1945: First Encounters with Americans

Written for my mother Elisabeth Behringer in gratitude

"So, now we're at war with the Americans too," announced the Gräfelfing school principal Thalhauser to his 4th-grade class in December 1941. "But don't worry, children: America is far away, and there's an entire ocean between us. We can't get over there, and they can't get over here!"

But in early May 1945, they were here, even on Lochhamer Jahnstraße. We children had gathered at the first house on the corner of Maria-Eich-Straße to play at Rüger Hansi's place, pressing our noses against the kitchen window when a huge tank came around the corner. Good heavens! It had a star painted on it—could the Russians have come? But no, two young American soldiers were looking out from the turret and suddenly turned it, along with the cannon, toward our window. Without any military training, we all ducked away in a flash. Nothing happened. After what felt like an eternity of silence, our curiosity got the better of us, and we peeked out again. The two Americans outside were laughing themselves half to death as we reappeared one by one like puppet heads.

The ceasefire came on May 8. The combat troops no longer had to fight, and they settled in as best they could in the already overcrowded town, which was filled with Munich bomb victims and refugees from the East. The most beautiful houses were seized first by the occupying forces, and the people of Gräfelfing squeezed in even tighter. Encounters with the Americans were rare, mostly noticed by the children. When the GIs went for evening walks—always in pairs, presumably for safety reasons—they kindly returned our greeting of "Good evening." My three-year-old little brother soon called the uniformed men simply the "Ihweling."

The Americans were also quartered in "our" Hitler Youth home. This meant we could no longer pick daisies on the colorful meadow in front of the building for Mother's Day as we had in previous years—entry for civilians was strictly forbidden. Later, however, we were allowed inside when we picked up uniforms to wash for our mothers. Each time, we received a nice bar of soap—orange-colored and strongly disinfectant-smelling. But we didn't have to return the rest when we brought back the cleaned uniforms, which had been laboriously washed and ironed by hand at home. In exchange, we sometimes got sweets or—something our mothers were far more excited about—a few cigarettes. Back then, cigarettes were the hardest currency, bringing a few much-needed groceries into the house.

A bit further down what is now Hubert-Reißner-Straße, just past the entrance to the old wooden gymnasium and the adjacent tennis courts, there was a small wooded area with a footpath leading to the train station. The German troops had previously built barracks there for their own use. Now the Americans found them quite handy. One day, however, they suddenly moved out, and we children searched the buildings for anything useful—perhaps a piece of old white bread or a not-quite-empty can of corned beef. The results were modest, but lo and behold: in one barrack, we found small packets of sugar! The fact that another shelf held a rifle and a few other items didn't bother us—we had no use for those. But the sugar packets! The fine cane sugar melted deliciously on our tongues… We happily took our loot and, still in the woods, encountered a lone GI. Only afterward did we realize that not all the soldiers had left. Well, the last Mohican probably didn't miss his sugar too much.

Right by the Gräfelfing train station, the "Weißen Rößl" served as the mess hall for the stationed American troops. For dessert, they apparently always had a cup of cocoa, which they brought outside,

half-drunk or untouched. There, German children stood with whatever containers they could find, collecting the sad leftovers. “Please, please,” echoed across the square—I can still hear it today.

But we were relieved that we no longer had to flee to the air-raid shelter day and night. Since January 7, 1945, when British bombs had landed just a few hundred meters from our houses, fear had weighed heavily on us. Even after the war ended, we were painfully reminded of its consequences. We children roamed the forests and meadows, hoping to find a few berries or mushrooms to ease our hunger. Our friend Ingrid Lenkeit and her cousin Reini Czybulka, who had fled East Prussia with his family just a few months earlier, were on one of these foraging trips. Near Kastanienberg, in the woods between Gräfelfing and Lochham along Jahnstraße, they came across some strange objects. The two picked one up and threw it aside. The consequences were devastating. The Americans had left behind live ammunition when they withdrew, and one of these shells—whatever it was—exploded.

German hospitals were in terrible condition at the time, so Ingrid and Reini were taken to an American field hospital. It was set up in front of Nymphenburg Palace—a vast collection of large tents. Ingrid could not be saved; she died two days later. Her cousin Reini underwent surgery for severe abdominal and leg injuries and survived. We children visited him, making the journey on foot with poor shoes or barefoot. We first walked to Pasing, took a short ride on tram line 19, and then marched on to Nymphenburg. Miraculously, we found the right tent among what seemed like an endless sea of them and were allowed in to see Reini. Thankfully, he was already improving, but right next to him lay a poor young American soldier. “One, two / one, two / one, two,” he gasped over and over. That night, he died in the same field bed where our friend Ingrid had passed away days before.

Still, another kind encounter with the Americans: one of the nurses brought each of us a slice of wonderful white bread, thickly spread with butter and topped with a piece of roast. Strengthened, our little group began the long journey home again—this time entirely on foot, from Nymphenburg to Lochham. Today, when I see the lovely sight of Nymphenburg with its great fountain, I still remember that sorrowful hospital city.

That summer was hot and felt especially long for us children, as there was no school and little else to do. So we had plenty of time to play. As “Indians,” we didn’t need much—there was still some string to string our bows, and we carved our arrows ourselves. But where were our targets? Moving ones were best. Not much moved on the streets back then. Then, a Jeep drove down Jahnstraße. We hit it! The reaction was immediate. With screeching brakes, the vehicle came to a stop, and the two American soldiers jumped out—on the far side for cover—armed with their rifles, peeking cautiously over the hood. When they saw us standing there dumbfounded, wearing three chicken feathers each as our “Indian” headdresses, they couldn’t help but laugh. The situation was saved—for them and for us.

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