

World War I

The summer of 1914 was very hot. In early July I went on a two-week hike with a Youth Movement group. The hike started inauspiciously. Since I was scheduled to leave at 4 AM, mother checked the alarm clock and forgot to rewind it. When I woke up at 8 AM, the group had disappeared without a trace. Fortunately, I remembered that our first destination was the city of Koblenz at the confluence of the Mosel and Rhine rivers. Taking a train to Koblenz I actually found the group at the old castle, Ehrenbreitenstein, an army outpost accomodating Wandervögel in empty bunks between enlisted men. In the morning, we were mistaken for soldiers and the sergeant gave us a dousing with a pail of water for not getting up in time. We left in a hurry, crossed the Rhine and hiked up the Mosel River to the Vosges mountains. Little did I dream that, in two months, this would be a frontier in World War I and an area of mountain war for me for about two years.

After returning via the Black Forest, we found Göttingen full of excitement and threatening rumors. The heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, had been murdered on a visit to Sarajevo (then in Bosnia-Herzegovina) by assassins said to be Serbian and an ultimatum by Austria to Serbia had called to the fore the "Nibelungen Vow"¹ of the German Emperor Wilhelm II. England, France and Russia had allied in the Triple Entente against Germany. England had been provoked by the growth of the German fleet and France dreamed of revenge for its defeat in 1870-71, while Russia threatened by revolution against the reactionary regime of the Czar and his entourage. Both sides acted stupidly and adamantly and patriotic fervor became aroused to a fever-pitch. Before long, declarations of war began to rain down. A signboard on a storefront in Göttingen reflected the mood of the moment, stating truculently: "More declarations of war will be accepted here."

Göttingen was the garrison town of the 82nd infantry regiment. Mobilized immediately, the regiment was shipped towards the Western Front -- after a triumphant march through our town. Students, including my brother Ernst and his friends, moved into the empty barracks to form a student regiment, the "234th infantry" (see Figure 22). My father, 48 years old but still a captain in the army reserve, was placed in command of a battalion of reserve² infantry and was soon shipped to the battlefield in Belgium. Fritz and I were still too young for military service. However, since father had taken me along on hunts and I had a gun, I was drafted for home defense.

Rumors flew fast and thick about all kinds of enemy shenanigans and spy activities. Among the foreign students in Göttingen, a Russian attracted special attention because he was very tall and looked slightly like a gorilla. He was a mathematical genius but obviously he was a spy! He was chased by an excited mob and I saw him race past. Fortunately, he jumped into a garbage pit -- and the mob stormed by.

A Coffin With Rindfleisch

My belief in public wisdom dwindled and received its death blow when, on a sweltering hot August Sunday, I was assigned, with a butcher and a handyman, to guard a road crossing outside town. We were told to intercept a "Russian gold shipment." The Russian Government was supposedly trying to smuggle its gold holdings out of Germany and, for the present occasion, had thought up the clever device of hiding the gold under a layer of "Rindfleisch" [beef] in a coffin transported on a farm wagon. As we dozed in the scorching midday sun, an excited cyclist appeared to report that the wagon with the gold shipment was approaching.

Swiftly the ambush was organized: the butcher with a meat cleaver standing behind an old apple tree, the handyman with his ax just walking along, and I with a shotgun hiding in the ditch. The farm wagon came creaking around the bend, the peasant slightly swaying in his seat and practically asleep in the midday sun. "Halt!" shouted the butcher jumping out of hiding, "What is in that coffin?" The farmer, staring in disbelief at our threatening trio, mumbled something like "Rindfleisch." With a "Hurrah!" we jumped on his wagon and unscrewed the top of the treasure box. There lay a poet with the name "Rindfleisch" whom an over-zealous guard had shot as he ambled through a field near a military installation smelling the flowers. Nauseated I went home; my life as a civil-defense guard was ended.

Instead, I volunteered with two friends to bring in the harvest on a small farm whose peasant owner had been drafted. It was hard work from early morning until night but our appetite for luncheon was slightly dampened by the small children and flies crawling over the food on the table. How we would have loved such a meal two years later when nettles and acorns provided a large part of our subsistence!

That autumn, brother Ernst and many of our older friends were shipped out with their regiments to Flanders. I can still see their cheering faces as they waved from their freight cars inscribed with mocking messages such as, "In bad weather, the battle will take place indoors."³ Nobody visualized, that before the winter ended, about 50% of these student volunteers -- along with their French and English counterparts -- would be dead.

Suddenly I found myself one of the oldest members remaining in our Youth-Movement group and had to assume local leadership.

