



HEINRICH BÖLL

1927-1985

Novelist and Nobel prize winner, Böll was born in Cologne to a priest-Roman Catholic family. Drafted into the German army, he served on both the Eastern and Western fronts, ending the war in an American prisoner-of-war camp. His Letter to My Sons: War's End was his last piece of writing, finished in May 1984.

A LETTER TO MY SONS: WAR'S END

Dear René, dear Vincent,

If you should find in this the slightest trace of glorying in Germany's survival and reconstruction, cross it out, laugh at it, put it down to irony or anger; but believe me, I don't intend to fall into the tone of the older generation, always out to tell their young listeners what a hard time "we" had of it, and how easy it really is for them and always will be. Oh, those plucky types with their sleeves rolled up: they've still got them rolled up, even now—as I write, the notorious Amnesty Bill is being pushed through Parliament by the most brazen of them—even now the crooks are busy rolling over the Federal Republic.

No, it's no easier for you than it was for us: don't let them tell you otherwise. It was possible to survive the last war, and that's what I want to tell you about: our experience of *the end of the war*. "Telling a story" is a risky business—in every story-teller there invariably lurks a braggart or a show-off; but in actual fact he's a true hero as well or at least a true sufferer. Even the *Odyssey* is full of boasting, and what I want to tell you about is like a little *Odyssey*. I've written enough about the war; read it with a forgiving eye, and if you detect—as you may here—anything accusatory in the tone, it's only the German Reich that I'm accusing, its leaders and its people, never the victorious powers, never the Soviet Union. I wouldn't have any grounds anyway on which to accuse the

Soviet Union. I was all there a few times, and I was wounded there, but that's war, and it was always clear to me: no one *asked* us over there. It just so happens that in a war you get shot at—they had those mortars, Stalin's organ pipes," and the like; and sometimes you had to eat and drink things that were unsafe or unfit for consumption. When you're half-crazy with thirst (one lesson I will pass on to you—thirst is always worse than hunger!), you do drink from puddles and you forget all the warnings about germs and bacteria. You can tell I wasn't keen to fall into Soviet hands by the way that, from the autumn of 1944 onwards, I managed to keep to the west, although they would have liked to send me back eastwards. I did what I could. Anyway, soldiers—and I was one—shouldn't complain about the people they've been sent to fight against, only about those who sent them there.

* * *
Where should I start what is not a "story," but simply an account of how we experienced the *end of the war*? I suppose the best thing is to begin with my mother's death, on 3 November in Ahrweiler, while I was in hospital in Bad Neuenahr. I wasn't sick or wounded; I had been transferred from hospital in Ahrweiler to Dresden, then discharged from there and sent back to Ahrweiler. In order to get another spell in hospital after my leave had come to an end, I had once again helped Nature along a bit, with something I'd been given by a Cologne doctor who's still alive. After my mother's funeral we left the hotel in Ahrweiler, probably around the seventh or eighth November. Her death probably saved our lives. A few days after we moved out of the hotel, it was destroyed by a bomb with a direct hit. Our "move"? No, I shan't describe it. It would turn out as an adventure story, and there are enough of those already. One important thing, though: the lorry-driver was a saint—patient, gentle, friendly. We billeted ourselves rather forcibly, although by invitation, on my relations: Maria, Alois, Marie-Theres, Franz and Gilbert in Marienfeld, where your little brother Christoph is buried. Our welcome in our new home was appropriate enough: a bomb, the first to be dropped on the village since the war began. Nothing from me here about food and living conditions; all that's been done often enough. Six adults and three children in temporary accommodation. My father was almost seventy-five, and still fond of cigars. The only reliable source of tobacco was a Polish prisoner of war who worked as a joiner in the house next door. His name was Tomi, and he was a perfect gentleman in dress and demeanour.

We had one wish only: to live, not exactly for ever, but preferably a while longer, and without the Nazi pestilence.

How many novels would it take to describe the time between 3 November 1944 and April 1945? Remember that the Minister of the Inte-

rior was Himmler, and that after 20 July he was also the Commander-in-Chief of the reserve army: *my, our, Commander-in-Chief*. The internal terror that prevailed between 20 July and the end of the war has yet to be described.

