

Chapter 1

The Camp at Caracal

THE bulging troop train pulled away from the Vienna station without bands, farewells, or fanfares. Only the SS men seemed alert and interested, as their trained eyes scrutinized the thronged depot for possible deserters. They stood on the platform with their thumbs tucked under their belts, watching.

Walter Logé, stocky, broad-shouldered, with a far-from-French square jaw and close-cropped dark-brown hair, leaned back in his seat to relax. He tried not to look too obviously pleased with himself, but he had accomplished all he had intended to do. With just a standby leave from the military hospital, where he had been convalescing from acute arthritis, he had made a rush trip to Berlin to visit his wife, Irma, and their three children, Ursel, Dieter, and Doris. And no one had noticed his absence. Not even Himmler could have traced his movements. He had arrived in Vienna in time to receive the inspection stamp in his passbook, with four hours of sight-seeing time before catching the noon train for the eastern front.

Walter had participated in the initial 1941 drive into Russia. As a medical corpsman with the Wehrmacht he had witnessed the horrors this campaign produced—the masses of torn, twisted bodies of soldiers and civilians caught in the violent death of the blitzkrieg, the scorched-earth policy of the retreating Russians, and once the fantastic annihilation of an entire Red contingent. Those soldiers, unearthly, wide-eyed, were dead at their posts, frozen in their positions by concussion bombs. The latter event could never be erased from Walter's memory. He could see those men yet, like statues with guns ready.

Although he had never dared express himself, even then he had sensed that the day would come when the Germans would

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be driven back across those vast plains. Now his mind quickly took in the past few years-the severe winters, the spring mud, the final retreat from Stalino, the regrouping and preparations in France, the convalescing from wounds. And now he was to rejoin his unit-if he could find it. It might have been caught in the Crimean squeeze. From news filtering back, he assumed that the Germans were in full rout.

Logé slumped a little in his seat and pulled his cap over his eyes, adjusting himself as best he could for a rest. The train was warm, for this was a summer day. But he had learned to make himself as comfortable as possible in crowded quarters. In days ahead he might not be as well off as this. Time seemed to stand still. The steady clicking of wheels over the rails had a somnolent effect, and Walter was only dimly conscious of the passing of an afternoon and a night.

Suddenly the train jerked to a halt. Peering into the gray dawn, the passengers watched the shadowy figures of the Romanian troops awaiting the German trains from Vienna. This must be Peshti, end of the line.

Maybe the end of the line in another sense too, Walter reflected. This was Tuesday, August 22, 1944.

The new arrivals were herded into trucks and transported to an airfield on the outskirts of Bucharest. Officers and men kept probing the Romanians about the situation, but either they had forgotten German or they knew too much to answer any questions. Two days later, on August 24, Romania officially declared war on Germany.

For a week the Germans were forced to forage for ripening watermelons in nearby fields. Hiding in ditches and culverts, they protected themselves from incessant bombings by the Allies, who seemed to care little about Romania's decision so long as there were Germans to destroy. The new contingent from Vienna was joined by those fleeing the advancing Reds. It was a motley group: sailors from the Black Sea region, officers

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and men from the bedraggled segments of the Wehrmacht that had escaped the Crimea and the Ukraine, and a few grounded Luftwaffe personnel who were feeling the foot soldier's problems for the first time. It was hard to conceive this war-weary mixture as belonging to the Nazi forces that had goose-stepped through conquered cities. No longer did jackboots echo along cobblestone streets. Now the Nazi troops did not march; they shuffled. Broken in spirit, these hollow-eyed men simply waited for someone to give the command that they hoped would end the nightmare.

A command was not long in coming. The Romanians set up loudspeakers and announced that all German personnel were to move northward toward the Siebenburgen sector. Small knots of Germans clustered about the speakers listened incredulously to the next part of the announcement.

"Free passage will be provided back to your homeland."

What was happening? Was the war over? What about the advancing Reds? The questions came, but the answers really did not matter. There was no choice. Judging by the stream of retreating Germans, the Russians must be advancing at a terrible rate. To await them meant annihilation or slavery. Long columns of men began forming and moving in the direction the Romanians had indicated.