Two War Years as a High-School Boy

What a strange transition! Yesterday, a well-protected youngster with young teachers as friends and older comrades to look up to -- now a leader and supposed consolation for a mother who was deeply worried about her husband and eldest son in the field and was caring for my younger sister and us two brothers in times of ever-increasing scarcity. Our mother was wonderful and so was her sister. Tante Mariechen, who lived not far away, had a divine gift as a teacher of modern languages and educated young girls with great humor and understanding. And there was also Grandfather, professor emeritus of ophthalmology (succeeded by his son, Eugen von Hippel, in 1914). He loved his daughter-in-law and walked over with his hunting dog, Blitz, to visit as often as time allowed. Uncle Eugen had built a large house not far from us and, while he was somewhat melancholy, his wife -- Tante Trude -- made up for it in cheerfulness and their daughters, Else and Lena, were good friends. Else became an outstanding beauty and Lena an excellent cellist. Their brother, Hans, the same age as brother Fritz, but unusually tall and strong, had joined the cuirassier regiment in Königsberg.

Initially, it seemed that the war would end soon: the German armies -- violating the neutrality of Belgium -- had outflanked the French and were approaching Paris. Simultaneously they pushed through Flanders toward Antwerp and Dunkirk where the British had landed their troops. But then everything went wrong. After mobilizing all the taxis of Paris for transporting their infantry, the French managed to stop the German advance. Simultaneously the English held Antwerp and

advanced with their student batallions to meet ours. In the meantime, the Russians had crossed the boundary into East Prussia but then dallied in uncertainty until German troops under Hindenburg -- partly taken from the Western Front and thereby weakening it decisively -- annihilated the Russian armies in the two battles of Tannenberg and of the Masuric Lakes. The Western Front froze on the fields of Flanders into the horrible trench warfare of 1914-15 and soon the Eastern Front also became more or less stationary. The four-year-long battle of attrition had begun.

School and life were now serious business. More and more often in the morning assembly, we heard read the names of old friends and comrades who had died in battle. Trains of the wounded arrived, new hospitals were improvised, gold was exchanged for iron to fill the war chest, and food rationing began. We wrote letters to our relatives and friends at the front, trying to be cheerful in reporting the news and sending parcels. We heard about the water-filled trenches in Flanders where our student battalions were stuck opposite those of England and France -- and about the desperate fights around the forts of Verdun where almost a million died. With winter approaching, patriotic fervor gave way slowly to a more rational accounting.

At the onset of winter our father returned, decorated but his heart overstrained in the Belgian campaign. For weeks on end we heard his nightmares as he called out of the window to waken his troops endangered by imminent attack. We shivered in bed until he found peace in mother's arms.

In contrast, on weekends and vacations, I organized hikes for our Youth-Movement group into the near and far surroundings. We had taken over a small house in the village of Emmenhausen as our country home⁴ before the war and it became the center of our activities now. We built a swimming pond by diverting a small stream and helped the peasants with their chores. During vacations, we hiked to more distant regions, such as the mountains of Thuringia or the Steinhuder Meer, a large lake in North Germany.

On one of our hikes in Thuringia, we visited the "Wartburg" where Luther had translated the Bible into German and -- visited by the Devil -- had thrown an inkpot at him. When unobserved, tourists would scratch a piece of the spot from the wall as a keepsake. We surprised the guardian renewing the spot with red ink but were sworn to secrecy.

The trip to the Steinhuder Meer led us to the home town of Herr Engelke, my teacher and friend from grammar school days. His relatives gave us a royal welcome and restored our strength with long-forgotten country-fare.

Time passed fast but the war seemed an endless slaughter: Germany tried to starve Great Britain with a submarine blockade; Italy entered the war on the side of the Allies and was beaten to a standstill in the Alps; Russia and Austria were practically in a stalemate and then later a German offensive penetrated to the Caucasus; Turkey entered the war early on the German side and a German Navy squadron -- surprised by the outbreak of the war in Italy -- escaped to Constantinople. The squadron became a menace to the Allies by making forays against the British from the Dardanelles until sunk by mines. Our uncle, Georg von Hippel, captain of the large cruiser, "Breslau," went down with all hands. The German army in the Balkans was commanded by Uncle Konrad von Hippel, and other relatives were involved in various activities. For example: father's youngest brother, Uncle Richard, was the surgeon-general⁵ of an army division; and a cousin, a flyer, frightened people by flying under the bridges of the Rhine.

By 1916, the young teachers, van Senden and Steinmetz, and my best friends among my brother Ernst's generation had been killed in battle and our "hurrah patriotism" had given way to quiet and hungry endurance. We ate nettles as spinach, pressed oil from acorns and gathered the leftovers in the fields after the harvest (see Figure 23). Peasant friends proved invaluable and black marketers began to flourish. Terminating my high-school education a half year early, I passed the final exam,⁶ and was exempted from the oral exam. I was then sworn in as a student of law by my father, who was Rector of our university that year, and joined the army: a buck private in the field artillery at the old bishop's town of Fulda.

