

Silvia Koerner Recounts Her Escape from the Red Army (Retrospective Account, 2002)

Abstract

In this retrospective account that was part of an oral history project run by the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Silvia Koerner (b. 1938) records her memories of fleeing from her village in the Uckermark region in order to escape the advancing Red Army at the end of the Second World War. Silvia, her mother and siblings fled westward in fear of retaliation by Red Army Soldiers against the German civil population.

Source

One night in the spring of 1945 I was, as I assumed, jolted out of sleep by a thunderstorm. Through the curtains I saw a light flicker, sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger, and waited for the next thunderclap. But it did not come. Instead, my mother had entered the children's room. She woke my brother and sisters and said to the four of us: "Get dressed. The Russians are here. They blew up the bridge. We have to escape!" (When we still lived in Berlin, there had only ever been general talk of the enemy. Now the enemy had become Russians, about whom the adults told each other that they would loot, rape and murder. I got a bit scared, even though I didn't really know what this looting and raping was all about).

So we got dressed and then went together to the courtyard. There, the owner of the manor and his entire clan had already gathered and were busily and hectically, but unusually silently, harnessing horses to the wagons, loading the wagons with all kinds of things like blankets, spades, large sides of bacon, bread and other foodstuffs, and finally taking a seat on the wagons themselves and driving off. Speechless, we stood there and watched the hustle and bustle for a while until mommy understood that no one from the manor would take care of us. We would have to help ourselves as best we could. For this reason we left the farmstead on foot. On the village street there were already many people fleeing, from our village and from the surrounding villages. We joined the trek and were now also fleeing from the Russians.

Everyone walked in silence. The only thing that could be heard were the hooves of horses and the wheels of wagons on the cobblestones and the muffled sound of bombs hitting further away. Everything took place in an illumination reminiscent of fireworks. But now I knew that it was neither thunderstorms nor fireworks. It was war! I was actually only a little afraid, because I had mommy and my brothers and sisters with me. That was enough for me for the moment. But I thought about how long this march through the night would last, an hour or two or maybe the whole night until dawn? And I would also like to be aware of where it was actually going. Without being able to say exactly how long we had been walking on the country road, the wagons from our village suddenly turned off onto a smaller path that led to a field near the river Ucker. There the whole trek stopped.

The people climbed down from their wagons, unloaded them, took their spades and began to dig in an adjacent field, which was a little higher than the one where we had stopped. In these holes in the ground they wanted to hide from the Russians. As before on the farmstead of the manor, everyone was looking out for themselves and only wanted to save their own skin. We had no spade and no one wanted to lend us theirs. So mommy looked around to find a suitable hiding place for us, too. Her eyes fell on a big haystack nearby. "Listen," she said to us, "we

will hide there in that haystack." And she continued, "I will crawl in first, then you will come and lie down with your bodies on top of mine and cover it, so to speak. After that, when we are all in our places, I will pinch you. If I pinch you, then you will scream and if you scream, then the Russians will believe that you are only screaming children who have neither mother nor father. And if they believe that, then they will move on. They are only after adults and do not care about children! Did you understand what I said?"

Oh yes, I understood, because now I knew what to expect! But I also knew what I had heard before about the Russians, namely that they were terrible and did all sorts of things, especially to the women!

The night in the haystack seemed endless. Mommy pinched me and I screamed. She pinched me again and I screamed again, and between my own screams I could hear the screams of my siblings. It was strange, because when I heard the screams of my siblings, and before it hurt so much that I screamed again myself, I was overcome by something like joy, probably it was simply *schadenfreude*. The screams of my brothers and sisters at least proved to me that they, too were being pinched and not only I!

At dawn the next day we carefully crawled out of the haystack and the villagers out of their holes in the ground. It turned out that no Russians had discovered us the previous night. We knew, however, that the danger was not over yet. They could come the next night or the night after. Mommy therefore borrowed a spade and also dug a hole where we could hide. We spent the day in the open, but only sitting, lying or crawling, because planes kept coming out of nowhere and flying low over us. Not far from our camp and fenced in were some cows grazing. No one dared to approach them to milk them. The danger that an airplane would appear in low-level flight was too great. The cows' mooing grew louder and louder. They wanted to be milked, for their udders were swollen and looked like inflated balloons. But nothing was to be done. The cows had to suffer and endure until the milk in their udders would dry up and we, hungry and thirsty, had to continue to be so.

