

Stalingrad, a Lifetime Later

A visit to the site of the siege of Stalingrad reawakens distressing memories and leads Ute Carson to an unexpected experience of mutual understanding

I BELONG TO THE post-Second World War fatherless generation. I remember many roll calls in my German primary school classroom: "Father's Occupation?" "Killed" ... "Missing in action" ... "Disabled" ... "Gone".

The city of Stalingrad was destroyed during World War II and rebuilt as Volgograd in the gray cement-block style of the Stalinist era. On a high hill just outside the city a statue of Mother Russia, a massive woman with outstretched arms, one hand menacingly wielding a sword, towers over town and country beyond. As we mounted the steep steps, martial music boomed out over loudspeakers from behind massive rock and concrete battle scenes, as haunting as Wagnerian Valkyries. Halfway through the climb, next to one of the numerous fountains, stands another female figure carved in stone, cradling a wounded soldier in her arms. Both statues are firmly grounded in Mother Earth but while the first signals might and fight, this one suggests comfort and sympathy, all important parts of the legendary Russian soul. Throughout our journey we were confronted with both sides of her character.

Many of our preconceived notions were confirmed during our stay in Russia and Ukraine. Or was it that, as spoiled westerners, we were most aware of the contradictions? While Moscow brims with high-priced stores, elegance, and entrepreneurship, the countryside shows signs of the old regime: sullen attitudes, resentment of foreigners, corruption and the black market which deals in everything from human flesh to drugs, displayed in broad daylight. Even good hotels are shabby beneath touched-up surfaces. Delicious meals are served in a wide choice of restaurants, but there is no water pressure in the shower and the toilet handle comes off in

your hand. In the first-class train compartment from Kharkov to Kiev, which boasted (nonexistent) air-conditioning, businessmen stripped to their underwear and then stood alongside us at the open windows in the corridor, only to reemerge from their compartments at their stop in jackets and ties, briefcases and new BlackBerry phones in hand. The young were open, helpful, and eager to try their English. But they also

only 10 months apart.

Between 1992 and 1999 the "Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge," a German organization founded to maintain cemeteries of fallen soldiers in foreign countries, built a memorial at Rossoschka for the victims of the Battle of Stalingrad. A nine-foot high wall 30 yards in diameter and bearing the names of identified soldiers, encircles the resting place of the estimated 1.5 million Germans and Russians lost



Soviet soldier waving the Red Banner over the central plaza of Stalingrad in 1943.

seemed skilled in black market dealing. Although we were not on a cultural tour, we did visit the lovingly restored churches and monasteries which survived Stalin's purges. But the purpose of our trip was a pilgrimage.

A long time ago, I promised my beloved maternal grandmother that I would find the burial grounds of Uncle Heio and Uncle Hubertus, her sons and my mother's brothers, Germans who were killed in 1943 on the Russian front. Both were 23 years old when they died, having been born

in the winter of 1942-43. The official Russian cemetery lies across the road but as we were told, "bones from both sides mingle at Rossoschka." A mass grave, equalizer of age, rank and nationalities. For the countless unidentified soldiers, massive granite blocks with names and dates in black lettering stand all around the circle in an adjacent open field.

We had travelled from Texas to Moscow, now making our way to Volgograd with high expectations, armed with maps, letters and old pictures. But when we

asked at our hotel, and then made the rounds of several others, no one could tell us anything about the location of this cemetery. We had no luck with taxi drivers and people on the street either. Even with the larger-than-life monument looming over the city, the reality of World War II seemed to have been forgotten.

Sitting in an outdoor cafe and watching fashionable young couples amble by, we felt in pursuit of a lost cause. Before giving up, we stopped one evening at The Intourist, a leftover from the Soviet era, the one hotel in town our guidebooks advised us to avoid. But there we met Vasily, fluent in German and English, who was well-acquainted with the site we sought. In the past, he had taken German veterans and their families to these burial grounds. "Nobody has been here in a long time," he said. "Those who knew have died and the young ones don't remember." We hired him on the spot. We had found the needle in the haystack.

