

More Stories!

Forum

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Collector

A Young Airman Collector in Post War Germany, Part 2

By Harold Ratzburg

Last month's article gave a good idea of how I got to Germany through the USAF and how I found things once I got there.

As I pointed out in last month's Collector's Corner, my lucky streak came about when I was assigned to OJT as a supply clerk in an Air Force Intelligence Squadron. The unit had its offices and quarters in three large Villas, overlooking the Danube River. During the war, the Villas were occupied by the local big shot Nazi's.

The Supply Officer, the Supply Sergeant, and two Supply Clerks, including me of course, had the responsibility of keeping track of all the AF stuff in the Villas. This meant that I had access to every key for every attic, cellar, and room in the Villas. The Villas had been previously occupied by ex-Nazi owners and also by the US Army Intelligence People before the Air Force took over, so there was probably both German and American stuff to be found. I hoped!!!

My first foray into finding collectibles and "liberating" them, was when on duty, I climbed into the attic of the garage. There in the dust was a really nice US M3 fighting knife and scabbard, and a knuckle knife with an ugly looking blade which led me to believe that some German soldier

from WW I had brought home from the Western Front a US trench knife and tried to reproduce it for WW II. The shape of the blade was so ugly that I took it to a knife smith in town and had him grind it down and reshape it into a more pointed, nasty dagger shape. About forty years later, I found that the knife, as it was, was really as they were made in the USA, so my grinding changeover certainly affected the collector value of it. But, I still have it, and I still like the altered wicked look of the blade and iron knucks.

That Villa also gave up a Cal .38 Smith and Wesson pistol, an early issue MP Billy club, lots of GI ammunition, and other assorted goodies, all from previous American occupiers.

One of the other Villas was much more interesting. There was a lot of German militaria stuff down in the wine cellar, but being new and just feeling my way in the outfit, I did not know just how far I could go, just liberating the stuff and hauling it over to my quarters. I finally figured that the best course of action was to make a "midnight requisition" since, of course, I had access to the keys. I figured also of course, that I had better get to the stuff before some other "collector" in the outfit got the same idea.

My plan was complicated by the fact that one of the German civilians, a lady known to us GIs as "Red" who worked as a housekeeper, also stayed there overnight and it was her responsibility to make sure that the building was locked and nobody was to come in after office hours. Being new, I did not know Red that well so I did not feel that I could involve her in my plan

So, taking my chances, late one night, I let myself into the cellar with my trusty flashlight and keys and started going through the piles of stuff on the shelves. (I can say that perhaps it was the very first estate sale in my life, except that it was not exactly legal like the ones I go to as often as I can these days)

Then, wouldn't you know it, about that time, Red decides to come down into the cellar for something. I heard her coming, and quickly figured that the best thing to do was to meet her half way instead of hiding out in a dark corner.

BIG mistake-----you never heard such screaming----- from a woman who thought she was alone in this big dark Villa and suddenly sees this big hulk coming toward her up the circular stone stairs from a dark cellar. You can't blame her for the noise she made in her panic!!!!!!!

It took more than a little while to calm her down, but I managed somehow, and she did not call the 'Poliizei' or tell the AF authorities of my looting expedition. I was shook up enough that I don't really remember if I left with my loot that night or came back at a later date, but you gotta admit, that was a close one.

The collectibles that came from that cellar were as follows: A German Officers Billed Cap, a German Gas Mask in the canister, a miniature SS Dagger, a starter pistol and a whole lot of photos and photo albums of German soldiers training and on maneuvers. Not really a bad haul for a young collector. A sad part of the story however is that when I got the stuff back to my quarters, I hid the cap and gas mask and some photo albums in a cleanout hole by the chimney where the maid found them, and thinking that this forbidden German material was stashed there by the previous German owner, she threw them out in the rubbish. and I never saw them again. Damn!!!!

Anything with a swastika on it was and still is forbidden in Germany. If you go to a militaria show in Germany today, anything such as a dagger must have the swastika covered by a paper stick on. It is simply illegal to show a swastika or to ship an article with a swastika into Germany and several other countries in Europe. If you sell on Ebay, Ebay will refuse to display or handle any article with the twisted cross on it.