As Soldier "Candide" in World War I

"Apropos" said Candide, "do you think the earth was originally a sea, as we are assured by that large book belonging to the captain?" "I don't believe it in the least," said Martin. "But to what end was this world formed?" asked Candide. "To infuriate us," replied Martin. "Do you think," said Candide, "that men have always massacred each other, as they do today? Have they always been liars, cheats, traitors, brigands, weak, flighty, cowardly, envious, gluttonous, drunken, grasping and vicious, backbiting, debauched, fanatical, hypocritical and silly?" "Do you think," said Martin, "that hawks have always eaten the

pigeon they came across?" "Yes of course," said Candide, "but there is a great difference, free will..."

Like Voltaire's "Candide" I had lived in a world of ideals and was rudely shaken awake under military rule. The master sergeant had contrived to stay on garrison duty and was taking sausages and other tasty bribes from country boys. He had it in for me as a "suspected future officer." I was therefore assigned to clean horses from 4 to 6 AM, after which I marched, pushed field guns around, drilled, goose-stepped, fell from horses and went on guard duty. Every Sunday, I was detached as an honor guard to march along for the re-burial of some dead warrior whose body had been excavated in France or Russia to find a final resting place in his fatherland.

Slowly I toughened. I learned to hang on to the carriages of howitzers as they chugged over ditches through the countryside, to string telephone lines from galloping horses, and to parade before visiting high brass. Once my horse fell on the ice and jumped up, before I could dismount completely. I was dragged with one foot in the stirrup for a hundred feet along the cobbled road. Contrary to expectations, I was found to be alive. After 5 months I was ready to be shipped to the Western Front.

I had one last homecoming, in full war paint and with sabre rattling on the pavement in March 1917 -- and then received marching orders to join a newly formed field artillery regiment in France. Since Fritz had also been accepted for service, our parents and Olga were left alone.

Leaving for the Western Front

I was sent out alone towards France to find a newly forming Landwehr Field Artillery Regiment 251 and to join its third battalion. This strange situation arose because a cousin of my mother, a "reactivated" Major Hoffman, wanted to do her a favor by keeping his eye on the youngster. He had therefore asked for me. At 18, I had not the good sense to decline -- and in the Army you are ordered around anyhow. However, I still feel unhappy today thinking that I might have had advantages compared to others.

Finding my battalion proved to be a major detective story. I boarded a troop train for Sedan. We were bombarded by an airship as we passed through Metz at

night. Arriving in Sedan dead-tired a night later, we lay down, packed like sardines, on the floor of a warehouse. When a depot next door was hit by a bomb and caught fire an officer tried to rout us out for firefighting. However, unidentifiable in the dark, we told him to go to hell.

I groped my way along, always within earshot of the grumbling front, but nobody knew where my battalion was. Finally, accidentally, I met some soldiers from my regiment picking up supplies at a depot. They took me along and I presented my marching orders to a lieutenant. I was assigned to the 9th battery and fell dead-tired into a makeshift bunk.

Presently, however, I was shaken awake by an excited soldier who had heard that I was from Göttingen. He was Willi Bornemann, who came from the village Bovenden next door. My father had rented the hunting rights there and I felt like a native in its forests and fields. Willi became my friend for life.

Forming a new regiment is quite an enterprise. Every day some equipment arrives and corporals and sergeants bellow and try to make your life miserable. I found I could keep them somewhat in check by learning faster than they the secrets of gun control and shooting tables.* Then we were sent out on horseback to pick up more horses at the railhead about 30 miles away. They were untrained remounts from Denmark. Sitting on our own horses and holding the halters of these devils with one hand, we rode back through the Ardennes forest at night. A thunderstorm came up, some horses tore themselves loose and galloped screaming and kicking along our column, producing an infernal scene of confusion amidst the lightning, thunder and violent rain. Still, we arrived. Slowly the regiment began to function and was then dispatched to the Western Front.

Since our regiment was untried and composed of a mixture of old and very young people, we were sent to the most southern part of the Western Front, the mountain zone of Alsace-Lorraine. There a strange kind of warfare had developed.

On the high mountain ridges, there were focal points of bloody contest: a maze of trenches approaching from each side to within meters of each other. There were also ravines out of reach of artillery bombardment where farmers on both sides continued to plow their fields until dislodged by large-scale attacks. It took much experience and some mathematical skill to give the infantry proper artillery support.

We became experts in mountain warfare without clearly realizing it and remained in the Vosges and Alsace-Lorraine for the rest of the war.**

The special destination of the 9th battery, to which I belonged, was the highest mountain of the Western Front on the German side, Kleine Belchen. In the

* Tables relating the distance a shell would travel to elevation angle, wind, etc.

** The Vosges Mts. now belong to France.

distance, facing our position on the French side, was the higher Grosse Belchen with a host of lower mountain ridges in between. Our battery of four 105-mm howitzers was dug in behind the mountaintop at the location of a demolished guest house "Kahler Wasen" and our telephone exchange was hidden in a tunnel. Our observation post on top of the mountain consisted of a buried concrete bunker with a long observation slot. It was reached by crawling on one's stomach for several hundred feet through a grass-covered ditch-tunnel.