When it began to dawn, we crawled into our hole in the ground. Mommy crawled in first, followed by my brothers and sisters, and finally me. In order to have room for all of us in the hole, we had to squeeze together. We lay in a heap of bodies, arms and legs. And since I was the one who crawled into the hole last, I was also the one who was crammed in at the exit of the hole.

I had fallen asleep and was awakened by men's voices speaking a language I did not understand. Instantly I realized, "It must be the Russians!" This thought alone paralyzed me with terror!

However, after the first fright had settled, I looked up cautiously. There, about a meter away from me, I saw a pair of boots and a bayonet on a rifle, poking here and there in the ground, coming closer and closer to me! Quickly I stretched an arm inward into the hole and managed to grab hold of an arm or leg by which I could pull myself further into the hole to get out of reach of the bayonet.

Much later, I told my mother about my experiences that night and the fears I had endured. Only then did we both understand what I had done to my mother. She said: "I had been awake the whole time and heard the Russians talking to each other. But suddenly someone grabbed my leg and pulled on it. I believed, of course, that it was a Russian who wanted to pull me out. I therefore spent the rest of the night motionless, hardly daring to breathe!"

Finally the Russians discovered us and ordered us to come out of the holes. They gave instructions that we should line up in rows; the adults in one row, we children in another. They gave their instructions in a torrent of words in Russian with the help of sign language and one or two words in German. The soldiers who stood with us children had two large canvas sacks with them. While they were untying the sacks, they laughed loudly and discussed

mysteriously with each other in Russian. We were waiting for them. What could they be up to? Surely nothing good, after all we had heard about them! It was good to be on the alert!

When the sacks were untied, the soldiers showed us girls how to hold our aprons so that they could pour something into them. Then they dug into the sacks with their hands and uncovered a white powder, which they filled into our aprons. Gesticulating and laughing, they showed us how to dip our faces into the powder and lick it up. So, reluctantly, I dipped my face into the powder in the apron, stuck out my tongue and licked the powder. Oh, what a pleasant surprise: it tasted good, it was sweet, and it was filling! The Russians had given us powdered sugar! Powdered sugar that they had stolen by the sack from the village bakery! The sincere joy of these two Russians at our happy, laughing, white-colored faces peeking out of the aprons now and then for a break in licking was liberating for Russians and Germans alike, big and small! The boys, who had no aprons on, (why not?) had to hold out their hands like cups, which were also filled with powdered sugar.

After this fortunately nice and peaceful meeting with the first Russian soldiers in the spring of 1945, we returned to the village. However, there were many, including the owner of the manor and his family, who preferred to continue their escape in a westerly direction. Many Russians, who later passed through the village, were not as well-meaning and friendly as those first ones with whom we had made acquaintance. Already on the way to the village we could guess and imagine what the village would look like. The fields we passed were riddled with small and large bomb craters, sometimes without, sometimes with dead bodies, swollen and stinking bodies of horses, cows, pigs and other animals. The village street, after it had been hit by all those shells, resembled a carbon copy sheet. Over the whole area hung an acrid sweet smell of death and decay!

The manor, like many other buildings in the village, was abandoned and empty. The destruction inside the house was enormous! Furniture and other furnishings lay around randomly, shot to pieces and broken. The toilets were filled with food, canned food with urine and feces! On the walls were traces of dried food and feces! Mommy, my siblings and I shared the big house only with mice! During the day it was unusually quiet in the house. Yet it became all the more lively at night, when the mice jumped over our beds! If I didn't pull the covers over my face fast enough, I could see their nocturnal activities on my face in the mirror the next morning! To escape the mice and because there were also many smaller abandoned houses in the village, we moved to a small house on the other side of the village street. Of course, this house was also devastated. But with combined forces we made it somewhat habitable.

Shortly after we had taken up residence in the smaller house, Mommy fell ill with typhoid fever and was taken to the hospital in Prenzlau. From that day in the spring of 1945, us four siblings (Dieter 10, Silvia 7, Edith and Jutta 6) had to fend for ourselves if we wanted to survive.

Source of the German original: Contemporary witness Silvia Körner,
<https://www.dhm.de/lemo/zeitzeugen/silvia-koerner-flucht-vor-der-roten-armee-aus-einem-dorf-in-der-uck-emark>

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