

Letter 2 – no address – dated 1 October 1992

I wrote to Elfriede Hannak and have received a reply which included a copy of her book in English. We now need to find out where we can get copies. Published in 1987 by World of Books Ltd., 788-790 Finchley Road, London NW11 and by Frederick Eberstr 80 Worms, Germany. My local library can find no trace of the firm in London.

It is interesting to discover what happened to the Hannak family after trudging through the snow from Lamsdorf. They left Tillowitz by horse drawn wagon and travelled for six days to Gornitz and then to Dresden. They were in the air-raid on Dresden and were buried in a tunnel at the railway station. Elfriede was burnt and was blind for 3 to 4 days. As expected, the family had to hide from the Russians for fear of rape, and were befriended by British ex-POWs and Polish RAF ex-POWs. Elfriede was in hospital for a year after collapsing in the street. Eventually, the family arrived in West Germany where Elfriede still lives with her brother.

She certainly had a rough time after leaving Lamsdorf and she has written to me reaching out her hand to reconcile for the past in Lamsdorf.

In her letter, she writes a lot about Captain Rex Dackers, the Australian padre. I would like to see a photograph of him and hear from anyone who knew him at Lamsdorf or Memmingen; please ask around for me.

It is easier to read the printed book in English and I have extracted a few more items to give you an idea of life in the Vorlager.

Being a very timid girl, Elfriede waited outside her office for 45 minutes on her first morning, afraid to go in until the official starting time of 8 a.m.

She saw a Scot in his kilt and heard bagpipes. She asked “what would a Scotsman be without his beloved short kilt, without his beloved mountains and sheep?” I was attached to the 51st division signals and they had no kilts or sheep but, coming from Aberdeen, they were certainly canny Scots.

Her travelling companion on the way to work had a brother who “had only seen only 19 Springs” when he breathed his last out in the East.

An officer’s daughter married to a young officer at 18 was a widow at 19. It was called “fallen in the field of honour”.

One of the soldiers in the office, detailed for the Russian front, was “14 days in action, he fell in Russia”.

Elfriede hated war and the suffering it caused.

It was suggest that she give shorthand lessons in the camp. She declined.

She was allotted the task of informing relatives of deceased prisoners and sending back personal items. However, the respective sympathy with which she wrapped each parcel “they would have neither seen nor felt”.

A sergeant had special leave to return home to the Rhineland where his wife and two children had been killed in an air raid. On his return he was assigned to a firing squad which liquidated Jewish children. He was close to madness. If he went it would mean for him a slow psychological death. If he did not go he would be shot. What he did is not known.

While growing up she had read a book called “Angel of Siberia” about a Swedish nursing sister who gave immeasurable charity to German prisoners in Siberia during the First World War. Elfriede would have gladly shown similar helpfulness to the various nationalities that passed through Lamsdorf. However she dare not even utter such beautiful thoughts to anyone, let alone try to help someone.

She was horrified to learn of the Rack Wagon which passed the camp loaded with the naked Russian dead between 5 am and 7 am; early so as not to offend the German women working in the camp.

The British sought permission to invite female civilian workers to see forthcoming show in the theatre. The German answer was a flat no.

An interpreter, born and educated in Switzerland, intended to turn his back on Germany after its victory. He intended to go to Australia or Siberia. He may well have gone to Siberia, never to return.

The British often remarked that the Germans would lose the war but the British would lose its World Empire (how true).

A girl, whose fiancé had fallen in the East while she was pregnant with his child, wanted to marry him posthumously. This she did at a registry office, alone and without a bridegroom. It was allowed in those days.

In the toilet, Elfriede was applying nail varnish. She was shaking her fingers to dry her nails when the clasp on her watch opened and her watch slipped off her wrist into the toilet bowl. Panic stations! She ran and told the other girls who burst out laughing; no one was willing to put their hand in the toilet to fetch the watch. Later, she told a soldier who retrieved it with a stick and washed it for her. He then told her he would get a prisoner in the camp to get it going again. He did this, but it took a long time. Who was the watch repairer?

One cold winter morning a prisoner told her he would light a fire for her. The German soldiers could freeze to death as far as he was concerned.

She heard that a chopped off hand had been found but no body. Would anyone admit to this dastardly crime?

When she knew the time of her repatriation, she stood by the railway at Tillivitz to see the re-pats go on their way. She was deeply moved and near to tears as she wished them on the way to their families.

The Germans had planned for a long time to transfer the prisoners further into the Reich through Czechoslovakia.

On her last day at Lamsdorf she saw refugee children tied with clothes-line on Annahof station. It was 25 degrees and their tears and nose drops frozen hard. Innocent victims of war.

A chapter of German history was coming to an end. Truly a sad, dark chapter of time. She finished her book with these words: PRISONERS OF WAR AT LAMSDORF, GERMANY. I WOULD LIKE FATE TO BE KIND TO YOU AT HOME.