Our predecessors, a battery of an active line regiment, moved out; our horses were sent back to a village about 20 miles in the rear -- and there we were.

Our battery was manned by a strange mixture of men, ranging in age from about fifty down to us 18-year-olds, and, in profession, from farmers, laborers and very tough miners to us recent schoolboys. Shockingly obscene language hid the homesickness and sexual needs of the older men. Fortunately, it was quite un-understandable to my boy-scout mind. They therefore left me alone and we soon became friends in our hard labor of shelter digging, shooting, slaving and sleeping. In retrospect, this was the nicest period of being "one of them" (a non-officer).

After a few weeks, I met my uncle, Major Hoffman. He was kind, gruff, and somewhat devoted to alcohol. His headquarters were some hours away in a forest place named "Böhnle's Tomb." In principle, I owe him much gratitude; in practice, I felt greatly embarrassed by this special relationship. A youngster wants to make his own way without suspicion of preferential treatment.

From Buck-Private to Corporal

There were few officer-candidates in our regiment but also few casualties. After some weeks of roughing it -- digging shelters, unloading and storing ammunition brought up by mule caravans, firing our howitzers in day and night attacks or local defensive actions -- I was sent up to the observation post on top of the "Kleine Belchen."

As I crept out of the tunnel into the bunker, a tremendous panorama lay before me: there were beautiful mountain ranges covered with meadows and woods, small farms in clearings and villages in valleys. And, through this paradisiacal landscape, the front-line crawled like a blood-red deadly snake -- systems of trenches with

their forward positions only meters apart. The earth was churned red like blood from continuous bombardment and whole mountaintops had been blown skyhigh by mines. There were burned-out farm buildings, and deserted villages and towns. The staccato of machine guns was underscored by the express-train roar of artillery shells. And, in the midst of all this agony, in dead-angle protection from the guns, cows still grazed and farmers desperately clung to their heritage.

After the first shock had passed, I began to learn the names of all the outstanding objects in sight, along with their distance and altitudes, and to compute with graphical tables the trajectories for our shells. Since my school had given me a good mathematical training, the use of these tables and the necessary corrections for wind-velocity, etc. were soon mastered. Still, it remained a somewhat eerie feeling to send shells from valley to valley -- often directly over my own head.

The front lines were in a strange state of suspended animation. Sappers on both sides drove tunnels undermining top positions. Signal flares called into action artillery fire that rolled like a demonic curtain in front of attacking troops or fenced off the advancing enemy. Every battery was given the assignment of defending some front-line position. And captive balloons manned by observers hung high in the sky and were downed by airplanes dropping phosphor bombs.

Fighter planes defended and attacked and sometimes raced along the trenches at very low altitudes spitting machine-gun fire. The first air battles were fought over our heads by the Richthofen squadron. Anti-aircraft guns were improvised by elevating field guns on tables and the white clouds of shrapnel dotted the sky. Only once did I see the artillery fire hit an airplane; but numerous planes were shot down in air battles. Heroic chivalry required the victor to drop a wreath at the crash-site of his victim.

Normally no high officers approached the front, but once a general crawled up to our observation post. He quizzed me about positions, names of mountains, fire zones, etc. His last question was: "How high can your guns shoot straight up?" Calling his bluff, I replied without hesitation: "6725 meters, your excellency." Impressed he crawled away and, to my amusement, the Army release carried a description of his visit and of the young Corporal von Hippel who had even known how high his guns could shoot.

Apple Thieves

Fall approached and we were very hungry. Then, one day, while scanning the enemy positions with our big telescope, I discovered a tree full of ripe apples. It was in a valley between the front lines, near the abandoned town of Münster. At the next opportunity, I told my friend Willy Bornemann about it and we decided to mount an apple-stealing expedition.

Around midnight, when all was quiet, we crept away and headed along deserted trenches. The debris of old fighting glinted in the moonlight. It included the first hand grenades -- made by fastening powder-filled cans to a wooden handle with string -- and arrows which were dropped from early airplanes by the handful. Such an arrow could pierce a man from top to bottom if he were hit. Sliding down a ravine and crossing through the barbed-wire entanglements into "no-man's land," we entered the ghost town of Münster. Looking into a school, we found a prayer for peace, written in a child's hand, still on a blackboard. Leaving town, we soon spied the apple tree. But dawn was breaking, a French observer had spotted us and a revolver started its half-hearted staccato. Having come this far, however, we wanted our apples. Hastily throwing them down from the tree, we filled two sacks and absconded. Luck was with us. When we climbed back up the mountain to our position, our absence had not been noted. We lived royally for the next few days, trading apples for bread and other edibles.

