

War Costs More than Money – Part IV

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The Walking Wounded

"I swear to serve and be obedient, so help me...."

Emil was a man who worked in my father's wagon-making shop. His wife and my mom were the best of friends. Mom spoke highly of Emil, who was a good worker and true to his word. After the relocation to Poland, Emil was conscripted into the German Army and served nearly four years in the military during which time he slept every night in a bed and had regular meals. He never was on the front lines in battle, never was wounded nor taken prisoner. When the war ended, the next day he was in civilian clothes and on his way home. Yet he became the victim of guilt left in his soul by the war. His conscience gave him no rest. Here is his story:

When Emil entered the military, he did so well in training that Headquarters promoted him to the military police. He was assigned as a guard at Headquarters and became an escort for government officials. When the tide turned in the war, Emil's assignment also lost its glamour. With Russia gaining momentum and Germany losing, security concerns became the big issue, front and center. Stalin made sure that Germany's allies knew what was coming to them if they continued to hold the line for Germany. The allies of Germany ran off like people escaping a house on fire. In the areas of former alliance, ethnic Germans and German soldiers became targets of ambush attacks. Emil and his unit got the order to keep their area under control. Every house was searched for weapons, and anyone found with weapons was often shot on the spot. It got very ugly. Emil was very disturbed by the violence and asked for a transfer. His commanding officer advised Emil to reconsider, along the warning that if Emil did not stay with his assignment the commander had no choice but to report him as refusing an order. Not being able to stand up to duty is a serious offense in the military. With a wife and three daughters at home, Emil went back to work.

By the time the war ended and Emil returned to his family, he was a changed man. The world around him had become a dark place. He was haunted by guilt from which his conscience would not release him. He started drinking and died before his 65th birthday. He was obedient to everyone, but lost himself.

Wounds for which there is no bandage

World War II left millions dead, and additional millions suffered guilt, shame, homelessness or grief from the death of loved ones. Many of the survivors were never able to get their lives back. Their stories are many. To get the feel of their situation, to understand, one has to walk in their shoes. Here are a couple of stories:

Once we were settled in West Germany, Mom befriended a woman named Selma. Selma was attractive and had been married to Heinrich, a wealthy Bessarabian farmer with whom she had two children. Theirs was a marriage that had some problems and stresses. With others from Bessarabia, they made the Trek to Europe and were resettled in Poland. For a while their life seemed better. A year later, Heinrich was conscripted into the German Army.

Selma and Heinrich kept in touch, under the wartime conditions. Then Selma received a letter from the military telling her that Heinrich was missing in action. That meant he was either captured or dead. When the war ended, people everywhere put up names and pictures to locate loved ones. Both the Red Cross and the post-war press stepped in to help people find their loved ones. Selma sent Heinrich's picture and description to the Red Cross. Eventually, Selma received a letter from the Red Cross saying that someone had been positively identified by her picture of Heinrich, but that his name was not the same. She wrote to the man to clarify the situation. The man wrote back, saying that his name was Paul Schulz. Selma wrote again, giving a more complete description of Heinrich. Again, the man wrote back with the same answer - his name was Paul Schulz. She began to suspect that her waiting might be over - it was. Selma died of old age and a bleeding heart. "Oh Lord, help me with the burden the war laid upon me."

Another lady we met in Germany was married with two children. She knew her husband was alive somewhere in Russia. It took some time before he got out, and by then he was skin and bones. Eventually he arrived in West Germany and his wife nursed him back to health. He then got a job and went back to work. Two years later he began an affair with a younger woman. When the wife found out about it, she said nothing. She was a good mother and a brave wife who gave up her feelings to keep her family together. This was not an isolated case. The war destroyed so many men. Young ladies and widows became the forgotten. But they, too, wanted to get back into life. Many young women gave up on what Mother taught them, in order to have a man. The war of hearts was real. "Oh Lord, shed light on love I can feel."

