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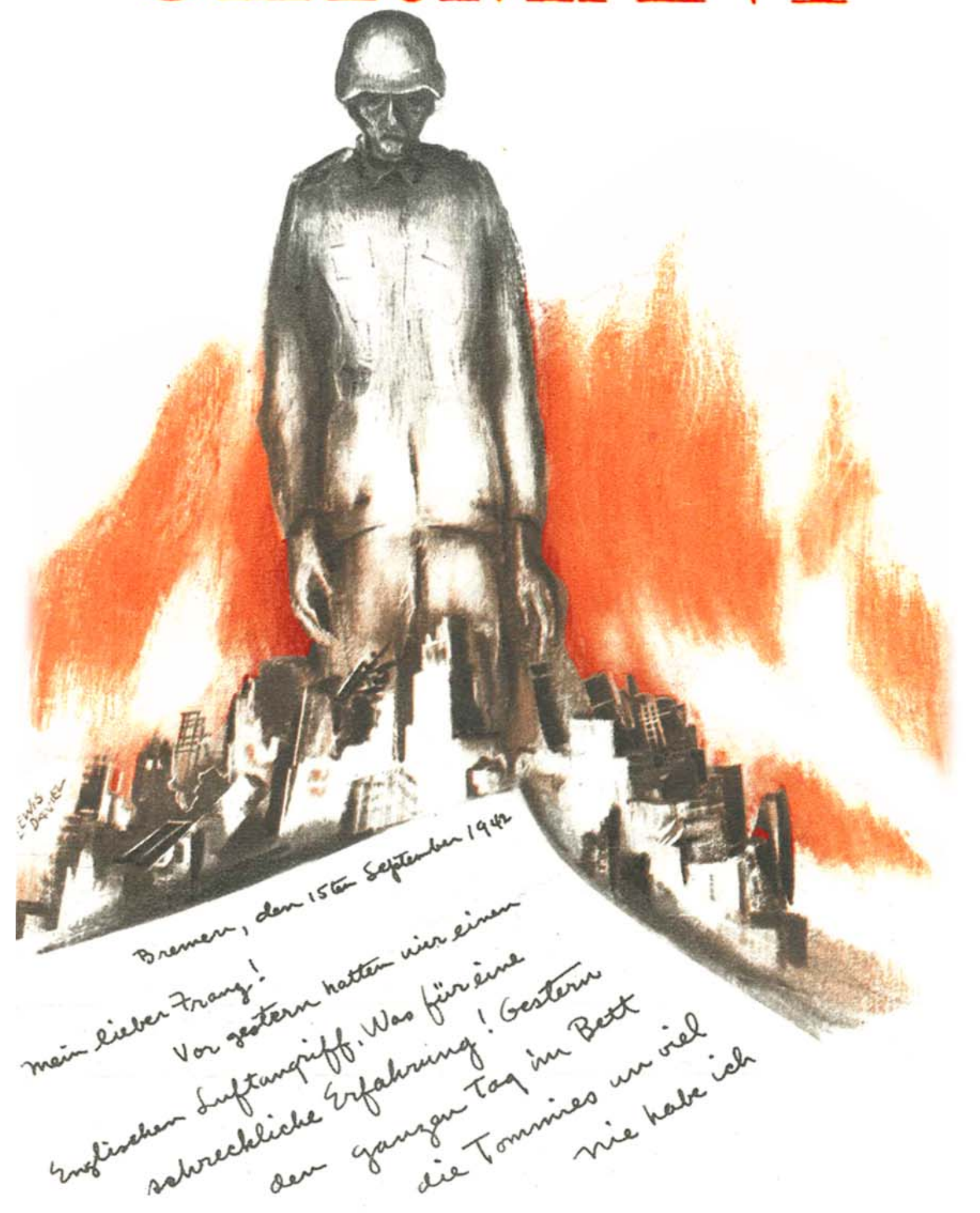
LAST MAIL FROM GERMANY



Letters from the dead bring you the voices of the living . . . Taken from the pockets of fallen soldiers on the battlefields of Russia, they are blood-stained news bulletins of what's happening inside Nazi Germany

by Maurice Hindus
BY WIRELESS FROM MOSCOW

THE AUTHOR, a Russian-born American, is one of the world's leading authorities on Soviet Russia. The ten books he has written and published in the United States since 1920 have established him as a writer of eminent fairness in presenting today's story of the land of his birth. He is now in Moscow covering the war.