Local villagers who were still pro-German welcomed the marchers with banners, cheers, food, and wine. Perhaps, thought the dazed soldiers, the horrors of it all were really over. Finally laying down their arms and placing them in a warehouse, as directed by the Romanians, they boarded waiting trains. Hope slowly revived. Maybe the war had ended and they were really going home.

The Romanians kept their bargain of a "free passage," but during the night the soldiers sensed a shift in direction. Instead of heading toward Germany the trains traveled southward, and by dawn the Germans were being herded into the former

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Romanian army camp at Caracal on the Bulgarian border. When the great wire gate shut behind them, they knew they had been tricked.

Shafts of morning sunlight slanted through the thick dust that rose as 4,000 prisoners milled in the compound. It choked the men and caked their nostrils. Unless a wind arose, relief seemed impossible. But hanging heavier than the stifling air was dread and foreboding. No wind could clear this. Its apprehensive weight hung like a shroud over the whole encampment.

Ordinarily Walter Logé was the kind of man who could rise above any despondency, but now even he could think of little that was encouraging. He had visited Russian peasants' homes and played the balalaika for the conquered, when fraternizing and singing with Russians was really not on the Nazi agenda. He had laughed and joked while recuperating from wounds in an army hospital, knowing that when he was strong enough he would be sent back to the front. He had dodged the Gestapo to bring cheer to his wife and three children in Berlin at a time when there was little hope of ever seeing them again. But the present situation seemed different, and it was really getting through to him. He felt not so much fear, only a sense of hopelessness. The uncertainty of how his family would make it through the terrible Allied raids, and the certainty of his own slavery—he felt his usual optimism buckling under the strain. He sat down with a dozen other men in one of the corners nearest the railroad tracks and stared through the three rows of barbed wire. For several minutes no one spoke.

Finally Walter began deliberately, as if every word had to be weighed. "You see those railroad cars? They'll be hauling us to Russia one of these days. Maybe to Siberia for all we know."

Another soldier leaned forward and shook his head. "I doubt that. We'll be put to work in a coal mine right here in Romania."

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The others seemed to agree. The Romanians needed the Germans to work their own mines. Why should they be sent to Russia?

“Just wait. We may not be riding on that particular train, but someday soon we’ll be shipped to Russia right from that spot.” Logé pointed a forefinger toward the cars.

For a moment he looked once more at the railroad cars. His squat, husky body outlined against the barbed wire gave him the appearance of someone who would be hard to hold. Obviously he was capable of tremendous endurance. He started to turn away from the men and then stopped. He wanted to have a last parting word.

“I have a hunch the Reds will be here sooner than we think.”

With this Walter made his way across the crowded compound toward the barracks. He might find an empty bunk and get away from the dust.

It took a moment for the soldier-prisoner’s eyes to adjust to the dim interior. The Romanians had not been lavish with windows, and the whole place had a dingy appearance about it. Slowly Walter had to make his way between the rows of bunks, trying to find one that might have a mattress or even a little straw.

While the barracks had looked empty at first, Logé now could make out a pair of crutches protruding from the lower right-hand bunk nearest the door at the other end. As he approached, he saw a figure lying face up on the bare bunk boards. He made out a lean, sharp-featured man with a very short haircut. From the blue-gray uniform and insignia Logé knew immediately that this was a Luftwaffe officer.

Instinctively Walter bent over the man. “Sir, I’m a medic. Is there anything I can do for you?”

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The officer's eyes slowly opened, and he turned his head slightly to see the speaker. "Yes-Yes- A free passage back to Berlin."

Logé smiled slightly. "Sir, if you find it let me know. That's my home too."

Grimacing with pain, the officer raised himself on his left elbow to face the soldier, and introduced himself: "Alfred Mattern."

"Walter Logé."

"Sounds French." Mattern groaned as he lay down again, but there was a slight twinkle in his eyes. "A Frenchman with a Berlin accent."

Walter sat down on the lower bunk across from him. "Not a Frenchman, really. A line of Logés came from the Huguenots when they fled the persecutions in France several centuries ago. Now there's been enough mingling of good German blood to make me love sauerkraut."

