

The Train to Leipzig

by Lowry Bowman, 397-I

[From the author: Enclosed is the story of the Great Train Ride of June 1945 for your consideration as possible material for the 100th Division Newsletter. Despite Sgt. Mosher's insistence, I have resisted turning it into a bawdy story; just the facts. Anything else would be a disservice to the character of the American GI.

I don't know the background for this unlikely expedition. There probably is no way to find it out at this late date. There must have been many other trains like it, but the American presence on this one really was superfluous. We didn't do anything. The brief write-up about it in the July 7, 1945 edition of the battalion newspaper, The Citation, doesn't indicate who gave the orders or how the escort was chosen. Maybe it was simply alphabetical—Bergeron, Bowman, Budz. Budz is now dead, and I assume Bergeron vanished into some Louisiana bayou. Edinson's memories, as relayed by his son, are skimpy and (in my opinion) unreliable, but then mine are, too. You'll just have to take my word for it.]

The woman was clearly frightened. Scared silly, in fact. After years in a Nazi labor camp, she was going home to her soldier-husband in Russia with her two small children. Her children not her husband's children. She knew, somehow, that he had found out about this and had mysteriously caused a needle to enter her arm. The needle was working its way slowly toward her heart and would finally kill her. Through an interpreter, she explained her problem to the American commander of the rattletrap train that was carrying her and hundreds of other Russians back to their homeland.

Second Lieutenant William Edinson of Brooklyn, NY, pondered the situation for a minute and then told one of the two medic on the train to put a bandage on the woman's wrist and give her an APC tablet.

This American medical miracle worked instantly. The woman went back to her boxcar singing with relief.

Germany was a country in chaos at the end of World War Two, not only because of its ruined cities and shattered economy, but also because of the millions of "displaced persons" trying desperately to find food, shelter, relatives, or transportation to homes that probably no longer existed.

What to do with these people became a major problem for the Allies. The 100th Division inherited its share of the problem at a place near Stuttgart called Goppingen. The 3d Battalion of the 397th Infantry Regiment found itself with between 1,100 and 1,200 Russian "slave laborers" on its hands and had to figure out how to get them home. This was in late June 1945. The Cold War hadn't yet begun, and the Soviet Union demanded that these people be returned to its control.

The Russians were rounded up and put into a large compound with one lone American GI standing guard at the gate to keep them there. I was that guard. I was given a .45-caliber pistol and told to "keep them from looting the town." A totally ridiculous assignment. They laughed at my little popgun and did as they pleased.

Somehow, somewhere, about forty five still serviceable railroad boxcars were found along with an ancient locomotive that leaked steam from many bullet holes. An old third-class coach with rattan seats was put in the middle of this unlikely train for the American guards who would accompany it, and the Russians were crowded into the boxcars—about twenty five or thirty to a car. No food, water, or sanitary facilities were in evidence, although just about every one of those refugees clutched a ragged bundle of something.

A six-member escort team led by Lieutenant Edinson of I Company was selected by someone to go along on this expedition. It included me, PFCs Henry Budz and Ferdinand Bergeron of I Company, and medics Louis Krimm and Walton Bragg.

Our mission was to keep these people aboard the train until it reached a suburb of Leipzig in the Russian zone of occupation. Under normal conditions, that would have been a round trip of only two days. Under the conditions that prevailed at that time, it took ten days.

Our “command car” wasn’t much better than the boxcars, but it did have seats. It obviously had been strafed several times by American planes because there was no glass in the windows and the coal smoke poured in. Once there had been a toilet in a small cubicle at one end of the car, but both the toilet and the cubicle were gone and only a hole in the floor was left. At least we had K-rations, water, and sleeping bags and could stretch out on the rattan seats.

Precisely what our job was—other than to make sure the Russians stayed out of our car and away from our rations—never became clear. There was no way to keep anyone aboard the train who didn’t want to be there because it moved only slightly faster than a man could walk and often stopped dead for hours at a time. During those times, the Russians would fan out to scour the countryside for food. They always came back when the train began to move again. At least most of them did. And they sang. Hour after hour. Oddly enough, their favorites were American oldies, “You Are My Sunshine,” or “Home on the Range.” They knew the words even though few of them knew any English. A sad-faced girl who appeared to be in her twenties acted as translator for the entire train.

At first we referred to them as “slave laborers,” but that turned out to be true for only some of them. Many had volunteered to work in Germany. Speaking through the translator, a Ukrainian who said he had been an officer in the Red Army admitted that he had deserted to the Germans and fully expected to be shot when he got home.

“Then why are you going back?” we asked him

“*Nitchevo*,” he said with a shrug—a sort of catch-all term that literally means “nothing,” but also can mean “what difference does it make?”

(Few Americans, least of all the CIA, seemed to understand then or later the almost mystical love of *Mother Russia* that grasps most of its citizens no matter what kind of government may be mistreating them).

There was a crisis of sorts in the rail yard in Frankfurt when our train stopped on the track next to a U.S. Army supply train. The Russians were all over that supply train in a matter of minutes while we raced around yelling and shooting. One of the MPs yelled at us to “shoot to kill,” but we just stood at the windows and watched the action. So far as I could tell, no one was shot.

There was a serious health crisis later, however, when some of the Russians ate the contents of the Sterno heating cans they had grabbed. We were told that some fell off the train and were left behind. The medics could do nothing about that, but they attended to the birth of two babies and treated some broken bones. The Russians would leap out of the moving boxcars to relieve themselves and then run to jump back aboard. Needless to say, there were accidents.

While we watched them, they watched us. But we didn’t mingle.

There was a sort of running board that ran the length of our car, and one of the Russians perched on it for hours at a time staring at us. We called him the *Kommissar*. All he did was stare. Never talked. One time I tossed him the fig bar from my breakfast ration. He caught it without taking his eyes off me.

We dropped them off in a grimy rail yard near Leipzig. There was no one to meet them, but they settled down and began singing.

When our train finally got itself turned around to head back toward Stuttgart, we were not prepared for the hordes of refugees who fought to get aboard it—a far greater number than the thousand or so passengers we had just dropped off. They packed the boxcars and climbed up on the roof of our own car after we shoved carbines in their faces to indicate they weren’t welcome aboard. They were ready to do anything or go anywhere to get out of the Russian zone of occupation.

In his book, *Crusade in Europe*, General Dwight Eisenhower wrote that, “of all the distressing memories that will forever live with American veterans of the war in Europe, none will be sharper or more enduring than those of the DPs and of the horror camps established by the Nazis.”

I deliberately did not visit any of the Nazi death camps (infantry warfare doesn’t make you curious to see more death than you’ve already sampled), but I do have a clear memory of those ragged Russians, and I wonder at times what happened to them.