

## CHAPTER 6

### PRISONERS OF WAR

During March and April, the Army was moving so fast, Tim and his group of photographers had to hustle to keep up with it. Sure, we were winning the war and the folks back home were elated. But we heard little rejoicing around our hospital; when our troops penetrated deeper into Germany, prisoner-of-war camps were liberated and Army hospitals were crowded with cadaverous, lice-infected GIs –thousands captured by the Nazis during the Battle of the Bulge.

One soldier, with his arm around his scrawny buddy, both wearing Ozark patches from the 102d Infantry Division, were so elated to be free and unshackled that they insisted on walking unaided through the entrance doors and up the long circular stairway. Then, feeble from lack of food, they collapsed on the second floor and the medics had to carry them to bed. Two officers, too weak to be fed intravenously, died during the night. We felt so helpless; raised in an affluent America, even the doctors and nurses didn't

know how to save the lives of men starving to death. From January to July, PWs were the only deaths in our hospital.

Checking the roster for patients at the beginning of April, I found a familiar name, Richard Brill, a neighbor from Bedford—the first time a man from my hometown had been sent to the 198th. I knew him because he often went to Quaker meetings to hear Aunt Lena speak.

When I entered his ward, I hardly recognized him. His hand shielded his eyes, a bushy black beard covered his face. Had he, too, been a prisoner of war?

“Dick Brill, you're from Bedford and knew my Aunt Lena,” I greeted him with enthusiasm.

He removed his hand and squinted up at me. The voice of his eyes was sad and painful. “Oh, yes, Carolena Wood; yes, of course.” He sounded as if he were returning from a far distant land.

“I’m Emeline Howe. I lived next door.”

“Oh, I remember you.” He perked up. “Once you came to Carolena’s Sunday school class with a neighbor boy. He stood on his head all the time your aunt was speaking!” He chuckled softly.

“That was Bill Fearing! What a memory. Hooray, you can still laugh, Dick. That’s a good sign, it means you’ll get well—in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

“One of Carolena’s favorite expressions! I’m...

feeling better already—talking to an old friend from home, that's good medicine." I handed him a ditty bag of toilet articles. "Hey, how about a candy bar for a poor, worn-out soldier?" he asked.

"I'll have to check with the chief nurse. All the POWs are on a special diet."

"I was never a POW." His words made me sigh with relief.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"A newspaper, please—and read me the headlines, not very good at reading these days."

"Of course, I'll come back this evening and then we can talk more about Mt. Kisco and Bedford."

The rest of the day I was on duty in the craft shop. The ambulatory patients were making a map of Paris to mount on the wall so they would know where to go when they were well enough to get a pass. I helped them trace the routes of the metro, but my mind was not on the job. I was in Bedford, thinking of Aunt Lena and her distinguished record in Germany in the last war. I was anxious to know what Dick remembered about her.

After supper, I went back to his ward with a copy of the Paris Herald. I had renewed my make-up but still wore my hospital uniform, a washable, gray seersucker bag tied in the middle. I pulled up a chair

of *The Paris Herald*, I had renewed my make-up, but still wore my hospital uniform; a gray seersucker bag tied in the middle. I pulled up a chair and read him the account of Churchill following his troops into Germany and planting his feet firmly on enemy soil. Later I asked, "Tell me, Dick, if you feel like talking, where were you stationed and what happened?"

"I was wounded at Bastogne and taken prisoner – a POW for over 100 days, lost everything, including the picture of my wife. The Krauts didn't set my leg right so doctors in this hospital had to re-set it."

"And you didn't eat much to eat, did you?" Had the malnutrition affected his eyesight or had he been tortured with strong lights?

"Not much food," he sighed, covering his eyes again. "Too many of us – not much food for anyone in Germany these days." Then quickly his mind jumped back to happier times. "Who could forget Miss Wood, your wonderful aunt? She spoke so beautifully and always wore the same dress for every occasion!"

"That's the way she simplified her life, the Quaker way. She never had to decide what to put on in the morning – always that gray denim middy blouse and skirt – better looking than this seersucker one." I pulled the belt tighter around my middle.

