

## HISTORY

# AN *Extraordinary* MAN

STORY BY JANE YII • PHOTOS COURTESY OF EBERHARD BURCHERT

PART  
TWO

## A Refugee in Childhood: “A Most Trying Time.”



ABOVE: Eberhard and his siblings, Detlef and Marianne, and his mother Paula just before becoming refugees on the run.

January 23, 1945. The collapse of Germany caused thousands to flee their homes in terror from the invading Russian Forces. In a letter written to him in 1965, Eberhard Burchert's mother, Paula, remembers that day: “We left our home and it is twenty degrees sub zero.”

Eberhard explains, “Mother said to us, ‘Children, pack a knapsack’ and we did and at 7 o'clock that night, we walked out of our apartment, along with Grandmother, who was in her eighties. We covered about five miles on foot before we found refuge in a barn. The next morning, when we woke up to leave, we discovered that Grandmother had frozen to death in the night, so we had to just leave her there. Everyone just left their dead.”

One story Eberhard says is etched forever in his memory: “There was a woman lying against a tree trunk with a dead infant in her arms. She refused to come with us, at our invitation, and

said she would stay there and wait for her own death.”

The streets were packed with refugees, running for their lives from the marauding Russians. Stalin had given his soldiers free reign to rape, torture and kill. Paula and her three children were able to escape on the back of a truck loaded with coffee beans that had been confiscated and commandeered by German soldiers who considered this coffee “their treasure.” The Burchert family rode on the top of the coffee beans for about a hundred miles before their paths parted from the truck.

Finally, coming to a train station, they boarded a cattle car with over a hundred other refugees. Here they would live for 10 days. The train had no set schedule; it just rode the rails, until it stopped, no one having any knowledge of the train's destination.

### Finding Food

For the first three days, the Burchert family rode the train with no food and barely room to sit in the filthy train car, until their hunger forced Paula off of the train in the town of Schneidemuehl. She had heard rumors that there was a bakery there that actually had bread. Not knowing if the train would leave before she returned, Paula also knew that her three children were starving, and that she had no choice but to attempt to get them some food.

Paula Burchert had to physically fight for the loaf of bread she coveted, and eventually was able to procure it and return to the train site. As she returned she could just barely see the last car of the train which was pulling out and moving down the tracks. She ran as fast and hard as she could, catching up to the train, clinging to her single loaf of bread, and someone inside was able to reach out and pull her



ABOVE: Eberhard's grandmother, who, during the first night that Paula and her children were fleeing the Russians, they found had frozen to death during the night in the barn where they were hiding. The Burcherts had no choice but to leave her there when morning came and they had to leave.

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ABOVE: Before and after school, Eberhard had to work for a neighbor, milking cows and plowing fields. In exchange, he got a small amount of food to eat for himself only.

into the moving car.

Eventually she was able to find her way back to the car with her children inside, and was able to feed them the precious loaf of bread. Eberhard speaks quietly of the hands that pulled his mother into the train that day, “To me, those hands will always be the hands of God.”

Sometime during this journey, the train came to a stop next to a cemetery where it settled for the night. When the refugees awoke the next morning, they found that the engine and the first car (holding German soldiers) had been uncoupled from the rest of the train, and had vanished into the night.

That evening, they heard rifle fire, and the doors to the cattle cars were thrown open by Russian front line soldiers. They first took out all the former military personnel and shot them, standing in a ditch. The rest of the refugees, including Eberhard, his mother, brother and sister were taken out and lined up next, as if to be

shot also. But the Russian soldiers just pointed the guns at them and laughed, ridiculing and terrifying them. Instead of shooting though, the soldiers packed the refugees into the back of a truck and sent them off to work camps. Eberhard was almost 12 at this point and had to use a pick and shovel to fill grenade holes in the roads.



ABOVE: Eberhard and his National Soccer League mates won the World Championship Soccer Cup in 1954

### Escape!

One night, Eberhard and his family hid in a nearby field. Then

they escaped and were able to cross the front lines into German territory. This was not easy, for the fighting was fierce at the front. They made it to Berlin amidst the air raids and bombs. There, the Red Cross gave them the apartment of a former German official in Potsdam. They would live there for a short while.

During this time, the Potsdam Conference was held and Eberhard was able to see Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill during

their visit to Potsdam. Everyone had heard about their arrival and went to gawk at these heads of state meeting in a nearby villa.

On April 14, 1945, Potsdam was “declared defended” by the German Army. The alternative was to be “declared free.” That night, sensing an air raid was imminent, all the residents of the apartment building went down to the basement, to a fortified air raid shelter lined with bunk beds. There were 68 people in the room. A bomb struck the building and the walls collapsed and killed 34 of the people in the shelter. The rest of the tenants, including Eberhard and his mother and siblings, escaped out an air vent into a city still aflame. 30,000 perished that day in Potsdam.

Eberhard tells a story of the day he and his brother found a mahogany kayak and used it to explore Wannsee Lake. As they moved about the lake, their paddles pushed against the floating bodies in the water. “It was an everyday occurrence, by that point,” he said grimly, “and we went about our boat trip as any boys might.”

Food supplies were meager at best. In another hard recollection, Eberhard tells of his mother, Paula, in a futile effort to feed her children, trying to get rice out of the hull of an abandoned barge with a bucket on a rope. When fighter planes flew overhead and peppered the barge with gunfire, they were able to escape with their lives, but no rice.

NEXT MONTH: Reuniting with Father and the American Dream