War of Attrition

We were shifted from mountain position to mountain position along the Western Front in Alsace-Lorraine. The winters were ice cold and we could hear the foxes howling during the starry winter nights. From bunker-type observation posts we changed over to platforms built high up in spruce trees -- a somewhat disquieting location when the enemy detected and shelled us. To be shot is one thing, but to fall down sixty feet afterwards is still less inviting.

I was sent to an officer's course and became a lieutenant; my friend Bornemann, a much better soldier, stayed a sergeant, because he did not have the necessary high school diploma!

As a lieutenant, I was shifted to the 8th battery and had to eat in the officer's quarters where much drinking and sexual talk went on. Also I was shifted to the headquarters of the regiment for a while. There a shabby old soul of a reactivated colonel once forced me to drink to excess. In proper revenge, I passed out and vomited all over his bed. I was protected against sexual mischief by our Youth-Movement ideals. In fact, my innocence went so far that I did not know how to beget children until I was married.

Like everyone else, I had some narrow escapes. I left my bunker five minutes before a direct hit destroyed everything but the last page of the book on "Land Reform"⁷ I had been reading (see Figure 24). A grenade exploding at the foot of my observation tree caught a passing soldier in the chest. A heavy artillery shell from a neighboring German battery fell short and exploded over my head because a woman worker at home had put a love letter into the cartouche. In childlike innocence, I sent a splinter home to mother writing, "This nearly killed me." The funniest incident was caused by a 150-mm shell hitting the entrance of our kitchen. It passed between the legs of our cook, threw him into the air and covered him with an avalanche of dirt, and buried itself unexploded in the ground. The cook whimpered, "I am dying," but, after checking him over, I found no blood and we revived him with a blast of laughter.

Traffic and transport in the mountains moved along roads shielded against enemy observation by wire nettings covered with branches. In addition a primitive but effective cable-car system had been developed: cables were strung across valleys from mountain station to mountain station and wooden boxes loaded with supplies were reeled along to distribution centers. Officers on special missions could also ride in such a wooden contraption. The view was breathtaking. Once, when I was accompanying my battery commander back from a meeting and we were each sitting in a box about 25 feet apart, a direct hit put our relay station out of commission. There we were -- sitting helplessly on our wooden planks high above the valley when suddenly a voice shouted from below: "Captain Sir!" It was the orderly of the much-hated battery commander. The orderly had, of course, to *walk* back to our position. "What do you want?" growled the captain. "Excuse me, sir, I did not want to detain you," came the voice from below, and happily whistling the orderly walked along, arriving hours before us at home base. What a lovely revenge!

An Austro-Hungarian battery stationed not far from us also had a good sense of humor. Its observer -- sitting on a tree some miles from mine -- called me suddenly to report: "Herr colleague, just now three shots of a barrage!"⁸ (The joke was that three shots are hardly a barrage.) Thereupon we decided to visit them and were greeted by cheers and a Hungarian brandy, which knocked us off our horses.

Once a year I got fourteen days of furlough and went home to Göttingen. It was both a lovely reunion with my parents, Olga, Tante Mariechen, my old teacher Engelke and other friends -- and a sad accounting of friends killed in the war. Before it ended, about half of my class were dead. On my first furlough at home as a lieutenant, I met Gerd Lüers. He was the adjutant of brother Fritz's artillery regiment, had become Fritz's friend and had no home of his own to go to on his leave. Gerd and I became friends and he tried to get me transferred to his regiment, which was on a much more active sector of the front and correspondingly much nicer in its human relations. But my colonel, a misanthropic stinker, did not let me go. (My uncle Hoffmann had left to assume command of a brigade.)

Gas, Tanks, and Ertel

The War on the Western Front had been stalemated by trench warfare and both sides tried to reacquire mobility. For this purpose the Germans introduced gas warfare, invented by Professor Haber and his team of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute of Chemistry (to which Opa Franck* also belonged). One year later, the English retaliated with tank warfare, initiated by Churchill. In both cases, after initial successes, the surprise wore off and the result was simply an escalation of the ferocity of the fighting.

An early drama of gas warfare was played out near our area by a Bavarian Division. I was a silent observer because I was in charge for a short while of the communication surveillance of our Prussian Division. For days before the attack I could hear, through our "Ertel" listening system, the Bavarians talk about the intended attack.**

At zero hour, mortars fired a thousand gas mines into the French lines. It was a frightening sight in the early dawn to see these canisters with fuses burning streak towards the enemy trench system. The result was unexpected, however: With their retreat cut off by the tremendous gas cloud, the French fought desperately and gave the Bavarians a sound beating.

Subsequently we were equipped with artillery shells containing all kinds of poisonous gases with names like "blue cross", "yellow cross", "green cross," etc. "Yellow cross" was an especially miserable invention because the gas condensed in the trenches in the cool of the night and evaporated again in sunshine, destroying

* Opa is short for grosspapa = grandfather. James Franck was to be AvH's father-in-law.