We not only had the frivolous desire to survive this horror, we were hungry as well; there were nine, sometimes ten or eleven of us to be fed. Ask Annemarie, your mother, ask her about it when you get the chance: she knitted gloves that would have delighted any boutique, and in exchange she would get half a bucketful of potatoes, a few of them already starting to rot. The winter was a cold one, like all the winters of the war. Why do we remember them all as so cold? I don't know what an objective, meteorological view would be. What else could we do but beg and steal? The stealing was confined to firewood, which had to be chopped by the women in a little wood nearby, up to their knees in the snow, under the strict supervision of your grandfather. Later, in the temporary accommodation for the nine of us, he sawed up the wood expertly on the kitchen table, after first, equally expertly, sharpening the saw. Do you know the sound of a saw being sharpened, one tooth at a time, with a saw-file? The wood was wet, and paper scarce; how could your grandfather, who always insisted on doing it himself, get a fire going? Well, our accommodation was the former vestry, only reachable from the street by a ladder, and in the loft above were stored the posts that carry the banners on Corpus Christi Day and other processions. The wood was dry, and the thickness of the posts ideal. We called them "pastors," because one of the banners in the procession at Corpus Christi read "Bless Our Pastor." Every so often one of the "pastors" would have to be secretly got down from the loft under the cover of darkness and sawn up into stove-sized lengths. We often asked ourselves whether the "pastors" would last us till the end of the war (later on in the prisoner-of-war camp, with the approach of Corpus Christi, I wondered what would happen when the villagers found out that their "pastors" had disappeared!). But you can't light a fire just with dry wood and a little paper; you need matches or a lighter, and we had neither. And so your grandfather would position himself at the gate at six o'clock on dark winter mornings, and wait for someone whose lighter he could use to light a twist of paper. Nevertheless he used to curse those farmers, who got up too late for his taste; he got up between five thirty and six all his life, to go to Mass.

Your uncle Alois, a "spont" before his time, had the understandable, if also dangerous, inclination to absent himself from his unit on repeated occasions, which could quite easily have been taken as desertion. Officially he "served"—that is, did nothing—in the Hackefürer barracks in

Cologne-Mülheim-of-wretched-memory. He would borrow or somehow get hold of a bicycle and just turn up, usually exhausted and drenched in sweat, having cycled via Much to Marienfeld. We sometimes had visits from the military police (known as "guard dogs"). The military police meant real danger, and not just for Alois, whom they could have shot, or strung up from the nearest tree—no, I too had reason to fear their visits, because I wasn't always able to keep my papers up to date, or have them properly falsified. Once I had to hide in the broom-cupboard, and the "guard-dogs" luckily didn't look in there. The three children were useful for camouflage and distraction. Also we brothers had the good fortune to resemble each other, so that the neighbours could never be quite sure whether there was just one of us, or both, around at any time. That's why we couldn't go out and help with chopping wood in the daytime.

At this point, I must mention Johann Peters, the farmer from Berzbach near Much, who would not only give us two litres (!) of milk every day (!) in return for two worthless Kriegsmarks, but who would also—he was an amputee from the First World War, a Catholic and an anarchist—welcome a couple of German deserters to his stove, and give us the odd pipe of tobacco to smoke, which was worth considerably more than two Kriegsmarks. Milk soups of the winter of '44, maybe it's to you and farmer Johann Peters that we owe our lives! Two litres of milk a day in a winter in the war. Our evening milk soup was the only meal we could depend on. Fetching the milk by daylight became a dangerous business—sometimes Annemarie and Marie-Theres could escape the low-flying fighter planes only by leaping off the road into the ditch.

Fear and hunger, hunger and fear of the Germans. Perhaps now, Vincent and René, you'll understand a bit more what we so often tried to explain to you: why even today shopping for me is always panic-buying, why I always get too much bread, too much milk, eggs and butter, and cigarettes preferably by the carton; and maybe you'll understand why I'm continually astonished that I didn't spend the rest of my life sitting by the stove, reading with a few cigarettes to hand. After all, I was married to a secondary-school teacher, decently well-off, whose salary would, while modest, have been enough for us all. To sit by the stove and read; to be free for just a few hours from fear of the "guard-dogs" and of Herr Himmler, the Minister of the Interior, and Herr Himmler, the Commander-in-Chief, and his laws and his emissaries: it'll help you understand also how the merest hint of Fascism throws me into a panic; why I always keep my car filled up with petrol, why I like to have enough money in my pocket to last at least a week, and why I live within reach of the Dutch and Belgian border. Crazy, I know, crazy. And perhaps you'll understand that only fear can make you brave—only the situation where the choice is between being courageous and being destroyed—and that

it was this fear that gave me the courage to exist on faked papers, which I then boldly handed in at some army office for genuine ones, to be faked in their turn. Don't take this as a tip or advice from me, René and Vincent, just as a statement on my behaviour, which at the time felt "historically correct," in view of the imminent *end of the war*—something historians will see entirely differently. If it should happen to you, it will happen quite differently. Advice isn't much use there.

