermann decided to buy something bigger, a "Horex" 350 cc. He said "I could have the BMW for 1200 Marks," which was a good buy, 600 Marks cheaper than what he had paid for it. Dad agreed too, so finally I had my own motorized wheels.

At work some complications developed; there was also a millwright on night shift, who was a real screwball and always caused trouble. Ober-Meister Böbel had a Moped to get around the factory, and parked it outside his office at night. Screwball just couldn't help himself and would ride that thing till the tank was empty; of course Böbel thought somebody was stealing his gasoline. He asked me about it, and I told him truthfully "that I had never seen anybody stealing gas." But since there were only two of us, I was always under suspicion.

Another time while I was on shift, there was a tremendous crash in the hall adjacent to our shop area. It turned out that another fool had been joy-riding a big electric forklift, and had driven it into the big door, which opened into the machine shop. This door went half way up to the ceiling; at least it did before, but now it had smashed onto a big metal lathe and had knocked over some locked tool chests. A big panic ensued, and I agreed to help with getting the door back into position and to weld the broken hinges. The lathe was a sorry sight, handles bent and some parts broken. Well, the next day there was quite an uproar. The Obermeister called me in and asked "about my involvement," which was only to get the shop back in order.

He wanted to know "about my welding and how long it took." Since I was not authorized to weld, he deducted two hours from my paycheck. I do believe that because of all this, I was included in the so-called Handwerker-Abgabe [trades-men reduction]. By the end of 1949 things had been built up to the extents that close to 50% of the tradesmen were not needed any more.

So all of a sudden I found myself working as a laborer. First I worked in the leather department, where I had to color hides. The foreman wasn't too pleased with my performance, since my hides turned out more like landscapes than the even color they were supposed to be. When

there was an opening in a sister factory, which was making sausage casings, I agreed to a transfer. The job suited me a lot better than coloring hides, but the wages were too low. After that I went back to Freudenberg, and started in the Simrit Division, making synthetic rubber products.

Three weeks after I had bought my motorcycle, my friend Peter invited me to join the Weinheimer-Automobil-Club. They had so-called Orientierungs-Fahrten, sort of a race, where you got maps and a list of towns and checkpoints. One was supposed to observe speed limits etc., but most participants didn't. In May 1950 I took part in my first one. There were four entries in the 250cc class, and since riding a motorcycle was still new to me, I didn't expect too much. Much to my surprise, when I finally arrived at the goal, an old Inn in Weinheim, Peter came running out and announced "that I was first in my class." Apparently none of the other three competitors managed to finish the race.

My prize was a gold medal and a silver cup. That was my high point; from then on I went steadily downhill. The next race was in the summer of the same year and I only managed to get a silver medal. There was another one in the fall of 1950, during which a flat tire delayed me, and I ended up with a bronze medal.

There were always accidents during these races. At one time, a motorcycle rider went racing past the first stop sign he came to and slammed into the side of a car. This mistake cost him his life. Another time a buddy of mine, riding a 500cc BMW, encountered a bus in a narrow street, there was no time to stop, so he threw himself and the bike sideways and slid underneath the vehicle. He wasn't seriously hurt, but one cylinder of his motorcycle was torn right off. One other event that I recall was a so-called Fuchs-Jagt (foxhunt) in 1951. The Fuchs [fox] leaves the starting point early and drops clues here and there, with lots of false trails. On that particular day I slept in, however Peter came and got me out of bed. I joined the hunt rather late; just the same I found the fox and the others in the afternoon.

They were all sitting in the yard of a tavern, busy sipping beer. As soon as I sat down too, the mad baker, as we sometimes called him, jumped on his big motorcycle with a sidecar, raced up onto the manure pile and really opened the throttle. We all had to scatter and run, because the crap was flying all over the place. He sure did live up to his nickname on that day. I had a couple of accidents too, but not during races. One day my brother and I had to pick up something, I don't remember what it was, but it required a large glass bottle. We never made it. Just after we had passed a streetcar I spotted a guy on a bicycle; he looked around and saw us coming, therefore I assumed that we could pass him safely.

