

Liberation

The 80th Infantry division was irate. The war was almost over, speculation was that Hitler may even be dead, and yet they were trekking through Austria rather than liberating Berlin. They had heard that some of the militants they'd met on the way over were about to go and take the city. "We could be out killin' some Nazi bastards and raisin' the stars and stripes over Berlin with 'em but the generals got us working clean down 'ere," one complained. Others, like Robert Colong, longed to once again feel the warm embrace of their wives and hear the playful voices of their children. Robert's wife had given birth to a baby girl named Anita while he was over in Europe, which made the time he spent in the war time he would lose with his daughter. But there was still work to be done, lives to be saved, and he intended fully to get the job done.

The scent of rotting flesh tainted the air. They entered a camp at Ebensee, Austria. Corpses piled up, left by the Germans to decay. They knew the Americans were coming and had forsaken the camp. Horror consumed them all observing the mass carnage that had occurred. The order was given to sweep the camp for survivors.

Robert walked towards the northeastern part of the camp. He came up to a barrack. Uneasy about any potential Germans remaining, he drew his rifle from his back and loaded it. Slowly he poked the door open and peeked in. He heard heavy breaths. The floor creaked slightly as Robert stepped in, causing a now startled family to awaken and plead for mercy. He remembered a slight bit of German from high school. He said, "Es ist ok, ich bin Amerikaner"; roughly, "It's ok, I am American." Sat atop the bed, the mother cradled a newborn in her hands. Robert kneeled down to the see baby, whom

she called Eva. He asked the family to tell what had happened here. The mother, named Johanna, explained that she had faked her own death by hiding beneath the wooden foundation of the barrack because she had watched as they put any pregnant women in a train to their death. Her son Rudolf, who was seven years old, told Robert that he had to smuggle food from sympathetic people, which he then lowered through a loose floorboard. Robert was dumbfounded. He couldn't comprehend the plight of this family.

They were interrupted by commotion from the outside. Robert peeked his head from the door to see dozens of families pouring from these homes towards the square. Robert brought the family to the square, where soldiers were distributing rations. Robert grabbed each of the family members two slices of bread and a slab of bacon. When they got the food they thanked him, telling him it was the first food they've had in three days. Robert was disgusted; he thought about how he would have felt had his family been deprived of food for days on end. He ushered the family back to their living quarters. The rest of the troops were meeting just outside the square. Robert walked over to meet them. Each soldier told about the horrors of the family they'd met. Robert described

They decided that they had to stay at Ebensee to help these people get back on their feet.

For the next few days, the 80th Infantry Division spend most of their time and resources on healing this community. Hundreds died of sickness even after they had

been provided with food and basic medicine. Robert spent this time getting to know the family. Being in the military, Robert learned how to quickly form a tight bond with people just met. He learned that their father had died while trying to escape to the Soviet Union several weeks back to inform them of what was happening in these camps. They told of how their home had been stormed by Nazis and how they'd been treated like animals. He helped nurture the children back to health. Robert learned about Rudolf's passion for reading, so he gathered up any books or comics that the unit had brought. He helped to treat the mother, who had what was diagnosed as meningitis. He spent time at her bedside. He brought her food and he was there when the pain got unbearable. But most of all, he was devoted to Eva. He played with her in the morning, he fed her at meal times, he read to her at bedtime, and he lulled her to sleep when she was restless. For the short time he spent with the family, she became his.

On May 8th 1945, the Nazis officially declared surrender. Within day of the surrender, the war department informed the 80th Infantry Division that they would be returning home to their families. Robert was reunited his wife and daughter, now three years old. Years went by; things began to normalize. In 1964, Robert had taken a career in education. He was teaching at a college in Chicago about the horrors of the Holocaust. As his lecture went on he noticed something unusual. Something was off, he just didn't know what. He observed the students for any dubious behavior. His eyes met that of a young woman, who remained rather still. Alas, he wasn't going to let odd energy ruin his class. So he went about the lecture and the students proceeded to leave

the class. Finally, as he decluttered the room, he read a note left on a desk inscribed with a single word:

Eva

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<http://wikimapia.org/10105471/Site-of-the-former-Concentration-Camp> http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203554.pdf