The first time I falsified my papers was in the spring of '44, when I persuaded the girl who was making out my hospital discharge in a Hungarian hospital to leave a blank under the rubric "Destination." My fountain pen probably saved my life: in the toilet of the train, I wrote in "Metz," the westernmost point still in Nazi hands. Otherwise I would have had to report for a front-posting in Debréçen—and the chaos in the Balkan theatre of war in the autumn of '44 you can read about in any account. From Hungary via Ahrweiler to Metz, from Metz via Ahrweiler to Dresden, from Dresden via Ahrweiler and Bad Neuenahr to Marienfeld. I want to describe *one* moment from all that time. It must have been September or October '44, and I was coming from Munich or Vienna to change trains in Remagen. As I went down the subway stairs to the Ahrweiler platform, your mother was coming down the opposite steps into the same subway—and we met in the tunnel! Can you understand how even after forty years our hearts still quake when we travel through Remagen?

I had gone to Marienfeld with genuine papers, my discharge from hospital in Neuenahr. As the expiry date came nearer, I panicked and travelled to Siegburg, having again first "doctored" myself, duly arrived there with a temperature, and got the document extended. The extension ran out, I changed the date; that date too elapsed and I presented myself, again with a temperature, to a civilian doctor in Much who extended the faked date, thereby making it almost "official" again. I faked the "officially" extended date, that too elapsed—and the scrap of paper became so tatty and so covered with typed-in corrections as to be unusable. Do I need to tell you that we weren't just longing for the Americans to get through, we used to pray, even curse them on their way? But they still didn't come. Do I have to describe our alarm when my brother Alois kept going on longer and crazier walkabouts away from his unit?

It occurred to me that I had one more card up my sleeve. After all, with three or four months in hospital and so many periods of illness at home I was still, in the German army's terms, a "reconvalescent," and thus before they could send me back to the war again I was still entitled—what "entitlements" did you have anyway, with Herr Himmler as

Minister of the Interior and Commander-in-Chief?—to some "convalescence leave." With my utterly tattered bit of bumf, the best thing seemed to me to return to the bosom of my damned unit, called a "reserve force," based in some miserable dump south of Mannheim. I went there. Yes, went. All the stations were like enormous caravanserais, swarming with exhausted, nervous, mostly filthy groups of people with their squalid baggage: civilians, "ordinary" travellers, bombed-out refugees, soldiers, POWs, policemen of all species . . . then I got a few things mixed up; the chronology isn't quite there, so I'll give you just a few guaranteed absurd details.

The reserve unit was quartered in a tobacco-village in Baden, I've forgotten its name. A company usually numbered just over a hundred men, but there were 800 in mine, and they stood there on parade, variously grumpy and cursing: some without an arm, others a leg, or both legs, or both legs and an arm, on crutches, with improvised artificial limbs, waiting for their pension-claims to be settled, decorated heroes queuing up for a dollop of dried vegetables. I suppose it was January or February, freezing cold, and you only got a coat if you put yourself down as "fighting fit." You slept in tobacco-sheds from which the tobacco had wisely been removed or confiscated. The false limbs were hung up at night from various hooks and nails on the wall, everything mouldy, foul coffee substitute, dry bread with a little jam. At least I'd got rid of my tatty, suspicious papers without any query and was legal again. I was cold and hungry, had to wait two days for my turn to eat. Evenings spent in farm-kitchens and the back-rooms of pubs, haggling over cigarettes; not a girl for miles, roll-calls barked out, shouting and swearing—oh, noble fatherland of mine, the way you treat your heroes, your crippled heroes (see *Märchen!*). Annemarie had lent me her wonderfully warm and light Turkish shawl for the trip and I'd created quite a stir with that, all draped in red. I straightaway got myself put down as "fighting fit," got a coat and, just as important, some genuine papers. I was given a "convalescence leave" note. Ask Annemarie about the years before that, the meeting in Remagen, the weeks in Metz, the Cologne apartments. Perhaps now you can understand what feelings and memories are set off in us by the stations at Remagen, Cologne, Bonn? When we visit the Kopelevs in Cologne, they live directly opposite the house in the Neuenhöfer Allee where we, newlyweds at the end of '42, experienced the worst of the bombing raids. One particular memory—the flat—surfaces irresistibly and unasked. I don't know how many times I stayed there, five or six or seven; the last was the night of 29 June 1943, when Cologne was almost totally demolished.