They both laughed, but the laughter quickly died.

"It's good to laugh," said Alfred. "Good if you can."

Walter leaned his head against the bunk post. "There's not much to laugh about now. The Reds will be here shortly, and it's doubtful we'll ever get back to Berlin."

Berlin. The name caused the men to reminisce. Their conversation ebbed and flowed from the past to the present in a shifting tide of recollections.

"Before the war I received my training in electronics with the Telefunken Company in Berlin." Alfred obviously spoke with a sense of pride and accomplishment. "I specialized in high-tension installations-mainly industrial, you know-commercial radio transmitters, high voltage transmission, and emergency power cutoffs."

Walter did not know. This was all esoteric to him, but he noticed the way Alfred's eyes brightened.

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"I hold a master's degree as an electrical engineer and electro technician."

"Just what did all that have to do with the Luftwaffe?" Walter wanted to know.

"Nothing, really. They needed pilots and gave me the training, that's all. It's too bad I didn't get into something else—something closer to my former work. Then this probably wouldn't have happened." Alfred pointed a finger toward his back. "I injured my spine when my plane was shot down near Bucharest. I was about fifty feet off the ground when the Romanian artillery got me. They tell me I'll never walk again without crutches."

In spite of the pain whenever he moved, Alfred wanted to face Walter. As he rolled sideways their eyes met in mutual understanding.

"But I will walk again. I will walk without crutches, I promise you."

Walter thrust his square jaw forward as if to punctuate Alfred's own determination. "You can do anything if you set your heart to it. Once in the late 30's, when I was still a painter, they told me I would die of lead poisoning. I just changed jobs—drove an ambulance for the DRK [German Red Cross] and decided I was going to live anyway."

Walter stood up. Planting his feet apart, he looked down at Alfred. "I tell you, when a man sets his heart to a thing, he can do it even though everyone else may say it is impossible. I believe you can walk again."

Within two weeks the Russians appeared at the main gate just as Walter Logé had predicted. Methodically they began sorting the prisoners for the first shipment eastward. Silently the prisoners watched as hundreds of their comrades were marched off to slavery. What horrors and hell waited for these men none could tell, but those remaining caught a glimpse of their own fate.

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There was not a prisoner in the whole camp at Caracal who did not wish the Russians would let the Romanians run things themselves. From the consistent friendliness of the Romanian guards they knew their former Axis partners still retained a soft spot for them. The guards indicated that they feared their giant eastern neighbor as much as did the Germans.

Throughout the autumn of 1944 the Russians continued to trim the prisoner ranks until by late November only a thousand or so remained. Whenever the Reds marched off a new crop Walter would check to see if his friend Alfred Mattern was still in the barracks.

“Good,” he would say each time. “Good—we are still together.”

They both knew, however, that this kind of luck couldn’t last. In time they would both leave the Caracal camp for something far worse. Neither of the men talked about it anymore. They found life more bearable to accept each day as it came, refusing to borrow from the future.

The brightest spot for every prisoner was the moment when members of the DRK visited the camp and promised to deliver a three-word message for each man. Irma Logé had repeatedly said she could stand the incessant bombings and the terrible uncertainty of each moment with her three children in Berlin, but the persistent pressure of not knowing the whereabouts of her husband tormented her to the quick. Did he ever reach his unit? Was he killed in the onslaught of the advancing Reds? Buried somewhere in an unmarked grave? Taken prisoner? When the DRK delivered those three words on November 28, “Well Internment Walter,” he knew his wife would lift her tear-stained face in a prayer of thanksgiving and exclaim, “My Walter is alive! He is alive!”

She could not know where he was, but she would not lose hope. Her deeply religious nature perceived the hand of Providence in all that happened. Those few hours of his secret

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visit in Berlin before leaving for Vienna, she had said, probably made the difference. If he had reached his unit, she was sure widowhood would have been hers. No one could argue with her. From the fragments of news she had gleaned, Walter's unit was apparently wiped out.