AN ARMFUL of letters fell in my lap with a rustle like wind-blown leaves. "Fresh from the front," said my host, a widely known Russian writer.

These letters had been gathered from German dead on Don battlefields. The paper was ragged, but the decorative envelopes were of various colors, white, blue, and pink. All were written in Gothic script, many in pencil.

On the top of the heap lay a postal card, shiny with two large drops of blood. It was from mother to son. The writing

was scarcely legible, but from the few words I could make out, the soldier and his mother loved each other deeply. The blood indicated that the soldier had carried it close to his body.

There was something spectral about this postal card, about all the letters. They seemed like voices from the dead. But they weren't. They were voices from the living—inside Germany.

The Russians have collected hundreds of thousands of such letters, and also diaries, from the German dead. These have been read, digested, put away. In the absence of direct relations between the United Nations and Germany, they are the only authentic source of information about Germany and the German people that we now have.

The letters are intimate and personal —from parents to son, from brides to grooms, sisters to brothers, wives to husbands.

The outstanding feature of this correspondence is that eighty-five per cent of all the letters completely ignore politics, rarely mentioning the Fuehrer or other Nazi chiefs, or referring to Nazi doctrine or practice.

Perhaps this is why military censorship is so lenient. Seldom are there any deletions, even when the writers speak frankly of hardship and sorrow, or of such delicate subjects as the deterioration of the morals of German women.

"Paul came home from vacation," writes one woman to her husband, named Gerberg, "and decided to divorce his wife. She is with child by a war prisoner."

THOUGH Germany's young women and girls are indoctrinated with the idea that they are Aryans and therefore superior to the prisoners and foreign workers in their midst, their emotions get the best of them.