I can't locate the order given by Himmler in those last weeks of the war, allowing any soldier to shoot any other soldiers found "out of ear-

shot of battle." That made every German into a potential summary court-martial for every other German—even though the one doing the finding would himself have to be "out of earshot of battle." The number of executions was enormous, running into tens of thousands. Now we know that Himmler gave this order shortly before he tried to arrange a separate peace through Count Bernadotte—of which Hitler was of course unaware—to save his own skin. His honour was his fidelity. (The SS slogan!) The Commander-in-Chief tried to save himself while all around him tens of thousands of men were shot and hanged on his orders. Between 20 July 1944 and the end of the war, Germany was completely terrorized by Himmler, the Minister of the Interior. And on the radio, Goebbels's screeching. Let me tell you that the American army shot *one* deserter in Europe, just one, and his widow sued the Pentagon for years afterwards, for decades. No one knows how many German soldiers were executed; certainly upwards of 30,000. And was there one single German widow, fiancée, mother or sister who tried to sue the German Reich or its successors, or one of the surviving Field Marshals under whose jurisdiction the shooting or hanging took place? Of course there's no way of knowing how many of those who were executed found their way into the statistics of "war dead," and are possibly now immortalized on memorial plaques. . . .

I knew one "deserter" who was shot. It was in a village called Kaldauen near Siegburg, and he spoke to me briefly once when I was back with the army. He was an NCO with the unusual name of Schmitz, a quietly-spoken fellow, and he talked to me because he knew Maria and Alois. After the war I heard he'd been shot for desertion. He had left the front—Kaldauen is about three or four kilometres from the outskirts of Siegburg—to visit his parents, probably to have a cup of coffee with them, and one of those licensed German murderers must have caught up with him, "out of earshot" of the fighting. It wouldn't have taken long, and there was no fuss afterwards. A little later, in the early '50's, German women didn't oppose rearmament. I never understood that; maybe you can try.

Then things get a bit disorganized. I know for a fact that I was in Ludwigshafen at one stage. Why? What was I doing? Was I on the way to the tobacco-village in Baden? I suppose so.

I was also in Mainz, in February '45. As I hated hanging around in the gigantic mouldering station/caravanserai, I went into the town (yes, I can vouch for the truth of this "story"!), saw the sign "Arca Command," went inside—don't ask me why—asked for the "legal officer" of all people and, with my faked leave in my pocket, had my name sent in to him. Was I suicidal? No, I still wanted to live. The officer, a major, had me shown in and I told him a whole string of lies: how on the way back to

my unit I had heard of my mother's death (she was already dead four or five months), and had to attend the funeral, and I'd also heard that our flat in Cologne had been bombed (which in fact had happened a year and a half before), and so I had to go to Cologne as well as to the funeral to rescue my library and my papers, which were absolutely vital for me as I was finishing a doctorate (my official designation was the highly ambiguous "student," and of course the officer had no way of knowing or guessing, let alone checking, that I'd been called up during my first term at university). Well, this incredible man, a major or perhaps even a lieutenant-colonel, who looked terribly stern and Prussian, he *believed* me, or—this only occurred to me later—he pretended to believe me, because he knew the war was lost and wanted to save whatever lives he could. He allowed me a fortnight's leave, and there I was again with legitimate papers and time off. One thing you've experienced, perhaps, so you know it's not a boast, just a fact: I can be pretty cool-headed when I have to.

I know one other thing: it was this leave that expired on 2 March 1945, so it must have been mid-February that I found myself—for what reason I really couldn't say—in Mainz, *with* a coat.

A fortnight was generous, a fortnight was forever, and the Americans would have to get through some time. Those fourteen days, with a proper set of documents in my pocket, were just about carefree, except that I was afraid for my brother, who was in greater danger than the women of our family had realized. It was during that fortnight that I cycled to Cologne on Tilla's bicycle in order to check up on our flat and to buy some cigarettes on the black market. But after that, things get a bit confused again: I do know that on 2 March I stood on the Michaelsberg in Siegburg, and watched the gigantic clouds of dust that had once been Cologne roll over the plain towards Siegburg. Also, I'm absolutely certain that 2 March was the deadline of my very last legal leave, but did I alter this before Siegburg or after? Probably before, because in Siegburg that day I could easily have fallen into the hands of the *Heldenklaus* (detachments which went around quite indiscriminately nabbing soldiers and taking them to the nearest fighting unit—that is, into the notorious "earshot of battle"). My falsification this time was to type in a "5" after the "2," using my father's old office typewriter: the "5" turned out crooked, and it was in a different typeface. A fake like that wouldn't have helped me much if I'd fallen into the hands of a proper criminologist; then—I don't know, daren't think about it—some German moron could have shot me quite easily. I still don't know why I didn't type in a "0" after the "2." I had gained twenty-three days, twenty-three eternities, but why not twenty-seven? Even unfaked, the papers weren't worth very much, because in this phase of the war no one was given five weeks' leave at a time. Perhaps we were just absolutely convinced that by