** The first electron tube amplifiers (triodes and pentodes) had been developed by Schottky at Siemens and allowed us to pick up the telephone conversations through the return current in the ground.

the lungs of unsuspecting soldiers. The only joy I drew from these miserable things was caused one day when an enemy airplane hit an ammunition depot in the plains near headquarters. A tremendous gas cloud rolled over the area and the generals had to run like chased rabbits.

For locating enemy artillery, we acquired sound measuring equipment. From our mountaintops we could often see the light flash or puff of smoke from the firing of enemy artillery and, by measuring the delay in the arrival time of the sound, measure the distance. To thwart the enemy's use of this tactic, we got some electrically-controlled fake batteries which fired smoke bombs. I was supposed to choose a location for one of these fake batteries and selected the neighborhood of the brigade command post. The staff, dozing safely in the rear, was unpleasantly astonished when it was woken up by salvos of enemy fire.

My ability to handle new techniques led to various other interesting assignments and, when the tank menace became urgent, I was sent in the fall of 1918 to a tank course in Belgium (see Figure 25).

The Revolution Breaks Out

The tank course consisted essentially of point-blank duels with fake tanks⁹ appearing suddenly from unsuspected hideouts. After its completion, I returned to my regiment via Brussels. My father was there, at work with Flemish underground leaders on a clandestine project to divide Belgium into two separate states, Flanders and Wallonia. There I also met for the last time my cousin, Hans von Hippel. He was a senior lieutenant of the dragoons, now without horses, fighting in the desperate battles of the French Champagne. We had a few hours of renewed friendship. Shortly thereafter, he was killed in one of the last encounters of the war and was buried by my brother Fritz, whose regiment was nearby.

As I headed back toward our front sector via Strasburg, the revolution broke out: The German fleet had been held back by Emperor Wilhelm II in the harbor of Kiel for a last strike. However, the sailors rebelled when ordered out on this suicide mission. They threw their officers overboard, hoisted the red flag in imitation of the Russian revolution, and individual sailors then rode on railroad engines from town to town with red flags, spreading the insurrection. They marched, followed by rapidly growing mobs, on city halls and military installations and everyone surrendered.

When my train pulled into the railroad station at Strasburg, we saw the red flag being hoisted at the cathedral. We were officers and men returning from various places to join our regiments at the Alsatian front. We barricaded ourselves in the

waiting room of the railroad station, every officer with his pistol on the table in front of him, waiting for the outcome: Would our train or the revolution be first? Suddenly an old sergeant -- sitting at a table nearby -- came over and whispered, "Lieutenant, when the rebels come, don't shoot; they will not do anything to you!" Obviously, I must have looked like an innocent babe in the wood.

Well, the train came and we pulled out just as the mob stormed up the stairs. By contrast, at the front lines, all was quiet.

Armistice and Retreat

Arriving at my battery position, I found a decree from Hindenburg's chief of staff, General Ludendorff: "You cannot expect relief anymore. Die like heroes." That did not sound very inviting, but I called the battery to attention, read the decree aloud and called forth three cheers for the Emperor. There was some talk of the Emperor forming a suicide battalion of officers and leading it in a final attack on the French trenches in search of a hero's death. By the next day, however, the Emperor had fled to Holland. And soon also most of the high officers had absconded as well.

At midnight on November 10, 1918, the armistice went into effect. From my observation post on one of the highest mountains of the Western Front, what happened then was an unforgettable sight: For 10 miles up and down the front -- as far as we could see -- there stood a fiery curtain in the sky; flares of all colors raced upwards, underscored by the rumbling detonations of exploding ammunition and the shouts of soldiers standing on the embankments of their trenches. We all believed brotherhood had come at last to this world. Airplanes had been for months dropping pamphlets over our lines, calling for such brotherhood on the basis of "The 14 Points of President Wilson." Alas, instead of this peace of human understanding, we got a peace of revenge, dictated by Clemenceau with Lloyd George's connivance. Germany was starved for years and loaded with intolerable reparations -- conditions which led directly to Hitler and World War II.

Fortunately, during that night and the subsequent weeks we still lived in illusions. Following the terms of the armistice, we took all our weapons along with ammunition and retreated everyday by a prescribed distance followed by the French. If they tried to push us, we stopped and threatened to shoot. I sold our emplacement to the farmer who owned the land for a token payment, allowing him to claim ownership of our bunkers and building material. We obtained in return a small sum for our battery canteen.

Coming down into the plain of the Rhine Valley we found sheer chaos: Depots and hospitals were being plundered. Foods that we had not seen for years -- even chocolate -- which had been hoarded by the higher staffs, were being thrown out of windows to the mobs below. Bed sheets, hastily dyed in the French colors, were hung from the houses. And young soldiers of the last reserve, not yet battle-proven, argued with their bewildered officers. Our army marched through all this turmoil in iron discipline to the Rhine. Crossing the river on pontoon bridges at Breisach, we blew them up behind us and were back in Germany.