The next morning, Vasily was as punctual as the church chimes on the plaza. He brought with him a vast knowledge of the history of Stalingrad and its environs and a driver in a late-model Toyota.

What's in a name? I traced the lettering H E I O with my index finger along a deep dark groove on the hot stone. My uncle had been listed as missing and therefore his name was not on the wall but on one of the large square blocks in the meadow. I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach the top. I don't know whether it was the burning June sun or my imagination heating up but suddenly over this large field of the dead, images from old stories and faded photographs of Heio's life swirled through my mind. They blew in with the hot breeze along with the soft kites of gray-haired dandelions.

Heio was the youngest of three, my grandmother's "Sun-

Memorial at Rossoschka for the fallen at the Battle of Stalingrad.



shine." He, along with my mother Gerda-Maria and his brother, Hubertus, grew up in carefree abandonment on the estate of his ancestors, Silesian landed aristocrats. He was popular in school, not so much for his grades as for his winning personality, his leadership potential, and his great sympathy for the underprivileged. He was also known for his sense of humor. He disliked marching to war songs, so as the leader of a small company en route to the Russian front he taught his men to whistle or sing love songs instead.

When Hitler began shutting down "Jewish schools," Heio was attending a private one in Berlin. The headmaster decided to relocate to Switzerland and asked Heio to accompany him there to help establish his new academy. Among the many friends Heio made there was Louis Guigo, son of one of the owners of the Nestle company, and his sister Cecile, Heio's first love. The Guigos took Heio in as one of their own. In that atmosphere of camaraderie

and future promise Heio heard that Hubertus had been called up in the war draft. Hubertus had no love of war. He was a quiet and reserved man, my mother's favorite. As children, they had played house together and tried their hands at cooking. Hubertus had begun his study of ancient languages like my father, and had a serious girlfriend. Despite urgings from his adopted family in Switzerland and my grandmother's fervent pleas, Heio returned to Germany. "I can't let Hubertus go alone," he said. He was soon called up and sent to the Russian front.

Hitler was under the illusion that General Paulus' Sixth Army could prevail over the Russian Army. The German troops had entered the city of Stalingrad without much resistance. They had no knowledge of the Soviet commander Marshall Zhukov's tactical brilliance and determination to defeat the Germans. Heio's reserve battalion set up camp

about an hour outside the city during the late summer of 1942, encountering a hot, dry season on the steppe. By the time the Russian winter arrived with sub-zero temperatures, the German troops were surrounded by Russian tank divisions and were desperate. They lacked warm clothing, food was running out, and their supply lines were cut.

When Heio was killed in January 1943 his personal belongings disappeared with him. When Hubertus died the following May, near Kiev, my grandmother received his iron cross, several of her last letters to him and a photo of his girlfriend in a small silver frame, all neatly tucked into a checkered handkerchief tied together at the corners.

At the sound of Vasily's voice I emerged from my ruminations. "Every man is first a baby, suckles at his mother's breast and then grows up with dreams, only to encounter the horrors of war. It does not make sense," he said. "Thinking about all the killings

makes me ill," I replied.

Vasily had a plan. "Do you have more time?" he asked and when we nodded, he told the driver to speed off again. Vasily had seen our letters and knew that one of the final battles over Stalingrad had taken place near the village of Baburkin. Burned to the ground in the fighting, the village had never been rebuilt. Decades later, its ruins lay overtaken by nature. My grandmother had received Heio's last note from Baburkin, dated New Year's Eve 1942, "Nobody will come out of this hellhole alive," he had written. "Only the memory of my idyllic childhood keeps me sane." Few did survive, and General Paulus surrendered soon thereafter in early February 1943.

