

The Coldest Winter

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It was January 1945 in Germany. History would later record it as the coldest January in Europe of the 20th century. Even had the war gone well, the German people would have needed to tighten their belts. But they were losing the war and had already eaten their belts, the rats, the cats and the dogs, and now they were starving. Despite the endless propaganda, rallies and speeches, the commandant, like most thinking Germans, knew the war had been lost in January 1942 with the retreat from Moscow at the hands of the Red Army and the coldest European winter of the century. Now, the great winter counter attack on allied forces in the west upon which all their hopes depended had failed and unconditional surrender was inevitable by spring. The commandant longed for the end of the war, to see his family again, and for an end of the bitter, interminable cold.

He rose from his desk and looked out beyond his office window to the snow and a row of crude wooden barracks. He began to reminisce upon the horrors of the two winters he spent on the Eastern Front and suppressed a shudder when a soft knock at his office door pulled his attention back to his office.

“Enter,” he commanded, annoyance in his voice.

A young orderly opened the door, came to attention and said, “Sir, a dispatch,” handed it to the commandant, saluted smartly, turned on his heels and left, closing the door softly.

The commandant sighed, massaged his temples and frowned as he contemplated the dispatch. Whatever it contained could not be good. He knew that much without opening it. There was no good news anymore. There was another knock, several sharp raps this time.

“Enter.”

“Sir,” SS Major Hoffmann to see you,” the orderly snapped.

“Show him in.”

“Yes sir.” The orderly stood aside as Major Hoffmann brushed past, clicked his heels, thrust out his right arm and barked, “Heil Hitler.”

The commandant did not return his salute. Waving him to a chair near the desk he said, “Please sit, Major.”

The major’s body language betrayed his irritation at this breach of protocol, but he said nothing. A cold smile curled his lips and he sat. The commandant despised the SS. As a career soldier with a sense of honor, he loathed their mindless obedience, arrogance, and sadistic cruelty.

The major crossed his legs, and without asking, slowly removed a cigarette from his coat pocket, pulled an ornate silver lighter from the same pocket and lit the cigarette. He took a long drag and leaned head back to exhale a cloud of smoke.

"I imagine you have read the dispatch from Berlin?" he asked.

The commandant held it up. "No, not yet."

"Then allow me to summarize its contents." His smile was warm this time. He made a sweeping gesture with his cigarette. Before the commandant could reply, he continued. "A couple of thousand American prisoners arrived here a few days ago. I want the Jews."

The commandant shook his head in disbelief. "Major Hoffmann, I already hold more than 50,000 allied prisoners in this camp. That is nearly triple the number it was built to house. I can barely feed them. Their barracks are mostly unheated, sanitation is almost non-existent. Men die in droves here. We stack the bodies in frozen piles outside because the morgues are used as barracks now. They will stay there until the ground thaws so we can bury them. I have nowhere near the number of guards to keep the prisoners here should they decide to leave en masse. They only stay because they have nowhere else to go and are more likely to die outside the camp than in it."

Major Hoffman flicked an ash into a plain glass ashtray. "We all have problems, Commandant. Mine happens to be getting rid of Jews."

"The Americans you mention arrived half starved. The commandant continued. "Their commanding officer tells me they were shipped here in unheated boxcars and then marched for days without food or water. Those unable to keep up on the march were beaten and left to die in the snow. Is this true?"

Major Hoffmann spread his hands in supplication and shrugged. "Considering how stretched our resources are, I would have preferred to shoot them when they were captured, except we cannot spare the ammunition." He laughed at his attempted levity. The commandant did not.

"They are fortunate a train was available, or the march would have been much longer, Commandant, and you would have fewer prisoners to worry over. The way it worked out is unfortunate for you, but things will improve slightly when I take the Jews, no?"

The major crushed his cigarette in the ashtray on the commandant's desk and stood to leave. "There are probably a couple hundred of them. Be so kind as to segregate them. Trucks will arrive tomorrow and take them off your hands."

"Where will you take them?" the commandant asked.