Homecoming at Christmas 1918

Suddenly, instead of forcing our way through a collapsing rear base and a hostile population, we were greeted with joy as friends and survivors of a holocaust. We crossed the Black Forest in winter storms on icy roads. Frequently I was detached to ride ahead with my orderly to prepare quarters for the batteries struggling across the mountain passes with their guns and ammunition wagons. Thus I came to know the old peasant houses with their massive stoves. They were surfaced with glazed tiles and provided a warmed bed for the grandfather on top.

I was still very naive: when a young lady in one of my billets assured me that she would keep her door unlocked, I warned her not to do it, because I could not guarantee her safety. When we left the next morning, I saw her taking tearful leave from a young sergeant and handing him a home-cooked roast. She had obviously safely survived the night.

At last we arrived in a small town near the "Burg Hohenzollern," where we had to wait for rail transportation to Münster in Westphalen, our North-German garrison. The runaway Emperor Wilhelm II had proclaimed this castle his ancestral home, while actually it belonged to some remote family branch (Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen). My uncle Hoffmann, commander of some other regiment for the past year, sent me a message to meet him there for a final goodbye, so I rode over.

The castle proved an astounding dream of megalomania: heroic statues and childish bric-a-brac abounded. It was bitter to think that millions had died partly on account of this emperor-fool. My uncle -- in contrast -- was in many ways a lovable man; I did not see him again.

Some days later a train arrived to take us north; but, as we crossed from Württemberg to Bavaria, our railroad engine suddenly disappeared. The relations between Prussians and Bavarians were somewhat tense; our railroad engineer had been a Bavarian, so he took the engine and went home. We were stranded, while one troop train after the other rolled by, until we captured an engine by force. From then on we officers took turns day and night standing next to the engineer, pistol on the ready, to prevent his escape.

While the train crawled slowly north, we ran out of hay for our horses. Passing through Würzburg we saw railroad cars loaded with hay on an adjacent track and requisitioned some of it. In response the Bavarians called out their railroad guards and threatened to shoot us. Countering their bluff we trained our howitzers on the city and threatened to bombard it. This Homeric display led to a compromise: we got hay and moved off into the night.

After about a week of travel on the overcrowded railroad lines we approached our garrison town, Münster in Westphalia. Near dawn I was standing in the engine with the recalcitrant engine driver. I noticed that he gave the train an especially vicious jolt, after which we sped ahead. Dense fog covered the countryside. I wondered, why this unusual speed? I had the engineer stop and we walked back along the train. We found that the last two freight cars, loaded with guns, men and horses, were missing and an empty hook dangled in the air. Chasing back with the engine, I found the soldiers peacefully snoring, unaware of impending disaster.

We detained in Münster and marched to the barracks. A revolutionary guard tried to prevent our entry and was beaten up. We delivered our weapons, stabled our horses, and processed our men for rapid discharge in the last few days before Christmas. As one of the youngest officers I had to return but got a few days of furlough for the holidays.

But how to reach home? The railroad traffic was in complete confusion without timetables. Every train was crowded; people even lay on the roofs and were sometimes swept to their deaths at the entrance of tunnels. Somehow I made it to Kassel and slept for a few night hours on the stone floor of the waiting room, with my head on a sack of flour which I had liberated at a plundered depot. Red guards here and there tore the epaulets from the shoulders of officers but left me alone. Finally I caught a train and, on Christmas Eve, arrived home.

It was like a miracle. Mother and Olga had been alone and had not heard from any one of us. Suddenly, before Christmas, Father returned from Belgium, Ernst from the Eastern Front, Fritz from the Western Front, and now I from the North. Everyone had brought some edible loot along -- and for the first time in four years we were a reunited family (see Figure 26).

A Last Military Assignment

While my father and two brothers remained in Göttingen and resumed civilian life, I -- as one of the youngest officers -- had to return to my garrison in Münster. Here I finished discharging returning soldiers and then had to set up a new battery for the protection of the National Assembly, convoked to Weimar.

Germany was in turmoil. After the Emperor had fled to Holland, the left-wing Social Democratic party under Ebert was forced to take over in order to prevent a Communist chaotic situation as in Russia. The various kings and princes of the German states were forced to resign. (The king of Saxony, when told, abdicated with the lovely phrase: "Okay, then make your mess by yourselves."¹⁰) A general election was called, and a "National Assembly" was scheduled to meet to draft a new constitution in Goethe's old town, Weimar.

In the meantime, street fighting went on in various cities; two Communist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were murdered in Berlin by nationalist officers; public utilities including electricity and gasworks, abandoned by their crews, were operated by volunteers. For example, Opa Franck and other professionals staffed these facilities in Berlin. In the meantime, the Allies kept up their food blockade of Germany and everyone lived on starvation rations.