them—at the very latest—the Americans, our liberators, would have got through. . . .

At some time I can remember going around bombed-out Bonn with Annemarie, probably to try and get into hospital again after “doctoring” myself once more. This time it didn’t work. And once—yes, this is all like “Once upon a time”—once I was in Engelskirchen with my sister Mechthild, where Tilla was arranging something again for Alois. It was the head-quarters of Field Marshal General Model, a feared murderer who at least had the decency to shoot himself in a wood between Duisburg and Disseldorf, aged fifty-four—two years younger than his supreme commander and nine years older than Himmler (yes, in 1945 Himmler was just forty-five; when you have the time work out how many murders he committed for each minute of his life). Strafing raids, the roads crawling with soldiers, refugees, evacuees—if anyone wanted to make a film about this they would need hundreds of thousands of extras. Troops advancing, troops retreating: who could tell the front from the rear?

We knew of course from listening to foreign radio stations (punishable by death!) that the Americans had gone on down the *Autobahn* from Remagen as far as Hennef, and had reached the river Sieg, which was only twelve kilometres away from us. Well, they had other plans: they moved east as far as Kassel, and together with the British who had advanced from Arnheim, they formed a pocket in the Ruhr where they trapped a large part of the German army—but they didn’t come to Marienfeld. So, the twenty-fifth came ever nearer, and this time there was nothing left to falsify and without valid papers and out of “earshot of battle” I’d have been strung up pretty smartly. Sometimes I think the chaos during and after the Thirty Years War couldn’t have been as great as it was in this one. The geographical area covered was much the same, but its population had increased many if not thousands of times over and the potential for chaos was far greater. Also, our enemies weren’t the advancing British and Americans: our enemies were the great death-and-chaos-specialists, one of whom called himself the Führer and sat in his concrete ivory tower in Berlin, and the other the Minister of the Interior and Commander-in-Chief of the reserve army, Herr Himmler; and they had transmitted their mania for destruction to subordinate organizations composed of great sections of the population. You’ll always be able to tell a German by whether he refers to the eighth of May as a day of defeat or a day of liberation. We awaited our “enemies” as liberators. One of the surviving Field Marshal Generals wouldn’t talk of “defeat” but of “lost victories.” Don’t read this as an adventure story, even though a few adventurous elements are unavoidable: read it as a crime-thriller, though it can’t be *that* exciting since the main issue—do they

catch him?—is settled inevitably by my own survival. The most exciting question you could ask would be: How did he manage not to get caught?

The twenty-fifth March came and went without the Americans crossing the Sieg and liberating us; there was cold comfort in the fact that even “by” after the “2” wouldn’t have made much difference, since on the twenty-ninth they still hadn’t.

There was nothing for it but to rejoin the German army. By now the question was: Where did you have a better chance of surviving, with the army or away from it? The answer we came up with, after giving it a great deal of thought, was with the army. Away from it, and without papers—that would have been dicing with death. But rejoining the army meant parting and further separation: a parting in wartime, and more especially in a Nazi war, could always be final, and it didn’t help much that we were convinced it “really couldn’t last much longer now.” After all, it had gone on for two years after Stalingrad, and if they’d had the chance the Germans would have prolonged the famous “five past midnight” to the break of day.

So, we prolonged our farewells. Annemarie accompanied me to the nearest army headquarters, which was a couple of kilometres away near a village called Bruchhausen. It turned out to be a staff headquarters: lots of people with red stripes on their trousers, a nervous staff who couldn’t make anything of this private who had just turned up and who weren’t able to give me legal papers in exchange for my ill-omened fakes. I was told to go on to a village called Birk on the way from Siegburg to Much, and was given some proper marching-rations: bread, sausage, margarine, cigarettes—and we extended our farewell further by sharing these together somewhere off the road between Bruchhausen and Marienfeld: we were both hungry, and your mother was pregnant. Annemarie walked with me as far as Much, a long downhill journey that she would have to make back uphill again later, and then we said goodbye at the crossroads down in the valley, with hordes of soldiers and civilians streaming past each other, sometimes into each other. Germany was on the move, and I had those rotten documents in my pocket. Yes, goodbye. No descriptions. How should I describe fifty or even a hundred farewells? In Cologne, Ahweiler, Marienfeld, Metz, Bitsch, St. Avold and elsewhere.