As time went on, people in the outfit, even the German civilian employees, learned that Ratzburg was a "collector" and willing to buy or trade for militaria items. Trading for things was made easier for us GIs in that there was a thriving black market going on in the ruins of the country. Cigarettes were the main items of exchange. All GIs got a ration of one carton of cigarettes per week, and that cost the GI a whole dollar. Sold on

the black market, that carton would bring in about \$4.50, which today doesn't seem like much, but back then a lowly Private First Class made about \$65.00 per month, so an extra \$14.00 a month helped like heck. That Pfc made about as much money as a Foreman in a German factory, so we rich Americans had it pretty well made, with our room and board supplied free by the AF.

One of the cleaning women asked me if I was interested in trading for a swastika that she had. She had previously worked for the German Air Force, and when the Luftwaffe base where she had worked was bombed, she had liberated the swastika from where it used to stand in front of the German Mess hall. Of course I was interested! For a carton of cigarettes I got a beautiful, nine inch tall, chrome plated, metal swastika on a chrome plated base.

Another lady offered a Luftwaffe Dress Dagger. Her family had kept it buried in the garden behind the house and she dug it up and brought it to me. It was a little damaged by being buried, but easily worth the carton of cigarettes that she wanted for it.

About a year after I got to Ulm, the US Army returned in force and occupied all the old German installations that had previously been used by the German army. This opened up the possibility of trading military stuff with other US Army supply people when you had an overage or shortage of items that you were responsible for in your own unit's paperwork. Judicious trading turned up Carbine and M-1 bayonets and helmets and other assorted collectibles that appealed to me.

So, you can see how my lucky streak continued.

But-----do you think I and all the other GIs did not complain?????? You bet we did. After all, is it not the job of all GIs to gripe and moan. We took that job so serious that we each carried a T.S. card. (The T.S. stands for 'tough s--t') and the idea was that if you complained to another GI, he could ask if you wanted to have your T.S. card punched in order that you could keep accurate score.

The troops like myself who came later to occupy Germany missed out on a lot of goodies that earlier front line soldier/collectors had access to. Of course, we later occupiers were not being shot at either. Just imagine the choices that earlier collectors had when they were able pick through piles of contraband that the Germans had dropped or turned in. In WW II days, GIs were able to mail collectibles back to the USA, things like pistols and even live sub-machine guns. Now days, these things mean jail time if you are caught with them. Especially machine guns.

The lady called Red, (the one I had scared the crap out of when I encountered her on the dark stairway,) told me how it was when the US Army came into a town with their rifles and tanks.

The "Amies", as the Americans were called by the Germans, put up notices that all Germans were to turn in ALL weapons upon fear of death. If they got caught with a weapon, they could be shot. That really got their attention!

Red's father, who was a Master Sergeant in the German Army, had left at his home in Ulm, a Luger P-08 Pistol and his Non Commissioned Officers Sword when he was shipped to Norway earlier in the war. As the family suffered through the many air raids, her mother carried the sword and pistol with her to the air raid shelter every time the sirens sounded so as to save them for her husband, but when the Amies notice about weapons came to the attention of her mother, her mother insisted that her daughter Red and brother Kurt get rid of the forbidden articles. Since they did not live very far from the Danube River, that is where the gun and sword were dumped, late at night, along with many other forbidden things that other German civilians had to get rid of. Not being much of a swimmer or diver, I never went after that stuff. I had always thought about going fishing with a big magnet, but I never got around to it.

This is the end of this story. It could go on for many more pages of the experiences of this little ole Wisconsin farm boy but enough is enough for this MTA Newsletter. I don't want to drive up the costs for more pages.

Footnote: Some of you by now may have figured out that "Red" was more to me than a passing acquaintance and you are right. About two years after our encounter in the cellar, we were married and this year marks 55 years of wedded bliss. Anneliese (Lisa) is my partner at our MV shows and handles the selling part of the stuff I find at estate sales and flea markets.

She lived through the bombing hell that was Ulm, and on December 17, 1944, her home was destroyed. Homeless for a long time, she was 14 when the war ended. If you would like to hear some war stories of the German civilian side of the war, ask Lisa. She was there and is not reluctant to talk about it. Why she did not come out of the war with this "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome" that you hear so much about these days, I will never know.

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