

AMERICAN OCCUPATION AND THE DAY MY GRANDFATHER BECAME MAYOR

We got used to seeing American soldiers in the streets of our little town. This was the first time I saw black soldiers. I remember one of them who guarded an important road intersection. He was a big guy with a friendly smile who tried to talk to us boys and gave us chewing gum, our first ever. The “Rathaus”, the city hall, had become the head quarters of the city commander. Officers were going in and out and a stream of proclamations and orders flowing from it posted on street signs and lampposts. The occupiers behaved very orderly and so did most of the citizens. We had a curfew at night, which did not last very long. Life in our town became almost normal, with movie theaters reopening and people moving around freely. The good spring weather helped to overcome the shortage of coal, but the shortage of food was a severe problem.

We saw many widows in their grief with hungry children. Many other women were still waiting for husbands and sons they had not heard from in a while. My father was still missing at the Eastern Front. We had not heard from him for over a year and did not know whether he was alive or dead. My grandparents were of great support to my mother. Luckily I could

escape to them where I found some food. My sister was too small and stayed with my mother.

One spring day in 1945, only a few weeks after the Americans had marched in, I was working on my grandfather's farm in the small village of Neustedt in Thuringia. My grandfather was standing in the courtyard looking up at me in the barn, from where I threw down some hay to feed the cows. Suddenly an American army jeep with a driver and a young officer drove through the gate and came to an abrupt halt in front of my grandfather. My grandmother had heard the noise in the house. This was probably the first car she had heard in years. She came out of the house to see what was happening. The officer jumped out of the car and started to talk to my grandfather, who looked up at me and asked, "What did he say?"

I climbed down from the barn and with some broken school English and some broken German from the officer's side, we started a conversation. After a while I figured out what the American officer wanted and turned to my grandfather, "He said they have heard you are a good man and they want you to become the mayor of your village."

My grandfather looked at the young officer in sheer surprise, took the pipe out of his mouth and said to me, "Tell him I am too old for this and I have no experience for a task like this." He was at this

time only sixty-six years old, young for present time standards, but back in 1945 regarded to be rather old.

But the American wouldn't hear any of it. He gave my grandfather a piece of paper, declared that of this moment he was the mayor, and drove off.

As I later learned, this small ceremony at my grandfather's farm was part of a grander plan of how the American military government intended to govern in their occupation zone. Under the leadership of General Lucius D. Clay, Military Governor of Germany, his staff and advisers looked for good, decent Germans with a clean background, i.e. not former Nazis, to be put in charge of important administrative positions, from the heads of the various states down to the mayors in the thousands of towns and villages. In this way, great men such as Konrad Adenauer were appointed who became the pillars of the first West German government.

Well, my grandfather took his new assignment seriously. Many days I found him sitting at a table in the parlor near the window with his old metal-framed glasses perched on the front of his nose, reading papers and signing documents in old-fashioned German script. Sometimes, he received visitors and listened patiently to their requests and complaints. He was a very respected man in his village of only a few hundred souls, most of them farmers and their

families. He had no problem keeping order. People trusted him and therefore his orders were obeyed. It seemed to me that in a small way he started to enjoy his new job with all its power.

Right after the Americans moved in they started to issue proclamations, which were posted on lampposts, church doors, town halls, etc. The first was to give up all arms and the second was no fraternization between the German civilian population and the American forces. At first, my grandfather had no problem collecting the few old hunting rifles that were left in the village and, as for fraternization, there was no opportunity because hardly any American soldiers showed up in this small and lonely place away from any major highway. As it was, most of the young maidens who might have been tempted had moved to the neighboring towns of Eckartsberga, Apolda and Weimar to find work. Soon, despite all the proclamations, fraternization blossomed in these places to the extent that some of the young girls ended up as army brides in their new home country, America.

Our village had an effective communications system as it had only one main road. At one end was the graveyard and on the other end the school, with the local pub right in front, and the church, a little off from the road, in the middle. Whenever there was some news or a proclamation, an old lady walked down the village streets with a big bell in hand and stopped at various points to ring the bell. Whenever the village

folks heard the bell they came out of their houses to gather around and listen to her reading in a high-pitched voice whatever news she had to announce. Usually this ended up in some funny exchange of jokes and teasing, with laughter sounding along the street. This curious way of communication was already in use during the war because newspapers were rare and not everyone had a radio. At the beginning of the war, with all the victory announcements, the spirits were high, but toward the end there was no more laughter. The older people, with sons dead or, if lucky, still fighting, listened silently to the more and more gloomy news.

After the war, my grandfather hired the same old lady as his messenger and, with the news getting better, the laughter returned. I am not sure this continued. After a few months the Russians moved in to replace the Americans as the occupying force. This followed the agreement reached by the Allies in Yalta, which declared the land east of the Elbe River as part of the Russian zone. It was the beginning of a long misery for my old home country. I don't remember how long afterward my grandfather was allowed to continue as mayor. Not too long, I'm afraid. An old, faithful Communist replaced him.

The farms were soon expropriated and brought into big collectives where the formerly independent and proud farmers worked like slaves on their

land that, in many cases, had been in the family for hundreds of years.

My grandfather was trapped in East Germany, as were more than seventeen million people. He lived for the rest of his life, another twenty-seven years, in the farmhouse in Neustedt. He died in January of 1972 at the age of ninety-three. His wife had died of cancer more than twenty years before. He lived in the house with his son Walter, the younger brother of my father. Walter worked in the local farm collective to support not only his family but also my grandfather. These were tough and meager years.

My mother and father had left East Germany one year before my grandfather died. My father was the oldest son. When he found out that the East German authorities would not grant him permission to return for the funeral of his father, he was devastated. What a cruel regime!

I had left East Germany without permission years before. It was risky for me to go back. But when I heard that my father could not go I quickly decided that I must attend the funeral. Nothing would keep me from going over to East Germany to pay my last respects to our grandfather. I was the oldest grandson and loved my grandfather. We had developed a very strong bond, especially during the war when my father was away. I spent all my summer vacations on my grandfather's farm. Therefore, when I got the news

of his death I drove to the border station to catch a train east.

I was not sure whether the East Germans would let me in, but when I presented the telegram from my aunt, along with the death certificate, I received a one-day visiting permit. The check by the East German border police was pretty unnerving, but finally our train was allowed to move into East Germany. After several hours the train arrived in Apolda, my old hometown, where the service was going to be held. After I checked in with the police, as required, I walked by the places of my childhood, our old house and my old school, knowing that I wouldn't see them again for many years. Actually it turned out to be almost twenty years.

I met all my aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces in the little chapel at the graveyard. Many of them I did not recognize. That's where I saw my grandfather for the last time. I had brought a beautiful floral bouquet from home and put it on the coffin. I was somewhat bewildered when one of the attendants asked me whether I would like to have it back after the service. I then realized that flowers were so rare and valuable that many people took them back home. The bouquet stayed on the coffin. It was a sad goodbye from my East German relatives. Many of them I never saw again. When my train finally crossed back into West Germany I felt a heavy weight lift off my chest.