I trotted off towards Birk, with a wholly irregular walking-stick in my hand which caused an officer of the military police who was driving past to stop and give me a severe ticking-off for being turned out in a way unbefitting a German soldier. I was too upset even to feign remorse, told him where I was going—and he ordered me to get into his car. He looked stern and punctilious, and I was afraid—he was after all a military police officer—that he would ask to see my papers, or even take me in

immediately. He did neither, but dropped me without a word outside the unit's orderly room in Birk, waited for me to go in, and drove on. I gave my name to the duty sergeant and presented my papers, but before he could study them he was called away into the next room. I grabbed the wretched scraps of paper, my *corpus delicti*, and when he came back and asked where they were I said, "But you took them with you." He was surprised and confused, but left it at that; I was incorporated into the company, and was once more legal. That ill-fated leave-note must still be around somewhere among my untidied war-letters, that document which probably saved my life.

On with the thriller. I felt relieved and depressed at the same time after half a year, I was once more separated from Annemarie and the others, back with the German army. The excursions to the tobacco village, to Mainz and elsewhere, had been risky, but more calculable in their consequences. I was pretty miserable, especially not being able to phone, which had always been a comfort in the earlier years of the war. In the evening I went for a walk in Birk, despairing, but still toying with the idea of simply slipping away—only where to? Then, in the main street in Birk, I bumped into the daughter of a Cologne shopkeeper whom we had bought food from many times—and on tick for years. A nice girl, whom unfortunately I have never seen since. She took me "home" with her: to temporary accommodation, where I met her father, they had left home just two days ago, fleeing to avoid being recruited into the *Volkssturm* territories. We exchanged our news, and Herr Pop, as his name was, told me that he wanted to move nearer to the American lines to steer clear of the *Volkssturm*, and asked me whether he might hide for a day or two with my family in Marienfeld. I said of course, and he asked me if I would, as it were, book him in, and gave me as an advance a stout bag containing twenty-five pounds of sugar. Twenty five pounds of sugar, at the end of March 1945! How could I get it to Marienfeld this late at night? Well, I was crazy, the girl lent me her bicycle, I jammed the sugar into the basket and set off. It was madness, and perhaps this sugar-transport, "quitting my unit"—like a subsequent bicycle-ride under similar circumstances that I'll come to later—was my only act of "heroism": sugar for Marienfeld! I cycled down minor roads, avoided dangerous crossroads where military police and the *Heidekämpfer* might be lurking, pushed sugar and bicycle up embankments, and finally reached Marienfeld bathed in sweat. That was some homecoming! A surprise, and yet still painful, and again the problem: whether to stay or go back. Finally, my "sense of honour" prevailed: I had promised the girl I would return her bike, and in these times a bicycle was worth more than a fleet of cars. Bicycles played a big part in determining my destiny, to the good as it turned out. So I rode off in the middle of the night,

returned the bicycle, and crept back into our sleeping-quarters. Legal again.

Now the last phase begins, which I don't want to write about in detail because it's stuff you can read up on in any war book. In Kaldauen, I met Corporal Schmitz whom they later shot a few hundred yards from his parents' home; then I was transferred to Niederauel, facing the town of Blankenberg across the river. We were positioned facing the Americans, separated only by the Sieg, so that we could see with our own eyes the white, white bread—it shone like the moon. There was no shooting: it was forbidden, so to speak, because if a single German shot fell whole barrages of American artillery would be sent over in return. Dissolution, mayhem, barely any normal rations, stealing, milking cows, contriving to spend the night in barns and animal-sheds for the warmth—you may wonder why I didn't go over to the Americans right away and surrender to that white, white bread. The answer is simple: not only did I want to survive, I wanted if possible to survive without being imprisoned—a really frivolous wish. Alois and I had decided that we would go and hide in the little loft at home in Marienfeld, among the remaining "pastors," and "await developments" there. I wanted to be with Annemarie, at home, and besides I would have had to swim or ford the cold Sieg. I waited. Open talk of desertion: some had tried already—they had families living in American-occupied territory—and climbed and crawled their way along a ruined bridge—and were shot at, because they were taken for a reconnaissance patrol. No, I waited, and once more a bicycle led me into temptation.