Dick looked at me closely and said, "For years we thought she only had one outfit, but that middy and skirt were always clean and never seemed to wear out."

I laughed. "She had dozens of them made alike by the Black women in Yonkers at the Colored Orphan Asylum. When she was Acting Director many times, she took me with her. We drove to Yonkers lickety-split in her Model-T Ford."

Dick was restless. He tried to turn. I lifted his cast; he was too weak to do it alone. "Remember the brooch she wore at the V of her middy blouse— a four-pointed black star mounted on a larger red star, the emblem of the American Friends Service Committee?"

"Sure, as a kid I was fascinated watching it rise and fall on her bosom when she was moved by the poetry she read to us during her sewing class."

Dick smiled. "Wasn't she one of the founders of the Friends Service Committee?"

"Yes, with her brother and other distinguished Quakers in 1917. And, you know, after the Armistice, she was one of the first women to cross the border into Germany to help care for the starving children."

Dick folded his hands behind his head. "I knew she worked with Herbert Hoover and Jane Addams in Germany

But she seldom talked about those days.”

We were both silent for a minute. Then Dick said, “How fortunate she left this world before she had to know about Hitler’s Blitzkriegs. Let’s see, she must have died early spring 1936 – nine years ago before Hitler began his rampage so she never had to know about the fall of France, the bombing of London, or the battle of Stalingrad.

“I never thought of that!” To myself I added – and than God she never had to hear about the extermination camp discovered only a few weeks ago in Auschwitz. Out loud I said, “But Aunt Lena was a realist; she knew one woman couldn’t change the world. Her favorite poem was Emily Dickinson’s –

“I shall not live in vain  
If I can ease one Life the Aching  
Or cool one Pain.”

My voice trailed off as I smoothed Dick’s pillows and tucked his blankets. It was time for him to go to sleep but he wanted to talk. “I remember her funeral. My brother and I were there – her grave cut into the frozen ground and surrounded with friends from all walks of life and many different countries.”

“You know, Dick, that day was one of the saddest days in my life because Aunt Lena was my wise and faithful teacher, my guide and friend.” I bent my head



So he wouldn't see my spongy eyes.

Dick looked up at me intently. "Maybe you're a little bit like her." I caught my breath. No one had ever said that to me before.

Everyday I checked the newspapers to decide what stories to read to Dick. One paper wrote about Ed Morrow, the radio announcer's visit to the camp at Belsen where he saw horrendous piles of corpses – men, women, children. He was one of the first to describe such a camp to the rest of the world. But Dick shouldn't have to hear that report until he was well and strong again.

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, it was my afternoon off and I'd been invited to the Baroness de Neufville's for tea. First thing in the morning I went up to read to Dick. He looked more like his old self; the orderly had cut his hair and trimmed his beard. As he eagerly finished his bowl of warm oatmeal, I read him about the Russians shooting their way into Vienna.

Suddenly a radio down the hall burst forth with the staggering news that Roosevelt died during the night in Georgia. Maybe the announcer had made a mistake; -- we were so surrounded by the wounded and dying in Europe that we'd gotten into the habit of

assuming everyone back home was safe.

On the wards both Democrats and Republicans agreed that in the photos of Yalta the President has looked frail and tired out but the great question - why couldn't the good Lord have let him live long enough to celebrate the war's end?

Dick said to me, "If only he could have planted his feet on German soil as Churchill had done." According to the press, the British mourned him more than the citizens in his own country. Now it was Truman's turn. What would he be like as president?

Later in the day, I relaxed in the Baroness's comfortable parlor with her daughter Jeanne and several of her friends. After so many months living in institutional surroundings, the ambiance of a private home was intoxicating even though I was only sipping tea. The room was furnished with family antiques and hung against soft green damask walls were paintings of the sylvan French countryside. The scent of lilacs in a large vase on the piano and the sound of a fire sputtering in the fireplace, transported me for a moment back to Mother's living room in Bedford.