The setting up of my new battery in Münster went unusually fast because, in contrast to the properly educated line officers, I was not intimidated by "Army red tape." For example, I went directly to the general staff officer responsible for the supply depots, taking along some soldiers as well as a complete list of the needed armament, horses and provisions. Intimidated, he signed. We took everything out of the depots, and in short order, the battery was ready for final training.

As our national elections approached, every political party from Communist to Conservative was allowed to address the soldiers once before the decisive day. Here I undertook some political manipulation by scheduling the Communist speaker first and the conservative speaker last. The result was very enlightening: The Communist exhorted the soldiers to stop being slaves: "Abandon the horses, throw away your equipment, and go home!" Everybody shouted "Hurrah!" Systematically, however, the subsequent speakers of more and more right-wing leaning began to talk more of the protection of home and nation. When at last the conservative appealed to their pride: "Remember your heroic ancestors who took care of their weapons and fought for their homes!" everybody shouted "Hurrah!" again and discipline was restored.

April approached. I had already missed the first term at the University. Slowly, in the absence of battle, the professional officers began to drift back to their positions. Finally, one noon, the colonel arose at the dinner table in the casino, the dining place for officers, and announced: "Now we have only space here for the 'active` officers and not for the 'reserve` officers." This was the last straw! Angrily I went to the surgeon of the regiment and asked him to certify that I had had a heart attack and must be sent home.

The colonel signed my release and I went out on a final ride through the lovely countryside on my beautiful horse -- much better than my poor riding deserved. And whom should I meet but the colonel, who thought me seriously ill in bed! Well, he was a gentleman. We both looked straight ahead and galloped off in different directions.

Endnotes: 2. WORLD WAR I

1. Nibelungen Treue -- a vow held true to the death.
2. Landwehr
3. "Bei schlechtem Wetter findet die Schlacht im Saale statt."
4. Landheim.
5. General-arzt.
6. Abiturium.
7. "Bodenreform."
8. Trommelfeuer.
9. Tank-atrappes.
10. "Nu, dann macht euren Dreck alleene."



22. Brother Ernst
and his best friend,
Richard Passow (on left). on
furlough in 1916. Reinhard
was killed at Verdun in 1917.



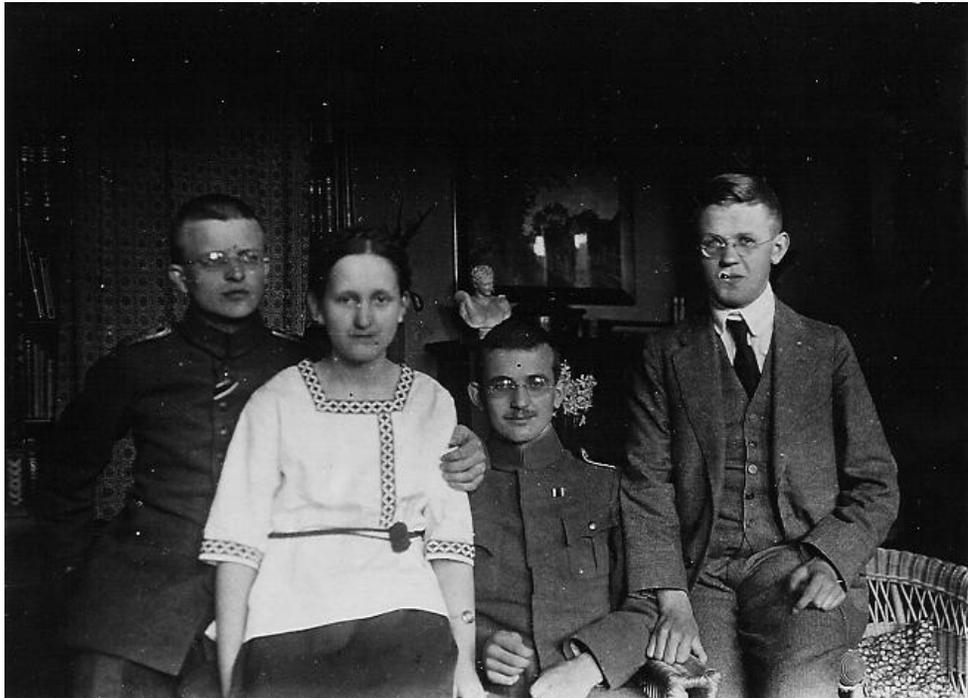
23. Cousin Eric von Hippel and a companion gleaning the fields above the Göttingen house (September 1919)



24. Telephoning from bunker just before a direct hit by an enemy shell (September, 1918)



25. On furlough (September 1918)



26. Reunited, April 1919
(left to right: Arthur, Olga,
Ernst and Fritz)