“Take them?” the Major replied. “I told you, Commandant, resources are scarce. These vermin will go to a labor camp. There, they will work to defray the cost of their extermination by the Fatherland.”

“Don’t you think we’ve murdered enough Jews, Major?”

The major paused and stoked his chin. “Do you have some reservation about following this order, Commandant? If not, I will bid you good day.”

There was no mistaking the threat in the question. As the Reich collapsed, the SS tightened its grip. Any challenge to its authority was met with a firing squad, or worse. Even though he outranked the major, the commandant harbored no illusions about their relative authority.

After the SS officer was gone, he summoned his orderly. “Get me Sergeant Weber,” he ordered.

While waiting, he considered his situation and fondly recalled the summers spent between wars vacationing in America with his family. The major was clearly a fool, he concluded, who knew nothing about Americans if he imagined they were much different from other people. Otherwise, he would know they would never willingly or under duress give up their Jews or anyone else to their enemies to save themselves. Americans segregated themselves by race, religion, ethnicity, and class. They resented each other but closed ranks when collectively threatened. Americans would lay down their lives to save comrades on a battlefield they would shun at home.

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter.”

“Sergeant Weber is here, Sir.

“Show him in.”

A very large, powerfully built soldier with fresh snow on his uniform marched into the office, came to attention and saluted. He did not say Heil Hitler. The two men served and suffered together on the Russian Front, were wounded by the same shell and assigned to this stalag upon recovery. The sergeant was the only man in the camp with whom the commandant spoke casually.

“Gustav,” the commandant began, “I need you to tell the American commander of the new prisoners to make me a list with the names of the Jewish soldiers under his command and deliver it to you by lights out.”

“Yes, Sir.” He waited for further orders. When none came, he spoke. “Will that be all, Sir?”

“No, if the commander fails to comply, bring him to me. That will be all. Thank you, Gustav.”

The commandant broke for a lunch of black bread and tea before beginning to finally deal with the mundane, daily logistics of running a prison for 50,000 men he could not care for and who would soon become his jailers. He thought it unlikely they would accept his excuse for their treatment as being the best he could do under the circumstances.

He worked on schedules, deliveries, inventories, personnel issues, and maintenance matters until his mind drifted to memories of his wife and children on their last camping trip to the Adirondack Mountains of New York State in the summer of 1940. Evening was fast approaching and the light beyond the window was fading when his reverie was broken by the soft tap on his door that signaled whatever waited beyond was not a visit from the SS or the Gestapo.

“Enter.”

“Sir, Sergeant Johnson is here to see you,” the orderly said.

“Show him in.”

An American soldier almost as big as Gustav entered with the German Sergeant close behind. “Close the door and guard it, Gustav, if you please.” The commandant next spoke to the American in English. “Please, have a seat Sergeant.” The American squared his shoulders and rose to his full height.

“I would prefer to stand, sir.”

“As you wish. You are here, I assume, because you declined to compile the list of names Sergeant Weber requested. Is that not so?”

“That is so, Sir.”

“I see, and why is that so?”

The American set his jaw and spoke. “That is so, Sir, because I am not required by the rules of war to identify my men by religious or ethnic grouping, only by name, rank, and serial number. I will dutifully provide you with that information if you wish.”

The commandant smiled. “Do you smoke, Sergeant?”

“I gave it up when I was captured and had no choice. I have to admit it was the only good thing being a guest of the German army has done for me.”

“Would you care for one now?”

The American declined with a “No thanks” and a slight shake of his head.

“Very well then,” the commandant said, “let’s get down to business. Sergeant, I need you to answer a question for me, and I need for you to consider your answer carefully. Do you understand?”

“I’m all ears.”

The commandant was at first confused by this answer then laughed. “Ah, yes! American idioms. You must excuse me. My English is...um, rusty.”

The American relaxed slightly. “It’s a lot better than my German. About all I know is “a beer please and thank you.”

“Well,” the commandant continued, “you can improve it after the war, which will end soon. That brings me back to what I said a moment ago. Please, consider the answer to the question I am about to ask you very carefully.”