No such luck, just as we were trying to pass him he turned left and we all found ourselves on the pavement. My brother ended up with a few cuts from broken glass and was bleeding all over the place. A policeman was standing right there on the sidewalk and saw the whole thing. He testified that the accident wasn't my fault, but I still had to pay a fine. Under German law it is illegal to be involved in an accident, some law that is. Another time on the way home from a dance, a girl wanted a lift. Since I am good hearted by nature I agreed, but soon regretted my decision. My passenger had never been on a motorcycle before and sat on the back seat stiffer than a board. There were quite a few curves on that road, so I asked her "if she couldn't lean

over a bit when we were going around a corner." The next curve we came to she leaned over all right, but in the wrong direction.

There was no way for me to make that corner and I ended up hitting a big apple tree with my right hand between the handle bar and the tree. My head split open and my left shoulder didn't feel right. Later on I found out that I had broken my collarbone. Luckily my friend Werner, a fellow electrician, was behind us and came to our assistance. The girl wasn't hurt too badly, just torn stockings and some scratches on her legs.

After he had taken her back to a bus stop, he came back to help me to get home. The motorcycle wouldn't run any more, but since the road went downhill, I rode it to the outskirts of Weinheim. There, Werner produced a rope and towed me to his house, where I left the bike. Dad had a bit of a temper and I was afraid he would finish off the wreck with a sledgehammer. This particular episode put me into the hospital for three weeks. After my release, I figured it was safe to bring my bashed up machine home and fix it up again.

The job wasn't too bad, except for the gas tank. There was a body shop not too far away, and I took the tank there for repairs. In the meantime, in order to get around again, I installed a small can as a gas tank and I was mobile again. When somebody asked, "What this contraption was all about?" I told them that I was testing a new kind of super fuel. Once the tank was repaired and installed, the motorcycle looked almost like new again. I made a mental note to be very careful in the future.

Of course we had dances in Weinheim too; to those I went on foot and never had any trouble getting home. The wildest place was Die Eiche [The Oak], a restaurant with a big hall. The music was mostly Big Band and we were all crazy about it. What kind of a dance style we were imitating at the time I can't remember, but everybody was jumping up and down. In a way that was probably the best thing, since we were usually packed in like sardines, and couldn't move around much anyway. There were always fights, American soldiers tried to assert themselves but without much luck. We had a boxer by the name of George and other tough guys amongst us, and they took care of the Yanks. Many times the military police were called to break up fights.

I never looked for trouble, and always managed to talk myself out of confrontations. At one time two of us went to Heidelberg and tried to get into a dance hall, when a big tough guy tried to provoke us. Using my proven technique, I said to my friend "look at those muscles; we wouldn't have a chance against that guy." That seemed to please him, since he said "come on in guys, I'll buy you a beer." We had a pretty good evening, and since we were drinking beer with the biggest guy in the hall nobody else bothered us.

A custom in Germany is to celebrate the day the local church was built, this Fest is known as Kirchweih, or Kerwe in our dialect. This happens usually during summer and fall, and since every town pretty well has a different date for this celebration, there is never a shortage of Fest-destinations. A friend of mine had a girlfriend, a farmer's daughter, in a village in the Odenwald, a hilly, wooded region east of Weinheim. When they had their Kerwe, she invited us and made arrangements for a room with her parents. That way we could sleep there Saturday night. At breakfast on Sunday morning the farmer wanted to have a little fun with us,

and offered to buy a bottle of wine for the guy good enough to bring his Billy goat out of the stall.

I thought this would be a piece of cake, until I saw the beast. It was the biggest, meanest looking, specimen of the goat family that I had ever seen, with a real big set of horns to go with it. After taking a good look at the wild creature, I decided to buy the wine myself and told the farmer so. Naturally he just laughed, since this was exactly what he had expected. In the meantime another farmer had brought a young goat to be bred; our host proudly went into the stall and came back with his prize buck. The female was so small and the male so big, that I thought right away that breeding was a physical impossibility.

