

## A Moselaner during War

The Moselregion had been done with its "thousand year episode" for four weeks when beginning of April 1945 five barrels of solid German machine guns aimed at the stomach of a Moselaner. This caused an unpleasant tickle in the stomach, which turned to cramps. At a railroad station in the beautiful Harz region, close to Bad Gandersheim, the town of the holy Roswitha, stand five German soldiers, who demand brusquely and unmistakably from Moselaner who was equally unfamiliar with the region, that he was to show them the way to the railroad bridge, which to defend they had the strictest order to do. To explain to those remnant forces of the Greater German Army in the not yet conquered residual German Reich one does not know the way to the rail road bridge either, is useless given the unambiguously aimed weapons. This infantry unit is determined to seek victory after all. The infantry consists of two seaman, two grenadiers, and an anti-aircraft soldier. Surely none of them ever read Lenin, who wrote that power grows out of gun barrels, even though they know, that a quick lift of a machine gun is more effective than a long speech. Our Moselaner does not know any revolutionary instructions at this time either, however, he understands the language of the dark small barrel ends. And he knows the application of this language.

A few months before he himself was guarding a Mosel bridge between Luxemburg and Germany with a machine gun in his hand and a big helmet on his head, ready to go, because that was his strict order, to defend against the enemy, to stop them crossing the Mosel at Remich and Nennig and to repel them unmistakably. The enemy in the fall of 1944 was not Caesar's commander Labienus, the enemy of the young warrior was General Eisenhower's commander Patton, who rolled in with his tanks. According to his order, the army was not allowed to cross the bridge. The Moselaner was ready to stop them no matter what. At first he stopped a bicycling German private to cross the Mosel Bridge, who asserted he was the rear guard who was followed by a large part of the American Army. According to the Moselaner's orders, however, all soldier were to be collected to build up the front. Thanks to the machine gun the private understood that he had to wait until – until both of them ran across the bridge together and left their guns and the bicycle. The Sherman-tanks of the Patton Army had interrupted abruptly any further chat with the private. In April 1945 the German infantry took revenge on the Moselaner for the rude treatment of the private.

He had signed off the Third Reich a few days earlier, on his own risk, which given the gun barrels increased the tickle in his stomach. The circumstances are such that one seeks blindfolded the railroad bridge on the off chance to find it. The weapon carriers rush to haste, force the Moselaner to trot, which must remind him about his experience with the Mosel Bridge, but all his thinking cells

are blocked. Then behind the hedges surfaces a bridge. The infantrymen and the Moselaner exhale because of different reasons in relief. "Your luck" growls the leader of the armed forces.

It is that bridges in the short or long run tend to surface along railroads. The Moselaner restrains himself to explain this. When the barrel of the machine gun, lifted quickly, unblocks his return path, he only breathes deeply and walks on. The last unit of the German Army, which the Moselaner runs across, crosses the railroad bridge, which to defend it they are ready for, based on the observed energy, to the last man.

The parting of the Greater German Army changed a lot. There is now grass along the embankment, the first flower heads are showing, the spring sun is warm, the air is quivering despite the early season, bird songs are suddenly to be heard, and the sky is cloudless and, what is more important, free of fighter planes of the foreign army of the West. When there are no gun barrels eyes open up. Bad Gandersheim on the right hand side, the Moselaner walks into a new era, towards democracy, as he already knows, because he experienced it during vacation with relatives in Luxemburg. Gone are the times of hollered orders, the arbitrariness of superiors, and he will never be abused and his head will never be shaven in a prisoner's camp. The Moselaner walks exhilarated given those prospects toward the new era, as ingenuously as it appertains to his 17 years of age. Land and nature are filled by an enchanting peacefulness and quiet. Before the curve the Moselaner turns around one more time and takes a last look at the Third Reich, which has nothing to do with sentimentality.

"Hands up!"

About twenty ugly black barrels of American machine guns aim unmistakably at his stomach, which cramps immediately, not different as a few minutes before in front of the German machine guns. However, the insurmountable urge to lift his hands above his head wins over the thought to pay attention to his cramping stomach. A barrel, quickly lifted, sets the Moselaner in motion, without the need to speak a word. Lenin's insight about the power of gun barrels is also applicable to the American handguns, whose language is equally unambiguous.

In front of a young officer, with whip made of hippo leather in his left hand and a dangling holster at his right hip, he remembers his English from school. However he cannot understand the officer, who is American and who ought to speak English. This only sounds occasionally like English. Finally he gets what the American Army wants from him. He is supposed to guide them to a bridge. To a railroad bridge but quick, quick, quick.

There is no argument against machine guns. This time there are twenty infantrymen and a lieutenant from the United States of America, who absolutely want to get to a railroad bridge, which was occupied by the residual German Army only 15 minutes ago. The grass along the embankment is no longer green. Flowers are no longer colorful and it is queasily cool despite the sunshine. The stillness jumps at the Moselaner. He suddenly knows what no-man's-land means and this is a new experience. Twitching of his eyelids and of the corner of his mouth add to the cramping stomach. In front of him five machine guns made in Germany, behind him twenty made in the U.S.A., all quality brands, he approaches the railroad bridge with his attendants. Soon one will know, which weapon brand is superior in firepower to the other.