We rumbled over rutted, washed-out roads, through dry ravines, along waist-high meadows. The driver got nervous and started to argue with Vasily. Until recently Russians were forbidden to travel beyond their towns of residence without a permit. We too had to share our passports to check in at hotels and carry identification in case we were stopped by the police. Vasily urged us on. Finally, we halted next to a vast field of tall grasses running up to a deep gorge. The driver parked and we started to walk. Vasily pointed straight ahead, "This deep riverbed was once the demarcation line. The Germans were here, the Russians on the other side. During the night of the final battle layers of solid ice covered everything."

When we had taken only a few steps we were startled by what lay before us. Nothing had prepared us for what we saw. Rusted chunks of artillery, small piles of shovels that were used for digging foxholes, remnants of hobnail boots — distinctive German issue. And then a sea of bones. It was surreal. I stumbled over a thigh bone. Long. It must have belonged to a very tall man. There were pieces of skulls, fingers, feet, all weathered but not gone. Over a lifetime the sands had swept through the looming grass, covering and uncovering



**Above: Snow covers the killing field at Baburkin near Stalingrad.
Below: Skulls and bones strewn over the field near Baburkin..**



the remains as once the snow had carpeted the footprints left by terror. I swayed with the thick grass blades and an echo from the past resounded through the still air. The wind seemed to blow in from the four directions and the dry bones began to jostle and rattle as in Ezekiel's prophecy. And before my inner eye the bones grew layers of sinews, and flesh connected to bones and skin covered the muscles, and an army of men rose

around me with shrill moans and loud howls like the lone wolves who once patrolled the tundra on bitter cold nights. I began to shiver, though it was unseasonably warm. And then I heard Heio's voice.

I am snugly dug into my fox-hole but can no longer feel my feet. I wrapped my boots in burlap before leaving the tent. My fingers are pressed around the gun barrel. They too are numb. I wonder if I can even

pull the trigger. Gerda-Maria sent knitted woolen mittens. She must have patterned them after her own hands because they barely stretch over mine! I like them though. They are sky blue, not the usual mouse gray color. It's snowing softly. The flakes seem to multiply as I stare into the powdery veil. I feel like I'm in a trance. The night stretches on and I whistle to Helmut who is in the hole nearest to mine. No answer. He must not fall asleep. How can I keep him awake? I whistle again and then swallow several times. My mouth is dry but I can still almost taste of the snow soup we had on New Year's Eve, which was seasoned with the last of our horseflesh. The snowflakes look like froth on the broth.

There! The first sunrays. They glide over the glaring surface and light up the nebulous haze. I have no physical sensations in my legs or arms. Am I frozen? It's quiet at Helmut's hideout and I can only just see his helmet sticking up. No movement. Without the cover of darkness I am not allowed to whistle. My eyelashes are stuck together. I can hardly make out the shapes creeping toward us. Huge turtles with feelers. Suddenly I hear crunching. These things are driving over our foxholes! I want to scream at them. Russian tanks? Why am I suddenly afraid? There must be a way to escape this moving menace. Why do I feel like laughing? This is hilarious! Opapa is having one of his famous dinner parties and Hubertus and I have been busy wrapping all the toilet seats in the castle in garlands of ivy. We worked hard all afternoon and now are hiding in a hallway closet watching the first guests enter and then quickly leave the bathrooms. Here comes Opapa to check things out. Now he is storming in our direction. He catches us by the shirttails. He has never spanked us before, but we can't stop laughing. Hubertus and I are still smirking as we hold our painful behinds. I drop my weapon and raise my arms to greet the glorious morning.

"God must have left just before the massacre of Stalingrad," Vasily brings me back to the present. "Yes," I concur, "he seems to make a habit of that." Icy rivulets of sweat streamed from my hairline down the front of my chest in



Above: 2010, looking at human remains from 1943.
Below: Hobnail boots-distinctive German issue.



the midday heat.