The two farmers eventually came to the same conclusion. It did not escape my attention that Billy was quite enthralled with the little goat and constantly sniffed her attributes. This gave me an idea, and I asked the farmer "if he would still pay for a bottle of wine if I tied his prize animal up again?"

"If you take him into his stall and tie him up, I'll buy two bottles of wine" was his answer. I took the little goat's halter and proceeded to lead her into the stall, Billy sniffing behind her. Once in the stall, I tied him up while he was sniffing and took the little one out again. There was quite a commotion going on in that stall and the farmer had a very long face, no doubt thinking about the two bottles of wine he had to buy. By that time there were several bystanders in the yard, all laughing themselves silly. All things considered, we had a wonderful time on that weekend.

Dad didn't like to ride with me on my bike; he always complained that I was riding too fast. Mother by contrast felt safe with me. One weekend she asked me "if we could visit her parents in Bersrod," the village she grew up in. Dad predicted "that all kinds of things were going to happen to us," but we went anyway. On the Autobahn we came to a section where the right lane was fenced off and we had to use the left lane. We had traveled on for quite a few kilometers, when Mother said, "why don't we go back onto the right lane it looks pretty good now." It was a mistake, the right lane was like a skating rink, I lost control and we ended up in fresh asphalt. Behind us a car did the same thing and spun around and around. Our clothing was covered with tar and I thought the best thing would be to go home again. But Mother wanted to go on, she said, "If we go home now, we'll never hear the end of it." I took the hose off the gas tank and with a rag and some gas we cleaned ourselves up a bit.

We continued with our journey, on the left lane of course, when all of a sudden the sky turned black, and we were traveling in a hailstorm, with thunder and lightning thrown in. Luckily a big trailer was parked on the side of the road, and we crawled underneath it for shelter till the storm passed on. The rest of the trip was uneventful and we finally arrived at our destination. In order to be able to go out that night I had to borrow some clothes from my Uncle Wilhelm. Still I had a lot of fun that weekend with friends from my school days, they were always glad to see me.

A few guys had started a ham-radio club in Weinheim; when I found out about it sometime in 1948, I became a member. We studied radio circuits, the Morse code, built test instruments and radios. The parts from the radio and transmitter, which I had hidden in our hayloft, sure came

in handy. Since we wound most of our transformers, a tedious job, I converted one of the Teletype machines into one that could wind transformers, complete with turn counter. It really worked well and made transformer winding a cinch. One of my projects was to build a radio for my parents, with Dad making the cabinet; it worked well for years.

On the job front things didn't look good; naturally I wanted to work as an electrician again and went all over the countryside looking for a job. At one time, I went to the unemployment office in Mannheim, 15 km from my hometown, looking for a job. There I was told "to go home again," since they had enough unemployed themselves. Slowly I realized that my prospects in Germany were getting worse rather than better. Australia and Canada had ads in newspapers asking for tradesmen, and since I wasn't getting anywhere at home, leaving the country seemed the logical thing to do. Of course I didn't want to go by myself, but my friend Paul said "that he wanted to go too." For a while it seemed we were all set, but he got involved with a girl and she talked him out of it.

Another guy my age, Reinhold, was thinking about leaving too. We decided to go to Australia and went to Frankfurt to find the consulate. After looking all over town we finally asked a policeman for directions, he said "Boys you are in the wrong town, the Australian Consul is in Köln." After we had digested that information, we came to the conclusion that it would be simpler to go to Canada, since the Canadian Consulate was in Karlsruhe, a lot closer to Weinheim.

Again I thought the partner problem was solved, but he too got tangled up with a girl and backed out. I had a few fleeting relationships, but nothing to keep me tied down and I was determined to keep it that way. In the end it was Herman, a year older than I, who became my partner. We went to Karlsruhe, applied and eventually were accepted. Two Canadians at the consulate showed us a big map of Canada, and asked us "where we wanted to go." Neither of us had a clue about the country and we settled on Winnipeg, which looked like it was more or less in the middle of the country. There we thought it would be easy to assess the situation, and go either east or west.