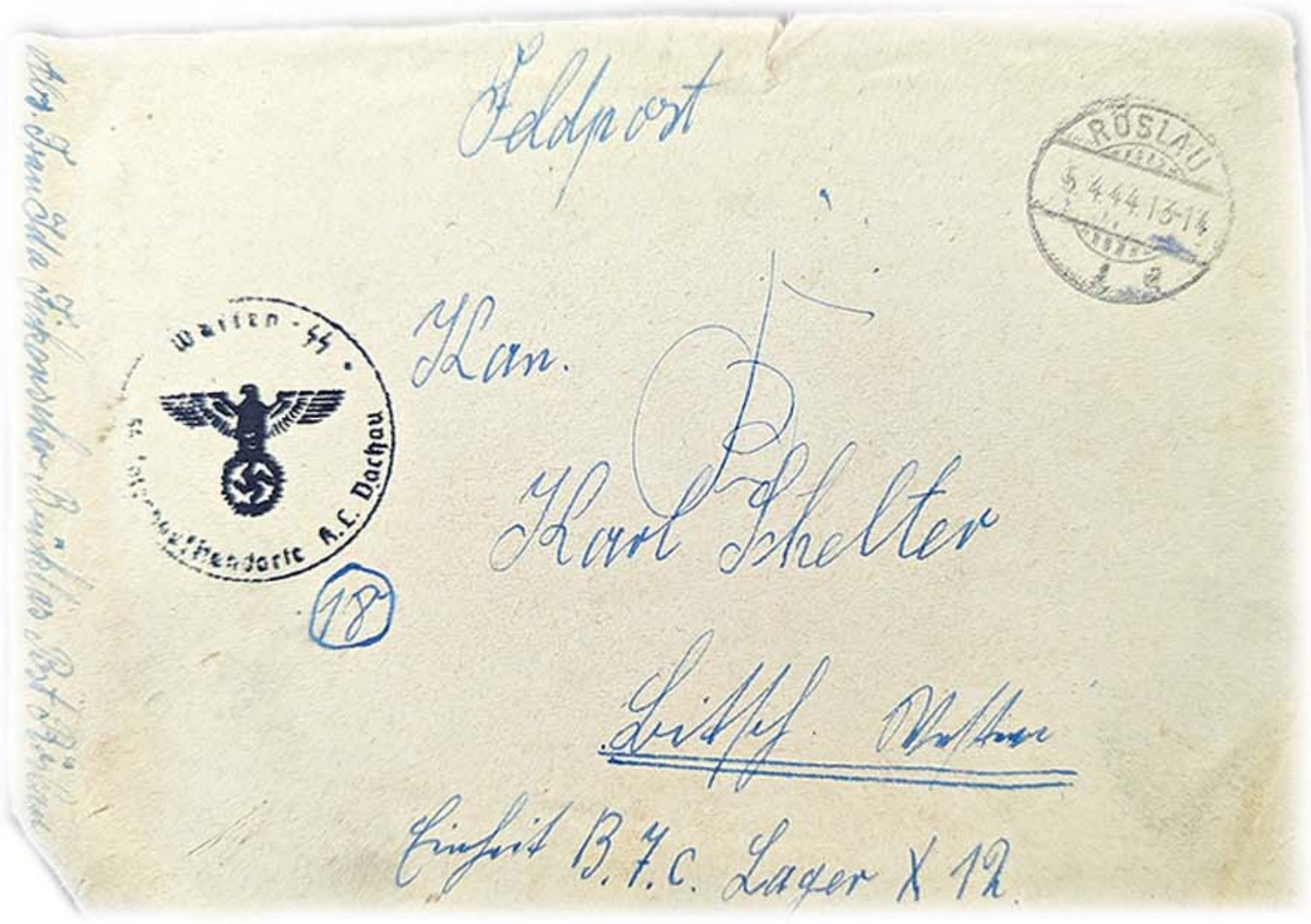
"We've got many Slovaks here," writes the mother of Eric Goppe, top sergeant in the German army. "Be of stout heart, my dear son—Hilda is a bad wife. If she rarely writes, it is because she still has a bit of conscience left. Maria Muller writes her husband every day, yet she shamelessly struts about, arm-in-arm, with the Slovaks."

An Italian named Giovanni Volpi, working in Kufstein, Germany, writes to an Italian soldier at the Russian front: "I'll tell you frankly, German women have lost all control of themselves. They have gone out of their minds. . . ." The rest is unprintable.

So while Germans by the thousands die daily for the supremacy of their race and the purity of their blood, their women at home, despite Nazi ideology and Gestapo vigilance, indulge in no small amount of race defilement. That's one reason, no doubt, why German mothers and fathers show increasing anxiety and bewilderment at the "foreignization" of Germany through the presence of millions of alien laborers and war prisoners.

"You ask me," writes a father to his son, "how Berlin looks these days. Dear Fritz, Berlin has become an international city—you can hear every language in this street."

German Mail



A fanatical Nazi girl from Berlin whose name is illegible writes Corporal Kaspar Zeibold: "Berlin is terrible. . . . I'm very happy at last to leave this stony desert."

Vienna is no better. Bettie Schummer writes her husband: "Life is hard in Vienna. The city is crowded with foreigners . . . In the trolleys you hear only Italians, Spaniards, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Greeks, Bulgarians. Viennese are hardly seen."

Smaller towns feel the inundation no less than Berlin and Vienna. "Our Aldstadt," writes Anna Siebert to her friend, Max Bernarsky, has become a semi-international state, inhabited by Frenchmen, Poles, Ukrainians, Serbs, and Italians." A patriotic, hopeful girl, Anna Siebert adds, "Of course, we shall soon have Englishmen and Americans."