Americans and Moselaner lie in the grass and carefully scout out the bridge. Over there lay some others too, who scout, the captive thinks. Then the lieutenant gives the order, the Americans jump up and run bent forward toward the bridge. It is unnervingly quiet. It stays quiet. The German Infantry has retreated as a precaution. The bridge was not worth to be defended it after all. "OK", burrs the perky and clueless U.S. lieutenant to the sweat-bathed Moselaner and let him lead away.

The streets of Gandersheim are occupied by the Army of the U.S.A. Tanks, jeeps, soldiers and officers. White linen wave out of the windows of the quaint half-timbered houses as signs of surrender, and the inhabitants of Gandersheim behind the windows eye the Americans as well as the young man who is brought to the city hall by two soldiers – with machine guns of course. One has a fine view of the plaza from the steps of the city hall. The Moselaner notices the residual German Army unit in front of the church of the holy Roswitha – five German soldiers – who he had lead to the railroad bridge. The barrels of U.S. machine guns demand, quickly lifted, them to speed up and the five men start to trot obediently. The Moselaner admits to this day, that he laughed mischievously, that he laughed in their faces, when they trotted by the steps of city hall, driven by the language of handguns.

The laugh leaves traces. The officer in the city hall notices. "Why do you laugh?" He speaks German without any accent. In front of the major, who he is, there is one of the strange whips out of hippo leather on the desk, which draws attention involuntarily to itself.

"You will loose your laughter. Do you know this?" He puts down large, glossy press photos on the desk, on which you can see horrible mountains of dead cadavers. The Moselaner understands, he nods.

"Katyn. Of course I know. That is a mass burial in Katyn. The Russians killed Polish officers over there." At that moment is becomes clear why the United

States of America equipped its officers with those strong whips made out of hippo leather.

"This is Rheinsberg!" shouts the major. Long silence. The name does not mean anything. Same with Dachau. The hippo whip slaps on the desk, as do the photos. The Moselaner notices his dry tongue in his mouth and licks off his blood from his lips. His palms are sweaty.

"Where do you come from?"

"From Trier."

"Where is that? In the vicinity?"

"Along the Mosel river."

"How far away?"

"800 kilometers."

"You say 800 kilometers, major!"

"800 kilometers, major."

The era of democracy has not yet started, the Moselaner thinks with his born Mosel humor. The major studies the German map. His finger glides over Luxemburg into France. The Moselaner, who was thought to be a half-Frenchman from somebody in lower Saxony, shows the major the location of Trier on the map. It does not say anything against the major that he, after briefly glancing at point of the map, which represents Trier, he joins the opinion of the Lower Saxonian and burrs "Frenchman?"

Who would not have been tempted having received such an offer at least in 1945? The Moselaner struggles and does not know that at this time, according to General de Gaulle's ideas, his homeland was almost actually to belong to France. The temptation grows when the major takes the hippo whip and puts it on the desk. But that goes too far, that is not how it goes.

"I am no Frenchman, major!"

An examining look along the course of the Mosel, then a new allure, a major allure.

"Luxemburger?"

That sounds more familiar, sounds like homeland, like cousins, Tata, Monnom, vacation, Alzette, first bicycle, chocolate as thick as the handle of the whip on the desk, sounds like Luxemburg town, Bettembourg, Clemens Mett, the Tour-de-France bicycler, sounds like Echternach, Wasserbillig, Schober Foyer and like citizenship, which may avoid difficulties with hippo whips at the moment. The love for the truth wins over the palpably close rescue.

"I am not Luxemburger, major."

"O.K. Nazi? Soldier?"

"No, major, anti-aircraft soldier and bridge guardian."

The hand of the major reaches for the hippo whip.

"You lie!"

"I am not lying, major!"

The riddle about the strange equipment of the U.S. Army resolves itself again in easily dispensable knowledge. In the beautiful Harz town of Bad Gandersheim with its quaint half-timbered houses the United States of America achieves on this day after all what it had not accomplished a few months earlier along the Mosel border between Luxemburg and Germany close to Remich: the Moselaner is imprisoned in city hall. A slender, young, perky officer, who also speaks German fluently, is supposed to escort him to a camp. The jeep stops after an hours drive and easygoing conversation – the officer's mother is German and was born in Cologne, and the Moselaner smokes his first American cigarette – in front of a camp close to Goettingen. Unshaven and dirty guys walk behind the barbed wired fences. That deters.

"What is this?"

"A prisoner's camp."

"But I want to go home, to the Mosel, to Trier."

"Trier? O.k., where is that?"

"Well, close to Luxemburg", explains the Moselaner carefully, but truthfully.

"Are you from Luxemburg?"

The barbed wired fence, the unshaven guys in the camp, the large gate with the guards and their machine guns suppress the scruples. The temptation is too big. From one moment to the next the Moselaner turns into self-acclaimed citizen of the duchies of Luxemburg.

"I am from Luxemburg."