Together with a few others I was ordered to escort our relief-detachment, a company from a bicycle-corps of Cologne policemen, from Allier back to Niederauel at night. It wasn't far from Allier to Marienfeld—twelve, at most fifteen kilometres. I was able to persuade one of the policemen to part with his bicycle. He must have been a saint because, as I say, a bicycle was precious, and how could you trust anyone in early April 1945, at the worst moment of Germany's chaos? Well, he gave it to me (I don't know his name, otherwise I'd put up a monument to him, like farmer Peters), and I rode off into the night, as muddled and impulsive as I'd always accused Alois of being, got to Marienfeld, saw Annemarie, took my father a couple of cigars—and more discussion: should I go or stay? Up into the loft with the "pastors," or back to Allier, which was tantamount to going back to the front? By now the poor people had even had someone else "billeted" on them in the "temporary accommodation." My father had common sense and advised me to take to the loft, but I could see the policeman's decent, honest face in front of me. I'd promised to take the bicycle back to him, and so I set off back to

Allner, down side-roads in the dark night. Later on I heard that the entire company of policemen and their bicycles had been wiped out.

We, my unit, moved on, through the Bröl valley towards Waldbröl an utter rabble, dragging this way and that. Once, I recall, we reached the edge of a village and saw white flags flying. Somehow—I can't remember exactly how it happened—the whole show broke up there and I set off home, until in the middle of nowhere I ran into this lieutenant who literally held a pistol to my head and forced me to join his own "unit," which bore the insane name "Garrison Brüchermühle": the tiny hamlet that gave its name to the last German army unit I belonged to must be situated somewhere between Denkingen and Waldbröl. I thought it best not to resist this madman, and so finally, after a few unpleasant days I came to be an American prisoner at Brüchermühle. Finally? I was surprised: we had begged, implored and cursed the Americans to come; it meant liberation, to be *finally rid of the Germans*—and yet, this was the surprise: I found it difficult to raise my hands. I found it difficult, but of course I did.

The rest doesn't matter so much now. A chilly night in an improvised camp in Rosbach on the Sieg, the Final Victory whisperings still going on. The thrilling drive through the Westerwald to Linz, across the Rhine to Simzig, Namur, Attichy—a huge camp. Of course, it wasn't a rest home. I had feared the worst, but it really wasn't half so bad in the end. It had always been the Germans who were the real danger, holding trials and doing away with "defeatists" in the latrines—and all this in April 1945, while the Soviet and American armies were fraternizing on the Elbe. No, no complaints. The important thing is that I was able don't ask me how, it's a mini-thriller in itself—to refuse the inducement of better rations, and not to do physical work. I thought to myself, If you do physical work now (it was absurd "work"), then you'll end up doing it for years, maybe decades into the future. Rather a few more months of hunger, I thought, than years of being a labourer somewhere. Perhaps that was the first occasion when I acted with "historical awareness." Still later, when the camp—200,000 men apparently—was broken up and handed over (sold) to the French, I was able, after a detailed test of suitability for work, to get categorized as "unable to do the work for which he is qualified." This was astonishing, as my occupation was "student." At this point, with about sixty out of 200,000 of us "unable to work," the Americans showed their sometimes surprising common sense: we were split off from the others, fed separately, almost well, and even got our own medicines who gave us washing things, until we were moved on, this time to a British camp near Waterloo. The British were very different, less obsessed with hygiene than the Americans, but there was proper food and lots of tea with milk and sugar, which the Germans

despised. To begin with, I wasn't a tea-drinker either, but I soon became one, acquired a taste for that incomparable English tea, and kept what was left over of it in a one-litre Belgian beer bottle that became my most precious possession. . . .

Too many things come back to me, and I must stop, otherwise I'll write a whole novel, and start "telling stories" and get into uncertain territory when I meant to stay on the "solid ground" of "true experience." Perhaps some things will be clearer for you now: why we're quite incapable of throwing bread away, why we hate pouring away tea or coffee, why I take what's left over of those precious commodities with me into my study after breakfast, and why I can't stop smoking cigarettes. And you should know that on my wanderings from 1939 to 1945, no Circe was able to lure me onto her rocks. The squalid sexuality in and around stations and trains at that time never held any attraction for me. Penelope was at once herself *and* Circe. You should also know that in the American camp were men with both legs amputated at the thigh who had been captured fighting with grenade-launchers: last ditch desperadoes. And that when a train full of British soldiers on their way home stopped next to ours at a station on the Lower Rhine, they passed us their half-smoked cigarettes.