“Okay, shoot.”

With a slight nod of his head and a hard look, the commandant began. “Are you refusing to give me the names of the Jews under your command, Sergeant, or are you telling me there are no Jews under your command?”

Even Gustav, who spoke just enough broken English to issue short commands, sensed that something serious was happening. The American’s body tensed. The commandant’s expression was as unreadable as the face of a sphinx. Deep silence pervaded the office. Then Sergeant Johnson spoke.

“I cannot give you the names of Jews in my command, Sir, because there are no Jews in my command.”

For a moment the commandant’s eyes closed. “I assume that means your men hold no identification or personal affects that would belie that statement.”

“No sir, they do not.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. That is all. Sergeant Weber will escort you to your barracks. Good night.” Both soldiers saluted and left. The commandant returned to the Adirondack Mountains.

Major Hoffmann arrived later than expected the next afternoon with a dozen trucks and a company of armed men to collect his Jews. Loud knocking by the orderly ushered him and a pair of junior officers into the commandant’s office. He greeted them with a bottle of cognac and cigars that he carefully hoarded for just such special occasions. He poured three snifters and passed out cigars and a lighter

“Gentlemen,” he said to his guests, “I give you a toast to our thousand-year Reich and to victory over our enemies.”

“Especially, over the Jews,” Hoffmann added.

“Especially over the Jews,” the others repeated in chorus.

Hoffmann and his underlings seemed jovial enough at the chance to celebrate the murders they were about to commit. Well into their second bottle of cognac they did not notice Gustav talking to the NCO in charge of the convoy or even hear the trucks when they left as empty as they arrived. Shortly after, Hoffmann got down to business.

“Tell me, how many Jews do you have for me, Commandant?”

“I know this news will not make you happy, Major,” the commandant said, “but we have no Jews here.”

The major choked on his cognac. His aides protested. The commandant shrugged. “No Jews here, gentlemen. I am sorry, but we conducted a thorough investigation and found none. Not one.”

“What game are you playing? The drunk Hoffmann demanded, jumping to his feet, and tossing his brandy snifter to smash against a wall. “This is outrageous. We sent you 2,000 American prisoners. Of course there are Jews among them! I am placing you under arrest, Commandant, until I get to the bottom of this.”

The major reached for his sidearm but froze when he looked down the business end of a pistol the commandant held. At that moment Gustav entered carrying a submachine gun. He waved the three SS officers to their feet and pointed to a place he wanted them to stand against an interior wall.

With the orderlies help, it took only a few minutes to disarm, tie and gag the major and his men. A few minutes later, Gustav left and returned with their driver at gun point. That night the commandant altered the guard schedule enough so no one saw him and his conspirators force the SS men into their car.

Earlier that day, Sergeant Johnson and a detail of American prisoners under the watchful eye of Gustav, partially dug a large dead tree up by its roots. They used rope and muscle to pull it partway over and left it teetering at a sharp angle over the road from camp, secured with a brace of lumber. If the brace was removed, a good shove would topple it. It was a simple matter for Gustav to drive the SS car to where the tree waited and for the commandant, the orderly, and Sergeant Johnson to follow in the commandant’s car. Flashlights to see by, and sledge hammers to remove the brace did the rest.

An investigation would later conclude that the three SS officers had died in an unfortunate accident, the causes of death were recorded as blunt force trauma and exposure. The report noted the irony of a tree, even a dead tree, that was anchored in frozen earth, falling suddenly on a calm night at just the right moment to crush a passing car on a dark, lonely road.

When the matter of Jews and the return of the empty trucks arose, the commandant produced document forged by his talented orderly to the effect that all the Jews ever present anywhere in his camp had been long ago sent to slave labor camps and that the unfortunate SS officers did not return with the convoy because they were being feted by the commandant.

The allied armies grew closer as the weeks past. The commandant continued to do what he could to keep 50,000 prisoners of war alive until they arrived. During rare, free moments, he longed for and hoped to one day return to the Adirondack Mountains where his Jewish wife and children waited safely for his return.