We talked about the President's death and Madame declared, "He was not only the President of your country, Mademoiselle Howe, but a world leader. We all



shall mourn him." Her voice was strong and beautiful. She was from Alsace-Lorraine and unlike Parisian women, wore no make-up to detract from her splendid brown eyes. But that afternoon they were so sorrowful, not sparkling like the day she brought flowers to the patients in our hospital.

Madame de Neufville told us that for four years she had bicycled out to her husband's estate on the Marne river, disguised herself as a maid and cleaned the house occupied by German officers. They never guessed when they held conferences around her large dining table, that she was tri-lingual and understood every word of their secret plans.

With a pack on her back full of fresh vegetables and a round of cheese made on the farm she cycled back to Paris with enough to feed her three children for another week. After the German retreat, American troops took over the estate. Parisians were still so short of food that Madam continued to peddle out to Chalons-sur-Marne and to bring home a round of Brie, fresh lettuce, artichokes, and carrots.

The ladies asked me to tell about my experiences and they seemed to enjoy hearing about crossing the Atlantic, Oulten Park, London and Etretat. When I had

tortured like her little friend's. "I worried about her for months and since August I've made inquiries every place. Yesterday, I met a woman who survived that camp. She told me just before they were liberated the guards marched her near her little friend and she heard her screams."

Madame swayed towards her bureau drawer, found a handkerchief, touched it to her mouth as if she were going to be sick. I put my arm around her. "I'm sorry to burden you - I had to tell someone. Think of her poor husband." She whispered, clinging to my arm. Her hands were icy cold. "Someday the world must know the evil in the hearts of Hitler's followers!"

She steadied herself against me, then took a deep breath, pulled her shoulders back and spoke out loud. "Someday this story must be told." With a shaking hand she hung the dress back in the armoire. "We will go down now and join the others. They do not know."

When it was time to go back to the hospital, silently Madame's eyes beseeched me - for warmth, for compassion? I kissed her good-bye to seal a promise, then walked slowly back to the hospital.

That night because Dick and I had been talking about her, I kept thinking of Aunt Lena and what a

an appreciative audience, I could make those days sound very funny. But the part about Rose pretending there was a Nazi officer under her bed was greeted by silence - no giggles, no smiles; that was not a joke for French women, too close to reality.

Jeanne quickly changed the subject saying she would finish school soon, then would make her debut in Paris that spring. And when Madame discovered I liked to sew she took me upstairs to ask my advice about the dress Jeanne would wear. It was a hand-me-down from a niece, hand-made of yellow organdy. When I admired the tiny stitches in the French seams, Madame told me the most ghastly report I've ever heard.

"The little dressmaker who made this evening gown was a friend of mine and a neighbor, a young Jewish woman, close to your age, happily married to an Aryan and pregnant with her first child. When she was about three months along they carted her off to the detention camp outside of Paris. When it was time for her to be delivered - "Madame bowed her head and whispered the last sentence as if she couldn't bare to say the words out loud. "The doctors and nurses, my compatriots, tied her legs together and left her dying in agony."

Madame bent over as if her womb, too, was in pain

blessing she had died before she had to hear that most of the German children she fed in 1919 were killed or grew up to be Nazis. I thought of her funeral my sophomore year in college and how I came down from Albany on the train. It was a fierce winter, the Hudson frozen over from shore to shore. When the snow melted, the water rose cracking and breaking up the ice - making weird groans that echoed across the river. A high tide forced huge chunks of ice on to the tracks and we wondered if our train would ever reach New York. Later when they lowered Aunt Lena's casket into the frozen earth, I felt my world breaking up around me, my path blocked by slabs of ice that might never melt.

Again those groans echoed in my brain as I thought of Madame de Neufville's story. Could the Allies ever win over such infamy frozen in the souls of Hitler's followers - more foul than the common understanding of evil - acts that even animals didn't do to other animals?

For weeks, months, years after that tea party the sight of yards of organdy or yellow evening dress, or the tiny stitches of a hand-sewn seam, would remind me of the little dressmaker. I pray that she and her baby are resting in peace.