

surrounded by people of diverse backgrounds. Many ethnic groups of all ages were represented. Many spoke English, some quite fluent, others barely understandable. They all had one thing in common, they all were proud to be able to use their English, and so we talked for hours. Of course, we would reassure them that they were doing great, and it was wonderful to see them break out in big smiles. You'd think they had accomplished an enormous feat of some sort and in retrospect, I guess it was. We soon found out that due to our appearance, people knew we were Americans, something we hadn't thought of as up till now we hadn't run across any other Americans.

You can't imagine the various modes and types of conveyances we managed to acquire or find usable. Sometimes we would catch a ride on a truck, then we would hop freight. We even were picked up by some Russians, gentry I presumed in a carriage. A carriage right out of the movie "Gone with the Wind." Hell! I had never even seen one of those contraptions before. I can only speculate upon the background of the owners of the carriage but from their mode of dress one would be led to believe they had money, as the saying goes. I might dwell a few moments here as to why one found a carriage in a war zone. You see, the Russian army (or I should say the Russian army's rear guard) consisted of soldiers' families, and civilians on the move. They knew they were going to Berlin, and they knew Berlin was far away, and in between where they were coming from and where they were going was plenty of land and other "goodies" to be taken. So the front army moved fast to kill the Germans and the rear came slow to take over. Thus it was that we came across the conglomeration of people and conveyances of various sort as we wended our way to Odessa, or so we thought. We soon met our first Russian resistance. You see the roads and byways were almost always filled by refugees, people of all the Eastern European countries that had been mostly political prisoners, all trying to get back home. Well! to alleviate the chaos, looting, etc, the Russians had established in each city, town, or village, a central mess hall where you could get a nice warm filling meal. Lodging was also provided for the night. The only catch (and catch it was) you were usually escorted by Russian soldiers to an interrogation center where your identity was established and upon completion of the interrogation ceremony you were assigned a room or dormitory to await transportation to one's home country. It didn't take Frank and I long to figure out what was going on...about one night. The Russians didn't have much of a guard or restriction on movements, so each morning after a good meal and warm place to sleep, we would nonchalantly wander off to the nearest road and continue on our way. Needless to say once we were aware of this situation, we knew we had a good meal and bed awaiting each evening so we would conveniently let ourselves be captured at night and the next morning we would be on our way to our next capture.

Another interesting and bordering upon the hilarious situation was Frank and I posing as officers. It was one evening after our capture and while eating with the general populace, we noticed a table at the head of the hall seating a dozen or so people. They all had various insignias representing their rank obviously from different countries, noticeable, of course, by their uniforms. Well, Frank not being one of them there slow ones says,

"Well, Tref, tomorrow after our capture you and I will be eating at the head table."

"What the hell are you talking about Frank? You saw all the brass and we're only sergeants."

"Hell! it takes us only a few minutes for us to change from sergeants to officers."

That night during our proverbial capture and interrogation (and don't forget now each capture and interrogation is in a different city or town a hundred or so miles down the road) Frank is a Lt. Colonel and I chose to be a Major. The Russians never even doubted our stories, our clothes were remnants of uniforms, flying uniforms, and we had no insignia. There was no doubt we were flyers and Americans, so the Russians took us at our word. That night we were escorted to the head table.

"Son of a bitch," I said to Frank, "Look at that joker who's sitting there!" It was an American Captain, among others of various rank.

"Keep your cool man," quips Frank. "He's not a flyer and he hasn't seen us before nor will he see us again after tonight." Well the evening passed uneventfully and you'd have thought we were having dinner at the officers club. Frank and I, by this time, were quite adept at prevarication and I am sure we would have been elected honorary members of any liars club in existence. The next morning, as Frank and I escaped, we bade farewell to our fellow officers. Frank and I often wondered whatever happened to the people that stayed in the cities and towns. One interesting fellow we met one night was a General from Yugoslavia, Romania or some other country. He had been at this particular place for some time, and said the Russians were going to give him a car and wanted us to stay until the car arrived and he would take us to his villa and then see that we would be flown home. We had a few reservations about the outcome for many reasons and I don't think I have to mention what his reaction would be upon finding out we were not the members of society we pretended to be.

One day while walking with a quite a group of displaced persons (as we were now called) as usual strung out single file on both sides of the road, we saw up ahead people suddenly diverting their direction of travel and diving for seclusion of the shrubbery alongside the road. It was almost comical and the reaction was instantaneous and unplanned. It reminded us of a row of dominoes falling over. Frank and I were at first unaware of the cause but soon heard the low flying aircraft and the splaying of bullets. "Goddam!" yelled Frank, "hit the dirt." We were being strafed. As far as I know no one was hit, and it was all over in a few moments.

A few days later, (Frank and I were alone at the time) we were stopped in mid-day. This was somewhat unusual, but after chatting with the Russian officer for awhile it was apparent we were getting a little too far east for the Russian's comfort. We didn't know if there was something they didn't want us to see or what. Anyway, we finally convinced the officer we were just trying to get to Odessa and he wrote out a pass. Of course, it was written in Russian and for all we knew it could have said take these damn fool Americans out and shoot them, but evidently the pass was legitimate for it helped us through what appeared to be a couple of nasty situations.

Speaking of nasty situations, Frank and I were probably the original "Babes in the Woods" Little did we know Russian soldiers had been left behind to kill looters and thieves. We would nonchalantly walk into town and go into a store and rummage around.