Mother supported my search for a better life right from the beginning, Dad needed a little talking to, but in the end he agreed and signed the application. If he hadn't signed, I would have waited another year. The ship we were sailing on was leaving Genoa, Italy, on November 7, 1951. In early October I quit my job at Freudenberg and started to sell some of my possessions, including the coil-winding machine. I left the motorcycle till the last moment, since we wanted to have a short holiday before we started our journey to Canada.

Our destination was Lake Constance [Bodensee] and we traveled through the Black Forest to get there. Close to the end of our journey, the road went slightly uphill, and suddenly as we reached the top, we saw the biggest body of water we had ever seen. We went on to Friedrichshafen and rented a room for a week. During the day we went on ferry rides, exploring the lake and the scenery, at night we went to dances. One day a few fishermen took us to Meinau in Switzerland, where we had quite a celebration, which was apparently too much for the Swiss. They told us to "hurry up and go back to Germany." We piled back into the boat and sang all the way back to Friedrichshafen.

Time seems to fly when one is on holidays and all too soon the week was over and we returned home. This was towards the end of October, and it was time to sell my bike and start packing. In the meantime Dad had made a big suitcase out of plywood which held most of my stuff; the rest went into a smaller, regular one. Finally the day of our departure arrived. We met at the railway-station ahead of time, where we were greeted by some of our friends who had brought a case of beer. Our parents were there too of course; the two mothers teary eyed. Eventually the train arrived and we said our final good byes.

Chapter 3-The journey to Canada

It was a pleasant train ride through southern Germany, Switzerland, and northern Italy. In Genoa we rented a hotel room, cleaned up a bit and started exploring the City. In the harbor we came across the Italia, the ocean liner which was to take us to the land of opportunities. As we came closer, we noticed a long line of people carrying baskets with fruit and vegetables into the ship. This gave us an idea; we grabbed a couple of baskets each and marched along with the crowd. Once inside we put the baskets down, and started looking for our cabin.

After we had found that location, I noticed an elevator nearby. Still in a discovery mode, one of us pushed a button at random, the elevator went up, stopped and the door opened. Much to our surprise we stared at all the ship's officers including the captain and they stared back at us. After an awkward moment we were asked, "What we were doing there?" "Just wanted to see where our cabin was," we replied.

The captain said, "Well, you are a day early and you better leave this ship." So we pushed another button, and when the door opened, we found ourselves on the upper deck. A deckhand was sweeping there and started chasing us with a broom. We made a tactical retreat to the elevator, and escaped through the same passageway where we had entered.

By that time it was getting late, so after a bite to eat and a glass of wine or two, we decided to go to bed early; after all the next day was going to be a very busy one. We got up early the next morning, had breakfast, and checked out of the hotel. Since we thought we knew where our ship was, we started out in that direction. It wasn't long before we realized that the Italia had been moved during the night. A policeman told us "where to go, a big hall in the harbor". There we had to present our passports, tickets etc. and check in our suitcases.

The date was November 7, 1951. Our cabin had four beds, but two were unoccupied to start out with. After we had settled in, we started to explore the ship, this time without having to worry about being chased off. There were a lot of Germans, Austrians, Italians, and people from every corner of Europe, all looking for a new and better life. I don't believe many of us had any delusions about finding gold in the streets; we were prepared to work and earn our keep. However, there was one guy who said he had no intentions of working; he was going to make his money by playing poker. It takes all kinds.

In the afternoon we left for Naples, with hundreds of people lining the pier and waving good bye. It was an emotional moment, since we all realized there was no turning back now. The weather couldn't have been any better, just a few clouds and the ocean calm like a pond. We

started to settle in, found out when the meals were being served and got to know a few people. In Naples we were allowed to go on shore and had a chance to explore that city a bit. At the railway station we came across a group of young Italians, with whom we communicated mostly by gestures. It didn't take long and we were singing songs that we each knew, they in Italian, and we in German. It was a lot of fun, but all too soon we had to return to the Italia.

