

## **Saving the Family Cow**

An Essay by John Knauf

Locked out and no place to sleep. That was where my planning – or lack of it – had brought me. There was only one thing to do – go see if the maintenance man was still awake and find out if he could open Jacques’ room for me.

The year was 1972 and I was an English teacher at a boarding school on an island in the North Sea named Langeoog, one in a string of small islands that marked the northernmost edge of Germany. These were the Friesian Islands, all of which were small enough to be justifiably characterized as not much more than bumps on the continental shelf. Langeoog was no exception and, covering about eight square miles, flagged its highest point above sea level at about fifteen feet, the biggest dune on the island. To the east was Denmark, directly south was the German mainland, and to the southwest was Holland.

It was just past eleven o’clock at night when I stood in front of the maintenance man’s door and raised my fist to knock. I could only hope that he had not gone to bed and was in a good mood.

To my surprise he was still up. About fifty years old but still imposing due to his size and the sheer raw strength he radiated, Herr Eilers looked down on me with his eyes forming the obvious question.

“Yes?”

“Herr Eilers, do you have a key to get into Jacques’ room?”

A moment of suspicion passed between us until I explained my dilemma. I had lent my room to two girls whom I’d known from the university back in the States and who had come to visit, the idea being that I would save them the cost of renting a room at one of the hotels. To cover my own sleeping requirements Jacques had told me I could use the extra bed in his room. The problem was, he wasn’t responding to my knocking on his door. He was either already asleep – it was, after all, relatively late – or had not returned to his room at all. I was locked out and had no place to crash.

He nodded his understanding. “Come in. I’ll check to see if I have a key to his room.” He ushered me in. “Would you like a glass of wine while I’m looking?” There was an open bottle on a small table in his sitting room and a half-empty glass stood next to it.

I hesitated but then decided, what the hell. “Yes, thank you.” I sat down in the second chair at the table and he provided me with a simple water glass.

“Help yourself,” he said.

So I did. It was a smooth, sweet, red wine that I hoped would help me fall asleep once I got into Jacques’ room. But that idea dissipated a few moments later when he returned and announced that, although he had keys for some of the rooms, Jacques’ was not among them.

He must’ve seen my annoyance. “You and Jacques are friends?” he asked as he sat down and poured himself more wine.

“Yes. I think maybe it’s just a consequence of me being the only American on the island and him being the only Frenchman.” I took another swallow of wine and smiled. “The two of us constitute the ‘foreigners club.’”

Herr Eilers nodded. “Your German is very good. Do you speak French also?”

“No. And Jacques doesn’t speak English, so the two of us can only communicate in German.”

He smiled, then became pensive. “What will you do if he doesn’t come back tonight?” I had no idea. “Pace the halls until I finally crash, I guess. My options are pretty limited.”

“Tell you what,” he said, “I do have a key to the teachers’ room, so how about if I lend you a blanket and let you sleep on the couch in there? How’s that sound?”

It was as good an idea as any. He went and got the blanket and key and then we settled down to enjoy the wine. It was then that I saw a photo of a young man in a WWII Wehrmacht – infantry – uniform on his bookcase.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

He reached over and brought it to the table. “That’s me as a young man.”

One would think there would be a moment of awkwardness in the wake of that statement, a feeble attempt at reconciliation over the fact that he and my father had faced each other as enemies just one generation before. But no such moment ensued; it was a simple statement of fact, of circumstances as they were. “Did you fight on the eastern or western front?” I asked.

“Both.” He poured himself more wine. “But I was in Russia when the Third Reich was collapsing.” He stared at the picture, then pulled up his sleeve to show me a long scar that went up his forearm.

“I was wounded eleven times.”

I didn’t know where to go next but it turned out it didn’t matter because he then volunteered a story that I have never since forgotten.

“The Nazi high command was pursuing a scorched earth policy as we retreated. It was madness – everything that we couldn’t take we were supposed to burn. And all livestock that couldn’t be carried was to be killed.” He poured himself another glass of wine.

“They wanted nothing left behind for either the Russian soldiers or civilians.

“I was a Feldwebel, a sergeant, and had a dozen men under me. One day during the retreat we came upon an isolated farmhouse. Inside was a small family – mother, father, two kids – that was absolutely destitute.” He stopped for a moment to stare at the picture, then looked up at me. “These people had nothing, no food, ragged clothes, nothing. They were absolutely terrified when they saw us. We couldn’t even figure out how they survived the winter until one of my men found a cow in a shed behind the house. We understood immediately – this was the thing that stood between them and starvation. Its milk would’ve provided cheese and butter as well as nourishment for the children.” He turned to the picture again and shrugged. “We had our orders and could see in their faces that they knew what those orders were.”

I held my breath for what I knew was coming.

“But we knew if we took that cow the family would die. We also knew the SS enforcement units were right behind us and would shoot anyone who disobeyed an order.”

It was an ideological gulf that both sides knew could never be bridged: On the one side the helpless Russian family; on the other, the heavily armed squad of German soldiers.

“You know,” he went on, laying the picture down on the table, “there comes a point when you think: Enough. And it seemed like all of us had the same idea at once. There wasn’t a moment to lose. I ordered one of my men to take the cow and hide it in the

nearby woods. A few minutes later the SS came by and we told them we had searched the farm and found nothing. When they left we brought the cow out and gave it back to the family. Then, with the Russian army closing in on us, we had to hurry away.”

He went on to say that his last memory of the event was the mother in tears on her knees thanking him.

I was stunned and wanted to know more about his experiences but it was obvious the story had triggered some sort of flashback mechanism. Herr Eilers sat there staring at his wine, his mind and memory far away by then, having gone back to a time when he had risked the wrath of the SS rather than take from those poor people the one thing that would keep them alive. I wasn't even sure if he was aware of when I left with the blanket and key.

Later, after I'd settled onto the couch and felt sleep slowly catching up to me, I lay there wondering about the hidden pages in that man's mental scrapbook. Wounded eleven times, patched up, and thrown back into the cauldron, fighting like a tiger not for some supposed glory but simply to stay alive, then coming upon an isolated and completely vulnerable farmhouse – I wondered many times in the Cold War years that followed if there was a family still alive somewhere in Russia who carried with them the memory of an anonymous German soldier who, in the darkest of those dark days, saved the family cow and, by inference, their lives as well.

And I couldn't help but wonder if that one act of kindness in a sea of atrocities would make some kind of difference in the long run. Given how things turned out, maybe it did.