When Hubertus heard about Heio's death he was incredulous. "Not Heio," he wrote from the Ukraine, "not him." The brothers had met by chance only a few months before at a briefing in Kiev after having been without mail contact for weeks. Heio could always be recognized by a distinctive white lock at the neckline of his otherwise dark brown hair. Hubertus had instantly spotted him sitting in the front row of the briefing room. "Stay strong, brother," Heio had encouraged.

"We *HAVE* to survive!"

Swallows fluttered like cupids over the quivering warm May landscape. The earth was melodious with birdsong and blanketed with wildflowers. Bluebells swayed dolefully in the morning breeze when Hubertus emerged from his tent, stretched toward the rising sun, and was instantly felled by a sniper. A friend sent his belongings to my grandmother. Hubertus was buried in a small cemetery in Romny and his remains later moved to memorial burial

grounds outside of Kharkov.

It was not difficult to locate the German soldiers' cemetery as it was a specially designated section of Kharkov City Cemetery. Stanislaus, the hotel concierge, and his driver friend were eager to earn some extra money. Like all cabbies we encountered on our journey, this one drove with the speed of an unimpeded whirlwind. Oncoming traffic was an opportunity for a game of chicken. I closed my eyes every time we swerved from lane to lane. Accidents were common and fender-benders a frequent occurrence. Safely arrived at the cemetery, the two men stood next to the taxi, smoking. But when we set off in search of the monument where Hubertus was immortalized, they ambled along.

Maybe tracing a dead man's name calls forth magic forces. As before, the spirits started to encircle me like a dense fog. Hubertus stood tall and lanky, his bemused smile wrinkling his nose just as I knew him from pictures. Was I hallucinating again? He seemed pleased that we had found him. But his voice sounded sad:

If only Heio had lived! He was the hopeful one. He gave me such courage when we last met. I am despondent. Even the thought of my loved ones at home, my dear mother, Gerda-Maria, and Elsa can't pull me out of this slump. They have their hardships with wartime rations and worries about us and all the personal losses they have had to bear, but they cannot imagine the conditions out here. Their letters are full of love and concern but they read as if we are living in different worlds. And indeed we are! When Karl was evacuated after his legs were blown off, my tears were a mixture of relief and sorrow. Would I want to survive as a cripple? So many of our comrades have already died and we take more casualties daily. I dreamed about one of Heio's childhood pranks the other night. He always had something up his sleeve. Aunt Emma often visited at teatime. We noticed that she carried an umbrella into the drawing room into which she secretly deposited the cookies that were not to her taste. One day when her coach arrived to pick



Rusted piles of foxhole shovels and weapons used during the Battle of Stalingrad..

her up, and she had finished covering our faces with sloppy kisses which we could barely wait to wipe off, Heio announced at the door "it's raining." Not hesitating to notice that the sky was blue as blue can be, Aunt Emma opened her umbrella and was showered with cookies! Heio laughed and laughed. I also found it funny but stood by rather awkwardly. I am not Heio, could never be Heio. But I could live if he had lived.

When I blinked, our driver was wiping his eyes. "He was younger than I am," he said quietly. "Yes," I replied and only then did I notice that he had been reading the words of Albert Schweitzer etched into the memorial stone: "Soldiers' graves are the best advocates for peace."

We had brought plenty of film with us. But that day we had left our spare batteries behind. When our camera stopped working, Stanislaus spontaneously began to take photographs with his phone. Back at the hotel I asked if he could send prints of the pictures. An hour later he was at our door with a disk of the photos. He accepted our thanks but courteously declined our offer of payment. A shared emotional experience had transformed an event from a lifetime ago into a moving personal encounter

between representatives of former enemy countries.

On our flight back to the States I resolved to tell this story of understanding across cultures which is also the story of my beloved uncles who died more than a half century ago, nearly half a century younger than I am today. The stories of the dead must be told lest they vanish like shooting stars.

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