More passengers had boarded all eager to go to Canada. Our next stop after a pleasant, smooth trip was Palermo. There we disembarked too and did a little exploring. The parks fascinated us the most with all the strange looking plants and trees; up till then we had only seen orange and palm trees etc. in pictures. The weather remained calm and sunny and we really enjoyed ourselves. Back on the ship were some new passengers, but still none for our cabin.

There was one more stop to make before we could leave Europe behind. After passing Gibraltar, we headed north towards Lisbon. There, Germans were allowed to leave the ship, but Austrians were not; we never found out why. We didn't stop too long there, but we still managed to have a short look around. On our return we found a new passenger in our cabin; he seemed a nice enough guy, but again we had to communicate with sign language.

Finally the old country was left behind and we started the Atlantic crossing. The waves were getting bigger, but we soon developed our sea legs. I had brought along a brand new hair-cutting outfit and since there wasn't much to do; we decided to try it out. The results weren't what we had expected, especially when the big Mama in charge of the dining room, wouldn't let us enter. She said "if you don't want to starve, you better see the barber and get a decent haircut." The barber didn't charge much, "since we had already started," the way he put it, and starvation was avoided.

To start out with the weather remained sunny and warm and we spent hours on the upper deck soaking up the sunshine. Little did we know how quickly the weather changes in the Atlantic, especially in November. And change it did, all of a sudden we were in the middle of a big storm with waves higher than the ship.

The lower decks had to be roped off, after some passengers found themselves up to their waist in water when we went through a big one. Not too many people showed up in the dining room any more, most of them were seasick. Luckily Herman and I escaped seasickness, and kept on eating, but it wasn't much fun with dishes sliding all over the place. We were not sick, but didn't care for the big waves either. Our ship had twin propellers, and as the storm got worse, they would come right out of the water when we went through a big wave. They would speed up, and the resulting vibrations would shake everything, not a very pleasant sensation. Eventually one of the engines gave up the ghost and we limped along on only one, everybody hoping that it kept on going.

Finally on November 19 we arrived in Halifax. It was a nice feeling to have survived this rough crossing without any broken bones. Who knows what would have happened if we had lost our second engine too? It probably would have fulfilled my ex-foreman's wish. When I quit the last thing he said to me was "I hope the ship sinks or they will have trouble with you over there too." The trouble with me, in his eyes, was my refusal to work on Sundays. This had nothing to

do with religion, simply put, I believed that working six days a week was enough and there was nothing he could do about it.

After we had disembarked, our papers and luggage were checked. The two of us didn't have any problems, but the poor Italians lost all their salami they had stashed away. Any food items were removed. The next step was to deposit our suitcases at the railway station; afterwards we walked around Halifax a bit. At the post office I bought a postcard to send to my ex slave driver. Dear Mr. Wooler I wrote, I am very happy to report that the ship didn't sink. Born lucky I guess, Rettig.

I mailed the card, and since we were both hungry we decided to have something to eat. We found a small restaurant and ordered a meal and a beer. The waitress was surprised and informed us "that for a beer we had to go to a beer parlor". We settled for the meal, but now it was our turn to be surprised when she put two big glasses of water on the table. Was it meant to wash our hands? It never occurred to us that we were supposed to drink it. Back home we never drank water, except mineral water, the stuff that came out of the tap was undrinkable. We kept looking around to see what other people were doing, and finally realized that it was meant to be drunk.

It was easy to see that there was a lot to learn in our newly adopted country. Since we had some time left before our train's departure, it was natural that we started to look for one of those beer parlors. It wasn't long before we found one; we went in and ordered a couple of beers. It seemed strange that there were special places just for drinking beer, and even stranger that women couldn't sit with the men in the men section, but the men could sit with women in the women section. However these were minor details and we assumed that we could get used to whatever strange customs we encountered.