That changes the war situation. The U.S. officer steers the jeep into the town of Goettingen, stops in front of the hotel along Main Street and escorts the "Luxemburger" to the bar in foyer of the hotel. The Moselaner gets a cocktail, a whole packet of cigarettes, original American blend, Phillip Morris. The officer vanishes up the broad stairs. After a few moments he returns down the stairs with a young fellow, about 18 years old. Two soldiers, Gis, lift their machine guns, which the young fellow understands and – escorted by the Gis – marches on. "He wanted us to believe that he is from Holland," explains the perky officer, "but we are not, how do you say in German, oh yes, we are not from yesterday. I will be back soon." He emphasizes his words with his hippo whip and vanishes again.

The destiny of the "Hollander" disposes the Moselaner not to wait idly for further developments. He puts the cigarettes in his jacket pocket, slides of the unfamiliar bar stool, nods to the keeper, mixes in with the crowd of male and female soldiers in the foyer and enters carefully into the street. The first traffic sign indicates the direction towards Kassel, the way to the West, to the Rhine, to the Mosel. "Nobody can get there. The Rhine is the end, nobody can get over there, the Americans are guarding the Moselregion for the French. It makes no sense to try it."

The Moselaner does not dispute this. The rhetoric changes from day to day and everybody has his from a dependable source. Advice can be obtained inexpensively, occasionally even a piece of bread, however, an egg costs up to 20 Marks. Otherwise the wanderer is fed by the garbage mounds of the U.S. Army. The old game is repeated in the defeated German Reich: the victor needs to feed the defeated, even if only with strangely wrapped GI rations.

Provisions are plentiful with the Americans, however, the citizens of the United States of America lack other things. For example, the Moselaner loses his watch to a well-fed American, who stands in front of the Autobahn exit in Kassel and already wears three watches on his wrist. He and his assistants also collect bicycles, bicycles of all ages, which are clustered next to the gas station. Obviously, bicycles must be scarce in the United States of America.

In contrast, they have enough bombs. So many that they were able to spare an inordinate amount for private buildings. That is why the Moselaner walks through bombed out cities on this path, climbs over debris of blown up bridges to the other side of the river and finally sees with a jumping heartbeat from the Karthause in Koblenz the German corner, where the Mosel disembogues into the Rhine. The bridges across the Rhine and the Mosel were blasted. Only stumps of columns tower over the water. Even today the Moselaner wonders about the ministers of the Greater German Reich, who insisted during the Nuremberg trials he resisted the orders of the Fuehrer Adolf Hitler to blast all bridges across the rivers. The minister of armor, Albert Speer, must have neglected the route from Kassel to Trier. There almost all bridges were gone.

In Koblenz, a ferry operated by the Americans carries refugees across the river once a day. There, in the truest sense of the word, Koblenz lies in debris in front of the people. And the journey across the Rhine is not fun indeed. So is the walk through the destroyed city. It smells of residual burns, old dust, dust of stones. But that also has its positive, because dust makes thirsty, and it turns to fun after all along the Mosel, thankfully so.

The Moselaner is treated to first bottle of wine by a vine-grower in Winningen, who uses the Moselaner as a "newspaper". Further stages are financed

involuntarily by the Americans with cigarettes, who they toss contemptuously in three-packs. Due to the tipsiness, which is a result of the Mosel wine, it is well that at least the bridge in Treis was not blasted (maybe Mr. Speer was there). A friendly vine-grower in Bremm offers a cot and insists and can prove that the path along Alf and through the Eifel past Wittlich is shorter and the most healthy to Trier.

Sobered the Moselaner finally arrives in Trier on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1945, the day when Germany first capitulated to Eisenhower. Rarely in history, their common history, the two cities were so similar as in those days. Trier was at the bottom. The Porta Nigra, this Roman City Gate, showed the least wear. Bombs and grenades bounced off the old wall. Few civilians rush through the city, ready any moment to flee. Jeeps with Americans dominate the picture. A jeep stops, the driver, an officer, casually waves the Moselaner to come over. He wears the hippo whip on his belt and speaks German very well. "What is this?"

Great boredom when he hears about the Roman City Gate, built in the fourth century AD. The chewing gum is rolled over between his teeth.

"O.k. O.k. what did it cost?"

Big question mark. That the Moselaner had never thought about, and even his teachers had never made any calculations accordingly. The American is not even disappointed about the lack of knowledge. He asks "Where does a family named Boehrer live? My grandfather came from this family out of this town."

"Boehrer? Yes, over there, on the right side."

"How far?"

"200 meters. A half-timbered house."

"200 meters? Oh, that is too far. Bye, bye!"

With squeaking wheels he rushes on, a new era has begun, as it often has in the Mosel valley. France takes over the occupation from America soon after. And no Frenchman ever asks the Moselaner, what this is, the Porta Nigra, they know it. However, they hardly give any food to the Moselaners and carry the few things left over away. Another conqueror along the Mosel. And like always and as it had happened so often, life goes on, however as difficult as it is to imagine in the Fall of 1945. Only those, who know the past of the land, know that better days lie ahead.