ONCE in a while there is an almost happy letter. "Ah darling little sparrow," writes Berta Duptgen to Joseph Weiskopf, "How happy I could be if you stayed by my side . . . Think, darling, how wonderfully we could arrange our life—a good kitchen, a good bedroom and spare room, two children, girl and boy, and of course the bond of our great love. Just imagine such a life." She hints that she is pregnant, and urges him to obtain leave and come to see her. "I'm so happy . . . When you come I'll tell you everything, but I'm afraid it won't be soon."

No, it won't. Joseph Weiskopf will never come home. He's buried somewhere in inhospitable Russian earth.

Most of the letters are filled with complaints. Religious people feel hurt because the church bells have been melted into cannons. Now and then there's a letter about the treatment of elderly people which tells most by what it leaves unsaid. "I notice," writes a woman named Editha to a relative named Werner, "that old people have no standing whatever. Recently an old man of 70 was refused even medical examination . . . The same thing happened to my aunt, who is only 44. It seems clear that women incapable of bearing more children are no longer useful."

There are endless complaints of hardships. "For groceries," writes a father in Berlin to his son, "we have to stand in line. Often after standing for hours we go away empty-handed . . . Now and then life becomes a nuisance, but we want to go on living for your sake, and for the sake of your darling little son." Reading letters like this, one wonders what the father will say, think, or do when he learns that his son, Fritz, is no longer among the living.

"EVERYTHING is for barter, even soda," writes a sister to her brother. "Father has a terrible time getting things he needs . . . Gustav is in Hamburg in an antiaircraft crew. Tommy (the RAF) has made himself seriously at home here . . . All Goerne is in flames."

Tommy has made himself sweepingly unpopular in Germany. He is to Germans the "supreme villain" of today. They hate him, swear at him, and above all, fear him. Nothing seems to exasperate and terrify them as much as an air raid.

German Mail

"Day before yesterday," writes Lillie Pavlichek from Bremen to her husband Franz, "we had an English air raid. What a horrible experience it was. I had to go to bed yesterday. The last few days the Tommies caused plenty of trouble . . . I've never seen so many blinding flares. So many people have been deprived of home and shelter . . . Henceforth I imagine we shall be spending more time in the shelter than in bed."

Letters from Rostock and Lubec on the Baltic, two towns the RAF has "Coventried," are frantic with woe: "It was all so horrible . . . so many dead and wounded . . . so many weeping."

In the Ruhr Germans are particularly unnerved by air raids. "We often think of you," writes Bette Gerbeck to her husband, August, "especially when we have to spend the night in the cellar . . . Friday twelve were killed here. In Essen there were 60 dead. It was most horrible in Zendingsganzen. In the evening when the alarm sounds I lose my head. I grab the children from bed, wrap them in blankets, and rush to the shelter. The moment evening comes I begin to shudder."

Their sorrows and bereavements weigh heavily on the Germans. They want the war to end. Sibilia Chad, from the Ruhr, wife of a soldier in a picked SS regiment, writes: "I'm very happy that your wound is healing. I've sad news for you. Erft was killed. He was only 20. There's no end to our sorrow. You can imagine how I feel . . . I hope this year will see the end of the war. Otherwise I don't know what's going to happen."

Sadder still is this letter from the wife of Sergeant Ewald Bekker, also from the Ruhr: "Today we commemorate the dead of the first World War. Many women are home. They are overcome with loneliness because their husbands are resting in cold and alien earth. I mustn't think of this any more, or I won't be able to do a thing all day."

It is interesting to observe that some of the gloomiest letters come from the Sudetenland, which the Munich agreement cut from Czechoslovakia and turned over to Hitler. I was in the Sudetenland during those explosive days, and witnessed the clamorous joy with which German youth greeted Hitler's triumph over the democracies. When warned that Munich meant war and death for many of them, these enthusiastic young Nazis said: "The Fuehrer will get everything without war." So here is Joseph Indrischek, from Grunthal, writing Sergeant Gerbner Wildner: "Every day there's a funeral. Carl Garron, a splendid young carpenter, has been buried. So have Dr. Pochman, and Fräu Pomesin. Yesterday we attended the saddest of all funerals—mother's."