Maybe now you'll understand why characters like Filbinger and Kiesinger—who smoothly, smirkingly survived everything, in untroubled bourgeois complacency—infiltrated us most of all. And you should know that Adenauer's celebrated move to release POWs concerned mainly the senior officers, the ones who thought in terms of "lost victories" rather than "defeat" or "liberation," and who were useful in the rebuilding of the German army (now called the *Bundeswehr*) and who were a bigger drain on pension-money than some invalid or shot-up soldiers, because they lived longer. Perhaps you'll understand better why our many trips abroad always had about them an element of running away, running away from types like Filbinger, who couldn't remember having participated in the execution of a man he'd sentenced to death. (Just imagine: he couldn't remember!) How many Germans there are who can't remember: not all of them judges, but all potential executioners, into whose hands I might have fallen. And what about "German nothing," a much-lauded group—how many of them sent their fourteen- and sixteen-year-olds to their deaths, sacrificed to Hitler, without resistance, without undue grief, some even with enthusiasm? There was one called Ferdinand Schörner, one of Hitler's personal favourites—in March 1945, he promoted Schörner to Field-Marshal General—whose counts martial were as notorious as Herr Model's, his soubriquet was "Bloodhound," his "charismatic measures" the terror of his troops. He died not in troops, like his beloved Fuhrer, but in the Year of German

Grace 1973, in Munich. I think he was one of those whose release Adenauer secured.

Around sixteen years ago, dear Vincent, dear René, one of Rudolf Hess's sons wrote to me to ask if I would join the long list of those pleading for the release of Herr Hess. I couldn't do it. *My conscience wouldn't let me*; and even now that Hess is ninety, *my conscience doesn't let me*. As late as 1946, in Nuremberg, this peculiar dove of peace was insisting that Hitler was the greatest son that Germany's millennial history had brought forth. And I can't get that whcedding, fanatical racist's voice I heard on the radio as a sixteen-year-old out of my head, and I can't forget that face I saw in the cinema news: the piercing eyes that asked for sacrifice and obtained sacrifice. No, I wouldn't protest *against* his release, but I can't plead *for* it.

And you should know that I refused to participate in the clearing-up in Cologne, as was the declared duty of every returning man. I didn't lift a single *public* stone, but quietly and alone, knocking the plaster from every stone, I cleared the debris in my father's workshop on the Vondelstrasse, which Alois was running then. Not one *public* stone. . . .

A few days ago, around mid-July, as I was finishing this report, SS General Karl Wolff died at the age of eighty-four. He was quite a spectacular Nazi, who in 1937 was already a General in the SS, Himmler's personal chief-of-staff, but who by late February 1945 was nevertheless convinced that the war was lost (you may laugh: by late February!). After negotiations through intermediaries with Alan Dulles, the German army in Italy capitulated. Well, well. Later Wolff was sentenced to four years in a labour camp, of which he served *one week*. Accused subsequently of complicity in the deaths of 300,000 Jews, he denied all knowledge of the death camps (and this was Himmler's personal chief-of-staff!). He got fifteen years in prison, and was released after seven. Remission of sentence. And lived on another thirteen years afterwards! That isn't a joke, dear René, dear Vincent, that's what *happened*. That's German history.

Your Father



HOWARD NEMEROV 1920-

Nemerov went to Harvard and during the war flew for both the Canadian and American air forces. He is now a Professor of English at Washington University, St. Louis, where he generates poems he describes as 'subversive.'

REDEPLOYMENT

They say the war is over. But water still
Comes bloody from the taps, and my pet cat
In his disorder vomits worms which crawl
Swiftly away. Maybe they leave the house.
These worms are white, and flecked with the cat's blood.

The war may be over. I know a man
Who keeps a pleasant souvenir, he keeps
A soldier's dead blue eyeballs that he found
Somewhere—hard as chalk, and blue as slate.
He clicks them in his pocket while he talks.

And now there are cockroaches in the house,
They get slightly drunk on DDT,
Are fast, hard, shifty—can be drowned but not
Without you hold them under quite some time.
People say the Mexican kind can fly.

The end of the war. I took it quietly
Enough. I tried to wash the dirt out of
My hair and from under my fingernails,
I dressed in clean white clothes and went to bed.
I heard the dust falling between the walls.