The DRK permitted a twenty-five word reply, but for some reason Walter received none. It would have brought much cheer to him, but his indomitable spirit maintained a high level anyway. He simply would not permit himself to slump into a state of despair as many prisoners did.

In the meantime the first word of his message home was no longer applicable. He had a sudden recurrence of his old arthritic malady. He spent a week in the prison hospital.

A few days after his return to the compound it looked as if he should have stayed a little longer. Around midmorning five Russian officers walked through the main entrance carrying a submachine gun and began to round up the remaining prisoners. The Germans were puzzled. Not a train was in sight, but the Russians made it clear that this group was expected to walk-walk all the way to slavery. There might be a train somewhere, but all must walk or be shot on the spot.

Walter knew enough Russian to understand their method of counting. It was to be 100 men to a row, ten rows deep. As the officer in charge began counting "Raz, Dva, Tri ...," Walter moved farther to the rear. He needed time to think.

"I can't walk very far, not now," he said to himself.

And there was no time to hunt up Alfred for consultation. He moved as far back as he could without being noticed. While the men lined up, he quietly prayed.

The Nazis had hoped to stifle all religious faith, attempting to convert the nation to their own brand of religion. Walter Logé had been one of those unwilling to go along. He had kept alive his faith as countless others had done during Hitler's rise

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to power. Now he needed the reassurance that God would be with him. It came-and with it a plan.

Fumbling in his pocket for his Red Cross armband, he slipped it into place and waited. He must time this perfectly. He watched until an officer swung the twenty-five-foot gate inward and the prisoners began marching through. Under the watchful eyes of the armed Russians an attempted break on the part of anyone would have been suicide. He must wait for the moment. His heart began to pound. This had to look natural.

As the last few rows started through, Logé made his move. Striding forward as if he were in charge, he walked up to the last Russian officer and stayed with him until he was even with the gate. Whatever the pains in his knees, he must not stop now. Grasping the end of the gate, he swung it closed just after the officer passed through. The Russian turned around and glanced at him as he shut it and dropped the bolt in place.

For a moment their eyes met. Snapping to attention, Walter gave a salute and then did an about-face. The last thing he wanted was an interrogation. As he walked briskly back toward the barracks he felt hot all over. He expected to hear the command to return, but none came.

Alfred Mattern was in the same barracks with all the other injured, and Walter headed there immediately. He startled the ten remaining men with his quick entrance. Slamming the door behind him, he announced, "I have returned to take care of you. Remove your bandages. I must see your wounds."

Alfred raised his head to see what his friend was doing. "Why the sudden interest in wounds, Walter?"

"Never mind. I'll look at your back in a moment too."

The men quickly caught the gist of what was happening.

As he passed down the line Walter ordered, "Keep calm. It is important that I take care of you."

When he reached Alfred he gave him a pat on the shoulder. "How's the back?"

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Alfred gave him a knowing smile.

Walter leaned forward and whispered. "It was close. I'll tell you about it later."

After a few minutes Walter looked through one of the windows to see if anyone was coming. There was not a sign of life in the camp. He went to another window and peered out. Still no evidence. He stepped outside and cautiously looked around. Finally he walked all the way around the compound area. To his astonishment there was not a Russian or Romanian in sight. He was alone with ten injured men. He hurried back to the barracks.

"There's not a guard anywhere," Walter said breathlessly.

Alfred looked surprised. "You're joking!"

"No, I'm not. They're all gone-vanished."

"Maybe the Romanians thought they got the whole lot of us."

Walter nodded.

Alfred started to speak again, but Walter held up his hand.

"I know what you are going to say."

He paused and looked at the others who were listening to every word. "I'm not going. It would be easy, and I know you'll call me a fool, but I'm not. I can't leave you and the others. Not now; not without someone to take care of you."

A long silence followed. At last Alfred spoke. "You should really make an attempt." "No! Now please--"

"This is your best possible moment of escape. You'll never be closer to home." Walter shook his head No.

A slight moisture filmed the ex-flier's eyes. "Now I know for sure your actions were not a ruse for the Russians," Alfred said.

