

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Lony Smith

Current home town: Dayton, Ohio

Age: 80

It was May 1945, in a small town in Germany. The name I'll never forget was "Tirschenreut." Fifty children, aged 6-14, were huddled together in a small room. If you looked into their faces, you could see fear mingled with tired resignation. I was 13, and one of them. Even though the room was tiny, dirty, and cold, there was no place we would rather be at this time. All other towns in this area were deserted by civilians in order to get out of the line of fire. The Germans were retreating and the Americans were taking town after town. Before getting here, we had been on the road for days. It was hell on earth, just walking along, with the American Army about four miles behind us, hearing constant explosions in the background, ducking into the ditches to get out of the way of the planes that were strafing the territory day and night.

This crummy room was like Heaven compared to all of that. We were safe here, at least from the bombs, because in the center of town flew a big Red Cross flag, making this neutral ground. No one would attack or bomb it. There were no defense stations. There were just houses filled with the wounded, the dead and the living women and children deadly afraid of what they knew would happen. The Americans would come. The thought alone made me feel weak in my knees, and twisted my stomach. I knew what they would be like. The posters throughout the war showed them as big, mean-looking soldiers, loaded down with ammunition, a knife between their teeth, ready to kill anyone that came into their path. I tried to picture how they would kill us. Would they shoot us? Would they hang us one by one? No, I thought that would take too long. They'll have to keep going to get to Berlin.

Then it came to me: They would just toss a grenade in here and, wham! Everyone would be gone. Simple as that! But, why? It went through my mind, why would they have to kill us? Then I remembered what we had been told all these years. Everyone that was not with Hitler was an enemy out to destroy us. So that's why the Americans will kill us. For a minute, a thought lingered in my head. Could it be that we had not been told the truth? What if they were people just like us? No, it had to be true. Our fathers would not be out there trying to stop them from destroying us.

Well, I was to find out soon, for now we could hear shouting on the streets, then three loud shots. It sounded like a salute over a grave. There were the sound of tanks rolling down the cobblestone streets, and more shouting. This time the sounds of it ran cold chills down my back. Why was I so afraid? Was it the thought of getting killed? No, I reasoned, because we were exposed to it night after night in the air raid shelters. We developed a shield against fear. Your feelings get numb and you rebel at being shackled down by it. So why then, did I feel this way? All my barriers were down and my composure melted away.

Slowly the terrible claws of fright gripped my heart. By the time the heavy footsteps were coming up the stairs I was horror stricken. My eyes fixed on the door, expecting to see Satan, himself. After a second of silence, someone kicked open the door and stuck the barrel of a gun through it. That sight sent us

scrambling for safety, trying to find a place to hide. But it was a futile attempt since there was simply no possible way to escape. We just had to stay put and wait to see what was coming. And come, they did. First the gun, then the top of a helmet, then the whole lot of them were in the room, dirty-faced, tired looking, with uniforms in need of soap and water. But their eyes were wide awake staring at us from beneath their helmets, watching us.

Slowly, one by one, they started to talk among themselves. Their voices mingled and one chuckled as if amused. One of them pushed his helmet out of his face and smiled, then dug in his bag and offered some candy to us. But no way would anyone of us accept any. Surely it was poisoned. After about five minutes, they left, leaving us wondering what would happen to us.

We found out the next day when a different group of soldiers came and escorted all of us down stairs and loaded us on to trucks. Now I was sure that they took us out to shoot us, one by one. So this is how it would end. At this point it seemed not to matter to me anymore. The last few years had been spent in refugee camps, always moving away from my home town, Berlin, where the bombing was never ending.

Suddenly, the trucks stopped and we were led into a big tent that turned out to be a mess hall, where smiling soldiers were handing out food to all of us. It was hard to comprehend what was happening. Instead of killing us, they were feeding us! After this experience I realized that one has to keep one's eyes wide open, and look closely behind all propaganda offered from all sources.

I was 13 years old at the time this all happened. Today I am 80 years old, and a naturalized American citizen, married for 55 years to one of those Americans I was so afraid of back then.