

Edith Krebs in the Arbeitsdienst 1940

CHAPTER 9

EVENTS IN 1940



In 1940, I was drafted into the German working Army (Arbeitsdienst), the Brown Uniforms.

Young men and unmarried girls, 18 years old, were obliged to serve in the Arbeitsdienst. Girls had to serve six months and men one year. The men were the ones that built the Autobahn, the beginning of the Freeways. There were 48 girls in this camp, 12 to a barrack. This was a men's camp before and didn't have many things that other girl camps had. A generator produced electricity for the camp some hours a day. It was very hard at first getting up at 5 AM, lining up for roll call, then exercising with running through the woods for an hour. We didn't have water in the barracks. Since it was winter and snow on the ground, we had to fill up a large stainless steel dish with snow each evening. It was melted by morning to wash ourselves in the nude. We heard later that soldiers stationed close by enjoyed seeing us bare girls through the window of the washroom. No bathrooms in the barracks, we had to use the OUTHOUSES.

We were assigned each morning work for the day. First I was sent to help a Polish family. It was so dirty there. The grandma could not speak German. In the kitchen there was a broken down bed in one corner with a torn mattress on it. Chickens

were on the table and bed. At dinner time a big bowl of food was set in the middle of the table and forks placed around for everyone. It was very unsanitary and made me sick. When I got back to camp I reported to sick bay. Thank goodness, I didn't have to go back there again. The next place was better, I helped a single man take care of the house. After that I had kitchen duty. Getting up at 4 AM, we also had to prepare meals when our officers had male company. One time two men officers with horses came and tied them to a fence. Another girl and I decided to take a ride. I enjoyed myself, having been expert at riding, but the other girl was thrown off. So one of the officers was left without a horse as it ran away. Nobody told on us. Another time a few girls went on the barracks roof of an officer we did not like and made a lot of noise while the officers were entertaining guests. Again nobody turned us in.

The head of my barrack was a Jew. She had planned on making the Arbeitsdienst her career and becoming an officer. I wonder what ever happened to her.

One of the girls was so stuck up, thinking she was better than the rest of us. We fixed that. We put her wash dish filled with melted snow under her bed sheet and pulled strings around her bed. Since we always went to bed in the dark, she was in for a big surprise. She became a good friend after that. We needed each other.

One of the girls came down with diphtheria. So we were quarantined and could only write one postcard to our parents. I was writing to so many soldiers, cousins, friends only because it did not cost to send letters to them. I wrote as many names I could on the postcard to my mother and asked her to please write to them. But we again found a way. Soldiers stationed in the next village came close to the camp at night and one of us would crawl under the fence to bring them the mail.

Out of the 48 girls only one got her monthly period, for the other 47 menstruation stopped from Day One. We never did find out why. I gained 30 pounds the first month, and became so sick that I needed to see a doctor by December. The result was I could go home for a week for Christmas. This helped right away. I just needed to lose the 30 pounds after that.

My boyfriend Herbert came to visit me at the camp. He stayed in one of the guest rooms. I was not allowed to go there and he was not allowed to come to our barracks. But my friends helped. Some watched outside as Herbert crawled through the back window.

I was also writing to strangers in the Army and one time I was to meet a sailor at the train station. As I saw him come off the train I did not like his looks and just walked away. Not very nice and I received a nasty letter to prove it.

I was transferred to work with the Red Cross with five other girls and had to serve 3 months longer. During that time, by agreement with Hitler and Stalin, parts of Poland and all Baltic countries were taken over by Russia. Thousands of Lithuanians left their homes, coming through Germany. We helped mothers with babies in their arms fleeing Russian rape squads. We felt so sorry for those people who were forced to leave their homes and all their possessions. Little did we know that the same fate lay ahead for us. I really enjoyed helping those women and children. We were asked if someone could draw pictures, and since I always loved to, I agreed to draw fairy tale pictures on all the blackboards in this big school building. For the little tots I drew pictures of flowers and fruits above. There was a big write-up and pictures in the city newspaper about that.

I met a wonderful friend that was stationed in the Army there. We were really just very good friends. He had a girlfriend and I had Herbert. We understood each other and talked things out that were happening in our country. Sad to say, he was killed during the war.

We had more freedom now and went to movies and sometime dances. Only we were to be in by 9 P.M. as the doors were locked. When we stayed out longer we opened a basement window where we crawled through in the dark. Those are precious memories. Herbert and I met during my stay there and he asked me to marry him. I felt I was still too young and told him so. His answer, "Tell me when it's time."

After serving in the army for nine months, I went to stay with my grandparents, Karl and Wilhelmine Sorge, in Drueckenhof, state of Briesen, province of West Prussia. I attended a business school there in the city of Briesen. Poles and Germans who grew up together in that village were friends. One day a friend, who had become a party member, came and told our Polish neighbors that the Nazis were coming to take them away the next night. Their belongings were transferred from their house to my grandparents' house. The daughter Rosa stayed with my grandparents as a helper. Later we heard that these people were placed in a camp until after the war and suffered many hardships.