



MY ARMY TIME (Arbeitsdienst) IN GERMANY 1940-41

by Edie Riske

Under Hitler's reign, men and women at the age of 18 were drafted into the working army (Arbeitsdienst) regardless of whether or not they were needed at home. So, in the Fall of 1940 I was drafted and assigned to report to a post near Ordelsburg, East Prussia, a place called Klein Gerlanden. This had previously been a men's barrack but now was converted for use by women.

There were 48 of us young girls-12 assigned to each barrack. Electricity was furnished by a generator but was on only a few hours during the day. The barracks had no bathrooms; we had to go outside to use an outhouse. There was no running water and the only heat we had was from an iron pot stove which burned coal. Wake-up call was at 5:00 a.m. and since it was winter we shivered as we crawled out of our warm beds. Dressed in gym suits we had to go outside for an hour of exercise in the cold winter dawn. After the exercise period we marched to the washroom. The evening before we filled a wash bowl with snow; the next morning the snow was melted with which we washed ourselves. German soldiers were stationed nearby. From the top windows of their barracks they had a view of our washroom. Once they discovered this tantalizing view, many times we saw a head popping up to peek at the sight of 48 stark naked girls, in all different shapes and sizes, taking a sponge bath.

Once a week we had to thoroughly clean the wash bowls by scrubbing them in the snow until they sparkled. The Germans, as everyone knows, are noted for cleanliness. We certainly held up that reputation!

One of the girls in our barracks thought she was better than the rest of us. She slept in a bottom bunk, so eleven of us got our heads together and put a bowl of water under her bed covers. As it was dark by the time we went to bed, she did not notice what we had done. When we heard her loud screams we knew she got a good soaking. Realizing that she was in the same boat as the rest of us, she was a good sport about it and gave up her snooty ways and became one with us.

One of the girls who was Jewish had the rank of corporal. Her brother was in the German Army and she had plans on making the Army her career. I sometimes wonder what happened to her.

We were assigned our work in the morning, either to work in the kitchen or for a farmer. My first assignment was to go to work for a farmer. Arriving there, I received a horrible surprise. The kitchen was filthy, everything was in a big mess; there were chickens running around on top of the table. In one corner was a bed with a torn mattress. The grandmother who could

not speak German, only Polish, slept on this dirty mattress.. At dinnertime a big bowl of food was placed in the center of the kitchen table. There were no plates, everyone had a spoon with which they dipped into the big bowl and that was the complete meal. I ate very little and ran back to the camp reporting that I was sick and never went back there again.

My next assignment was to work for another farmer, a bachelor. I cooked and cleaned which I didn't mind at all. After that, I was assigned to kitchen duty which was certainly better than my first assignment.

When our women officers had men visitors (German officers), we had to make special meals for them. There was one of our officers we girls did not like.. One time, two German officers came riding on beautiful horses that they tied to a pole out in front. My love of horses and the desire to ride again made me throw caution to the wind and I talked one of the girls into taking the horses for a ride while the officers were entertaining themselves inside. Without being seen, we untied the horses and rode off. Being young and adventuresome we were "brave" to try such a prank. We were in our glory galloping along on those beautiful horses, except the other girl fell off soon after. Fortunately, she was unhurt and after picking herself up, we decided the best course of action was to let the horses run free while we hightailed it back to the kitchen and acted as if nothing happened. No one ever reported us, the girls stuck together and didn't squeal on us, and the secret never got out how the horses got loose and ran away.

Another time, one evening when this same woman officer had company, a few of us got onto the roof of her place and made a lot of noise. By the time they came out to see what was going on, we were gone. Pulling those shenanigans relieved some of the tension and boredom we faced while being conscripted in Hitler's Army!

One evening we were invited to a dance by the German soldiers. A bus was sent for us. That certainly was a rare night for us to have some fun. However, we were given strict orders not to go outside at any time with any of the soldiers. Those orders were so strict that none of us dared to disobey. Even though there were times for goofing off, there were limits to our behavior. Discipline was stressed which made me and the other girls grow up fast. We learned to accept responsibility, which certainly helped me to endure the trials that I faced years later. Such a program should be required for young people in all countries.

At one time diphtheria broke out in our camp. We were allowed to write only one postcard home about it. I sent my Mom many addresses to let my friends know that we were quarantined because for a few weeks no mail went out from the camp. Some of the girls made friends with the soldiers stationed nearby. We wrote letters and at a given time in the dark one of the girls crawled under the fence and "delivered" the letters to a soldier waiting on the other side. In spite of being quarantined, we found ways to communicate with the outside world!

My boy friend, later my husband came to visit me at the camp. Men were not permitted in our rooms. He could stay in the guesthouse but we were only allowed to meet outside in my free time. Since he could not come to our room, my good bobbies helped. Some watched outside if the coast was clear and someone showed him the way to go to around the back where a window was opened for him to get in. Many memories!

The Russian Army marched into Lithuania and overthrew the government in 1941. The people were fleeing and coming into Germany by the thousands. The Red Cross requested six girls to work with them in the city of Ordelsburg and I was very thankful to be chosen for this duty.

A school building was cleared and prepared for the refugees, including mothers with small children. We were asked if any of us could draw pictures. I was the only one to volunteer. I drew a picture of a fruit or an animal for each child so they knew where their place was to hang their clothes and to put their toothbrush. I also drew large pictures with chalk on all the blackboards in the room. I was really proud with the big write-up about that place and my pictures on the front page of the newspaper, although I didn't think I was that good. I regret that I did not keep a picture of those drawings for a remembrance. So many things are lost. However, I do have a picture of the school.

I enjoyed caring for the mothers with the small children. I felt so sorry for them having to leave their homes and all their possessions. Little did I know that a few years later I would go through the same thing on our journey for survival.

Working with the Red Cross, six of us girls had to stay in the Army three months longer. But we didn't mind the assignment as we enjoyed helping those homeless people. Our duty ended about 6 PM and we were on our own. The lights went out at 9:00 p.m. and the doors were locked. Sometimes we sneaked out to see a movie. We left a window open in the basement for us to crawl through in the dark and all the way up to our room.

Many long-forgotten memories come to the surface as I'm writing this. I hope you enjoy reading it.



Arbeitsdienst-Army camp



Guesthouse



me (Edith)



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Jewish girl me



The girls scrubbing the wash bowls



camp bunk beds



still my friend Lotti



The School building in Ortelsburg



Girls having a party in that building