April 21, 1945

Darling,

I haven't written for a day or so. I have been too depressed. The realization that what has occurred here is only one small incident among many others makes it even more terrible! At Weimar and at Bremen we are told of massacres larger in numbers; but what I saw myself on my two visits to the charnel house at Gardelegen exceeds in cold-blooded brutality anything of which I have read or imagined to be possible. I am going to tell you the story, as well as it is now known. Every American should be brought to see with their own eyes this sight. They must be made to realize that this type of incident is true - it really happens. They must learn anew to recognize our Nazi enemy as the inhuman, despicable beast he is.

In East Prussia there was a concentration camp, where many thousand "enemies of the Reich" were imprisoned. Nobody knows exactly how many. Most of these people were there because they were patriots, and fought for their homes. There was a Dutchman, an old and wealthy man, who gave sanctuary and aid to two American parachutists. They confiscated his wealth, and sent him to a concentration camp. This was in 1942. His sons are also "missing." There was a Russian tanker, a legitimate prisoner of war, who was considered important enough politically to be sent there. There were many Poles whose crime was that they were Jews. There were Frenchmen who either had been or were suspected of being active in the underground. There was a French doctor, and it is thought, two English, or perhaps American, medical corpsmen. There were about 50 women from various countries, no one knows for sure what had been their "crimes." In all they numbered several thousand.

In January the Russian drive began to imperil this camp and it was decided to move the prisoners to inner Germany. They were packed tight in box-cars, and train-loads began to move west. It was very cold - many degrees below zero. These people had no coats or shoes. They wore gunny-sacks and rags.

One of these trains, the fate of whose occupants we follow, was spotted and strafed by an allied plane. The engine was destroyed by a bomb. So, on about the 29th of January, began a two months' march, which beggars the imagination. All day in the bitter cold they trudged through the ice and snow. At night they sank exhausted, and if they did not freeze to death, awoke to trudge again. Feet froze, hands froze, their souls froze. One of the survivors with whom I talked can not remember weeks at a time of this dreadful march. If one became too enfeebled to keep up, the Nazi guards shot them, or beat their brains in with the butt of a gun, or just left them to turn to icicles. They were fed one piece of black bread and one bowl of watery "soup" a day. Sometimes they were fed twice in a day.

It is thought by the survivors - there are five - that over half of those who started died on the way. All of the women died. Those

who finally arrived here were gaunt, emaciated, shrivelled spectres of their former selves.

You have never seen a person who starved to death - until his skin, wrinkled and leathery, shrouds his bones, and his face is like a mummy. I have now seen hundreds. It is not a sight one forgets.

When this dreadful march was over, they were put in several small concentration units near Gardelegen - at least, those who could still walk around. The weakest were put in "hospitals." These consisted of a number of houses or buildings, where the prisoners lay on straw or on the floor in rows. They were occasionally fed. One or two were actually hospitalized in the military hospital there at the insistence of a French doctor.

This was the state of affairs as of about a week ago.

Then suddenly came news to the district party leader - the Kriesleiter - that the American armor was rapidly approaching. The exact details of what happened and exactly by whom was what done are not known. Obviously, witnesses are reticent, to say the least. (Two were so reticent as to commit suicide in their prison cell night before last). But, as the story is pieced together, this is what happened.

The Kreisleiter, through the local SS and the party members, organized the Wolksturm of Gardelegen (that is, the people, the civilians, the German folk themselves). They went about a mile out of town to where there was a barn near the big airfield, about 150 feet long and 50 wide. Outside of this, to the north and east, they dug a series of trenches about 60 feet long, six feet wide and eight feet deep. The soil is sandy. It was not hard digging. They put straw in the barn, and soaked it with some oil. On Friday the 13th they were ready. They collected all these gaunt and tattered prisoners from the camps, the "hospitals", the buildings, and assembled them at this barn. One Russian fell on the way. He was clubbed with the butt of a rifle, and left as dead. But the blow was a glancing one, and only lacerated the scalp. (He is one of the survivors). The old Dutchman had managed to escape during the last days of the march. He was hiding in a little farm-house, sheltered by some Russian slave-farm-laborers. (Thus he too survived). They had two machine guns strategically placed near the corners of the barn. The Wolksturm had rifles and pistols.

They asked if any of the prisoners could shoot a rifle. Some said they could. These they stood in a line about 15 yards from the barn, with Wolksturmer and SS standing behind them with pistols in their ribs.

The rest were herded into the barn. Some refused to go, knowing what was in store. These were shot. The rest were crowded in. Then the

big wooden doors were slid shut. The ones with rifles were ordered to start shooting through the doors. The machine guns began to rattle. Some bazookas were fired through the walls. A 13 year old boy threw a burning faggot through a hole in the wall. The straw began to burn, and soon inside was an inferno -- Then the prisoners who had had the rifles were shot in the back of the head. -- --

Saturday morning, the fire was still smouldering. The Wolksturm were trying to bury the evidence. Most of the bodies outside, and a few from inside had been thrown into the pits. But they couldn't finish. The American armor swept into town in the early afternoon. The brick shell of the barn with its charred doors and grisly contents told its story all too clearly. The pits were only half full.

Do you think the Coconut Grove fire was a disaster? Listen! There were over six hundred bodies found in the barn. There were over 400 more already in the pits!

I went out to the barn on Wednesday. It is a sight to banish sleep. Emaciated bodies, twisted in grotesque shapes. Some charred, others just darkened by the smoke. Piled on top of each other, four, five, ten deep, especially near the doors and corners. One had dug with his hands a pit in the dirt of the doorway just enough so he could get his face out - struggling to get air to breath! The agony is frozen on his face. Some had others in their arms, as if to protect them. One oldish man was just a head on a body. The legs and arms were burned right off.

Can you visualize that scene as it took place, and hear the screams, and moans, the crackling fire, and the rattle of the machine-guns and rifles?

It seems hard to believe, but two or three people lived to come out of that barn alive. One lay unconscious under a pile of bodies until Sunday. They are in an Evac. Hospital near the town. I have seen them and talked with them through an interpreter. The Russian tanker will probably come out all right, and the others too will probably survive. One has gained over five pounds in as many days. Think, next time you eat a steak, what that might mean to somebody!

Gardelegen is a county-seat, a rural town of about 20 - 25,000 people. It lies about 25 miles to the north of Magdeburg. It is peopled by the average farming community of northern Germany. It is almost 100% Nazi. These are the people of Germany. These are the men (and women) and boys who could burn alive over one thousand tortured, sick, and starving fellow men!

Does this story reach you? I mean really and truly twist and tear you as the horror of it sinks in? This is no vague report of something that happened far away, and is "probably just propaganda." I have seen this thing myself.

Yesterday and today they are sorting and counting and burying these people. Identification is largely impossible. Who they were, nobody will probably ever know. It is grisly, smelly work. All the available party members of the town were assigned the task. They must dig new and individual graves. They must remove the bodies from the pits with their bare hands. They must carry them on litters, reverently. It is hard to keep the Russian liberated laborers from killing all the Germans. The American soldier must stand guard over them all. It is hard to keep these soldiers from killing the Germans. It is a situation without parallel in human relations or experience.

Without parallel, that is, except elsewhere in this Nazi Germany! This is only one incident, apparently. There are others on a much vaster scale elsewhere.

That doesn't seem possible, does it? But don't be deceived. These are the German people in their naked brutality.

Let as many people as possible see this letter. Let them know, and try to understand. Let them remember this when they talk about the peace to come. When the time of retribution and punishment of war guilt arrives, let them visualize that barn in Gardelegen on the afternoon of Friday, April the 13th.

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Henry