THE Russians' prolonged and violent resistance, with the mass casualties it has inflicted, is as unexpected as it is painful to the German people. "When will we finish this cursed Russia?" writes one mother to her son.

As if in reply, comes this letter from Uncle Reiter to Top Sergeant Erwin Schneider: "We're hoping Russia will at last get sick of the affair. When we throw her out of the Don Basin and seize several more industrial districts, she won't be able to stand any more. That will cost a good many battles, but we're convinced you fellows out there can do it."

Yet one of these fellows, Alois Pfusahr, in a letter to his parents in Mannheim which he didn't live long enough to mail, writes: "We hope the war in Russia will end. Nothing in the world could make me want to spend another winter in Russia. I must finish this letter—the lice are unbearable."

There is much complaint of insects in the underground bunkers in which German soldiers in Russia must live much of the time. "In my bunker," writes Pilot Kremer to his wife, Fannie, in Vurtemberg, "the lice give us

no rest. Fleas, bedbugs, and heaven knows what other insects swarm the place. We spend days and nights scratching ourselves."

Yet Kremer is of good cheer. "Eggs, milk, and cream," he writes, "I can always find. Once I got my hands on 21 eggs, half a liter of good thick cream, and three quarters of a pound of good homemade butter. We catch chickens and wring their necks, tie up cows and calves with rope."

IN SPITE of the scorched earth policy of the Russians, they haven't been able to destroy all the gardens, orchards, and berryfields in the Cossack villages, nor evacuate all the livestock. In an unmailed letter written by N. Aschenbrenner to A. Aschenbrenner in Modorf, Bavaria, there's the happy news that "our commissary procured today some wonderful pork and three sacks of potatoes. All day long we've been frying both. We've also gotten hold of many milch cows. The milk is excellent. We've got hens, too, so we're bearing up pretty well under these hardships."

But excursions into the barns, cellars, larders, and wardrobes of Russian peasants, especially Cossacks, do not always end in happy feasts and picnics. "Today," writes brother to sister, "we got hold of 20 hens and 10 cows. Then something happened. Several Russian women with pitchforks suddenly appeared, and stabbed two soldiers to death."

It's amazing how many German women ask for parcels from Russia, including clothes. That these clothes are filched from the meager wardrobes of peasants doesn't seem to matter to these women. "Don't forget me and the children," writes Murta Treu, from Breslau, to her husband. "I'll be especially grateful for some smoked pork and soap. Though you write that where you are the heat is tropical, remember the winter—think of yourself and of us. Find woolens somewhere for me and the children."

Nor do German soldiers ignore such requests. The other day, in a village at the Rzhev front, peasants just liberated from German occupation told us American correspondents that in winter the Germans stripped even the children of felts and woolens, which they sent back to Germany. One little girl, nestling against her mother's apron, said, "They took all my dolls away, too."

FROM home German soldiers also receive letters of gratitude for the fine, cheap workers now coming from Russia. "Who'd ever have thought," writes Ruth Kretschmer, from a Breslau suburb, to her husband, Willie Mentsel, "That such a creature as our Ukrainian girl would sew so beautifully."

Anna Wiza, a bride from Resiborf, writes to her husband, "We'll be given three Ukrainian girls to work in the house and garden. All those who already have Russian help say it's no expensive luxury."

Sometimes the luxury brings grievous disappointment, as is testified by this letter to Surdolf Lamsmeyer from his mother: "Today Anna Liza Roster rushed over to our house. Her Russian girl had hanged herself in the pigpen. Anna cut the rope, but the Russian girl had no pulse. She was dead . . . She arrived in April, and all the time she walked around in tears." Enlightening is the following comment in this letter: "We offered Fräu Roster our consolation. After all for a very small sum she can get another Russian girl."