How dark is dark? - Soldier Ewald

I met Ewald when we, as homeless refugees, were assigned to live in an old Inn. The place had nine rooms and two toilets. This became home to nine families. We spent three years in that situation, and adjusted well to one another. We felt safe, and felt that with patience better times would come. Life did become better for us, but not for Ewald.

Ewald had been blinded during the war. I went with him on walks, and so did others. He was a remarkable person: handsome, smart and fiercely independent. He was rarely seen without a tie. Born in Bessarabia, he left on the Trek for Europe with the rest of us. On our walks, he shared with me his experiences and feelings. Here is his story:

After his family was resettled on a farm in Poland, Ewald was called into the German Army. He was assigned to a Storm Trooper division stationed near a big city. On pass, he and his buddies visited the city, and there he met his sweetheart. After his training was completed, he was allowed time off, which he spent with his girlfriend and her family. Then he had to say good-bye and was off to Russia.

The train ride out was long and dangerous, passing partisan hangouts. The troops knew they were headed East, but didn't know their destination. Everything was in code to keep their position secure. Traveling in boxcars, his group made it to a place - out in the middle of nowhere. On arrival, the commanding officer greeted them, shook hands, then called them to order for a briefing. The troops were given instructions as to what position to take when an attack was called. The soldiers were told they were expected to fight courageously and bravely for the Fatherland.

His first assignment that day was to go out on patrol. Ewald later described this as a death trap. Along with four others, he went on a walk to check up on the enemy. They remained on patrol until late that afternoon. Besides an isolated shot here and there, all seemed normal. The Corporal wanted to have a last look, and told Ewald to

cover him. The Corporal went ahead, and Ewald lost sight of him, so he went looking for his comrade. Walking along, Ewald heard a "bang" and everything went dark. He felt a burning sensation around his eyes, and called for help. His comrades came running to see what was going on. All who looked could see something was wrong with his eyes. They tried to figure out what had happened. It turned out that a bullet hit him in one side of the face and went out the other, showing little damage to his face, but destroying his eyesight. They bandaged him up and took him to the medics who looked him over and decided they couldn't help him. He was then sent to a field hospital where he was told his eyes couldn't be saved. He was treated and sent home. His parents were notified by the military of his condition, and Ewald sent word to his girlfriend. It was bad news all around. Ewald had a huge hill to climb. Both of his parents were elderly, and his mother was not well. His only brother also had a health problem. The military could provide some monetary support, but Ewald needed more than that - he needed a home. His hopes now rested on his girlfriend. They met and talked, and both came to an agreement that they would be married. With this decision, the girlfriend returned to her parents to prepare for the wedding.

Two weeks later, Ewald received a letter from his girlfriend informing him that she couldn't go through with the wedding. She felt she did not have what it takes to adjust to what life would be like with Ewald. The letter came as a blow. He tried to persuade her to change her mind, but the facts were settled as far as she was concerned. It was not his decision to lose his eyesight - it was the bloody war. He was now dependent on his elderly parents. When the war closed in on them in Poland, like everyone else they, too, had to flee to the west. They ended up in the same place we did, only ten months earlier. Here we met, and here we parted. I moved on to get my life in order. Ewald tried to pick up his life as best he could. Ewald was unable to write to me, and neither did I write to him, so we lost contact. Later on, a friend told me the rest of Ewald's story.

Ewald was given a good pension because of his war disability, got a job, bought a house, got married and became the father of two boys. One would think he had it made. But once again bad luck came down on him like an avalanche. His wife befriended another man and ran off, taking money from Ewald's bank account. The younger of the boys went with Mom, and the older son stayed with Dad. Nearly broke, Ewald was in need of help again. Friends and the community stepped in to help him out. A caretaker came in to look after the house-keeping needs. The son that was living with him had a job.

One day, the police showed up to arrest his son on a serious criminal charge. The case went to court and the boy was put behind bars. Ewald had no choice but sell the house and check into a Care home. When my friend last saw him, he was frail and showed no life. He sat in his chair, withdrawn - a shadow of the man he once was.

"In a war the bullets often hit in slow motion."