Six hours later the Romanians returned. Walter Logé went directly to them and announced his intentions of taking care of the remaining men. He would need medical supplies immediately. The guards seemed pleased and promptly

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honored his request by bringing a box from the hospital. Whatever thoughts may have been entertained, they never openly questioned his assumed leadership. They watched with obvious satisfaction his diligence in attending to the men and seemed glad for his presence.

Several days later the whole camp was crowded again, this time with civilians. The Reds had ordered all those of German descent living in Romania to be interned. The authorities, however, had no intention of crowding the camp beyond its capacity. There was to be a separation. And it was this that tore at the hearts of the men who saw it. Every man remaining in the barracks had known hard action and had witnessed many heartrending sights since the war began, but this touched even the most seasoned soldier.

Parents were forced to remain within while children were escorted outside with the grandparents. The latter were told to take the children home and care for them. The Reds wanted only the men and women for their slave labor. It would have been pathetic during any season, but the early part of December had brought real winter weather, and the sight of the little ones kneeling in the snow crying and begging to be with their parents haunted the memories of those who saw it. Many mothers fell prostrate by the barbed wire as they saw the guards take away their babies. Slowly the whole group on the outside were prodded and pushed along. At last only the scattered tracks of the very old and the young, where they had crossed the camp cemetery, remained in view. For days Caracal resounded with bitter cries and wails of the parents.

Logé had been so successful with securing medical supplies that he pressed the guards to bring in any musical instruments they could find. "We must do something to bring a little cheer. Music is good for everyone."

He told them he could organize a little band and entertain the people during the long evenings. The guards said it sounded

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like a good plan. They would like to have something to liven up their own boring situation. It didn't take long for the Romanians to scrounge around Caracal for anything that could be plucked, scraped, blown, or beaten-anything to make music.

In the meantime Mattern had another idea. Why not get a shortwave set going? Getting the news would be a good morale builder too. The guards balked at this. They were under constant surveillance by the Russians. Music was one thing, but a radio might mean trouble.

"You've been so successful with them," Alfred told Walter, "why not tell them we could use the music to drown out the radio? I could listen and then safely hide the set if the Russians return. I could relay the news after every performance."

It worked. The last thing the Romanians wanted was to have the Russians down their throats, but they were as eager for news as the Germans. Surreptitiously the guards brought the parts for Alfred to assemble. His orders were to hide the set immediately when the music ceased.

Thus on Sunday evening at six, December 17, Alfred turned on the radio while Walter and his group played loudly. The guards had even brought over additional food for supper. Afterward Walter and one of the guards checked with Alfred about the news.

"The German forces are pushing the Allies back," he said. Alfred reported what was to be known in the West as The Battle of the Bulge. It had started the day before at 5:00 A.M. and was sweeping the Allies toward the sea.

The Romanian guard grinned broadly. "Good! The right side is winning."

But it was not to last-neither the German counteroffensive in the West, nor the situation at Caracal. The Russians were already planning their final shipment from the camp. The guards sensed this and began issuing warm Romanian winter

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wear to the German soldiers. "We want you to be civilians. It will be better this way," they said.

The Germans knew their time was running out, but they were glad for the change of clothing anyway. Their own summer military wear was hardly sufficient for the bitter winds blowing down from the Russian steppes. A fur-lined cap, leather coat with lamb's-wool lining, wool pants, and high-top boots completed the outfit.

The Romanian officer issued the clothing with a friendly smile. "We Romanians would like to keep you Germans right here until the war is over," he said.

The Germans nodded with a hearty, "Ja!"

Toward the end of January the wind brought a new snowfall. Drifts formed along the sides of the barracks, while the gale swept some pockets near the corners clean. Icicles hung like crystal jewels from the ragged tips of the barbed wire. The old camp cemetery was almost buried. Just a few headstones and crosses protruded above the mantle of white. The railroad tracks running parallel with the front gate were no longer visible from the barracks. One would have to go to the entrance to see even the slightest evidence of the presence of rails. Probably this was the reason the sudden appearance of boxcars on the siding came as such a shock to the inmates of Caracal. Without warning, without the slightest noise, they just materialized. The wind had muffled the sound of the train's approach. The Russians had finally arrived.