The information in letters found on the German dead, intimate and personal as it is, leads to some striking deductions. The people inside Germany hate the war and want it to end. They are tired of hardships, sick of sacrifice. They lament the moral disintegration of their young women; they shudder at air raids; they weep over their dead. But nowhere do they betray the least suggestion of German guilt or regret for horrors which the German

armies perpetrate on conquered countries.

Hard as is their life, they know neither starvation nor desperation. Nor do they expect Germany to lose the war. To expect them at this time to revolt against Hitler is as futile and puerile as to expect the Fuehrer to live up to his promises or the treaties he signs.

DIARIES of the German dead, particularly Nazi officers, support these conclusions. The Russians have gathered thousands of these diaries, but that of Hans Yokhim Hoffman, from Frankfort-on-Oder, gives as vivid an insight into the Nazi mind as I have yet read. Thirty years old, captain in an SS regiment, Hoffman is a man of considerable literacy. Writing for his own edification, he hides nothing, neither his sentimentality nor his barbarism. A fanatical believer in discipline, duty, and obedience to the Fuehrer, he tells his soldiers: "We are the master nation in Europe. The least show of compassion is a step backward, which must be condemned as inimical to our vested interests."

Once he puts the question: "Shall they (Russian civilian prisoners) all be shot, or shall we leave some alive? How would the Fuehrer act in my place?" In a subsequent entry he gives the answer to these questions. "Today we hanged 25 bandits (meaning Russian civilians). For 24 hours their bodies have been swaying in the wind."

Hoffman has his quieter moments, when he becomes contemplative and almost lyrical: "It's pleasant to sit and dream by the light of a candle. Doesn't the warm glow of candle light arouse the Aryan spirit?" He dreams of his wife, Ingeline: "What are you doing at this moment, little kitten? Perhaps you're listening to the radio, or penning a letter to me. We understand each other so well . . . It's almost impossible to imagine the idyllic harmony of our relations. . . ."

Hoffman visits the village of Siverskoye, in the Leningrad region. He likes it. "It's as beautiful as a German spa, with little wooden cottages spread over the charming countryside. It's so beautiful that I'd like to settle here with Ingeline."

BUT the war goes on. In his particular sector the Russians are fighting hard. Guerrillas are rampant. "Today we are sent forward again to Viritza as infantry." He's in deep mud. "Shells whistle all around me. The mosquitoes won't let me sleep."

Under the impact of physical privation he allows himself to say: "One is seized with indifference—let happen what may. It's a tough situation . . . Shells cleave the trees—a steely hail sweeps over us . . . The 84th battalion exists no longer."

On the first of July Hoffman receives reinforcements. With his new men he drives the Russians from a village. "Now we have a roof over our heads, and can delouse our shirts . . . Facing us are Russians with an insane amount of arms. All day long there's an exchange of bullets. Everybody digs in, precisely as in the first World War."

Now the Russians drive the Germans back, though not very far. Hoffman is facing increasing Russian violence. "Today there's noise again on the entire front. These damned Russian guerrillas . . . Two more killed, Koolig and Schultz. Raap is heavily wounded. The snipers are in hidden shelters, with rifles that have telescopic sights. It's impossible to lift one's head. If the Russians only knew how few of us are left!"

Yet Hoffman regrets nothing, recants nothing. He sees the end coming. He hates to die and leave Ingeline behind, and never to enjoy the village of Siverskoye. But to him the Nazis are always right, the world always wrong, and his cause just. The last entry is dated July 22: "Yes, big things have started—on the left the Russians are trying to break

through, and there's heavy fighting . . . Russian fliers are dropping bombs. They're bombarding us with field artillery. It's a hellish noise—everything seems to be cracking. It's impossible to talk. We cling to the earth, and the blasts from the explosions seem to blow us almost out of our dugouts . . . The roar of the plane motors is terrible."

And Hoffman dies as unregenerate a Nazi as he was in life.

Maurice Hindus