Female Survival in Berlin in April 1945 (Retrospective Account, 1950s)

Abstract

As Soviet troops converged on Berlin in March 1945, local citizens prepared themselves for the terrifying onslaught that had been foretold by Nazi propaganda. Relying by this point on reserves comprised mostly of males either too young or too old to fight, the Wehrmacht had little fight remaining, and Soviet forces captured the city between April and May. Conditions under occupation were extremely harsh. The scarcity of food and clean water, shelter, and the means of staying warm dominated the day-to-day experience of most civilians. In addition to these material strains, civilians suffered from severe mistreatment by Soviet troops – especially women, who became the targets of rampant sexual assault and mass rape: current research suggests that approximately 100,000 German girls and women were raped by Soviet soldiers during the occupation in Berlin alone.

One woman wrote about her experiences during this occupation, including the pragmatic approach she found necessary to survive under these conditions. Originally published anonymously in 1953, her memoir, *A Woman in Berlin* [*Eine Frau in Berlin*] covers the arrival of the Soviets and initial weeks of occupation from 20 April to 22 June 1945. She discusses the daily struggle to find necessities like shelter and food, as well as the mass rape of women, including her own experience with rape. Her descriptions reveal the fear and anxiety she and others faced every day, especially through encounters with Russian soldiers, and give a sense of the impossible decisions each woman had to make in the hopes of improving her chances for survival, such as plundering from neighbours.

A critical text analysis of the manuscript in 2016 revealed that most of the text is not diary entries from the period described, but that the author, whose identity is now known, later added many passages and edited the text.

Source

Friday, April 27, 1945, Day of catastrophe, wild turmoil — recorded on Saturday morning

It began with silence. The night was far too quiet. Around twelve o'clock Fraulein Behn reported that the enemy had reached the gardens and that the German line of defense was right outside our door.

It took a long time for me to fall asleep; I was going over Russian phrases in my head, practicing the ones I thought I'd soon have a chance to use. Today I briefly mentioned to the other cave dwellers that I speak a little Russian, a fact I'd been keeping to myself. I explained that I'd been to European Russia when I was younger, one of the dozen or so countries I visited in my travels.

My Russian is very basic, very utilitarian, picked up along the way. Still, I know how to count, and to say what day it is, and I can read the Cyrillic alphabet. I'm sure it will come back quickly now that practice is near at hand. I've always had a knack for languages. Finally, counting away in Russian, I fell asleep.

I slept until about 5:00 A.M., when I heard someone wandering around the front of the basement;—it was the bookselling wife, who had come in from the outside. She took my hand and whispered, "They're here."

“Who? The Russians?” I could barely open my eyes.

“Yes. They just climbed through the window at Meyer’s”— meaning the liquor store.

I finished dressing and combed my hair while she delivered her news to the others. Within minutes the whole basement was on its feet.

Taking the back stairs, I felt my way up to the second floor in order to hide our meager provisions, at least whatever wasn’t already squirreled away. Before going inside I put my ear to the back door, which was in splinters and could no longer be locked. All quiet, the kitchen empty. Keeping close to the floor I crept over to the window. It was a bright morning outside, our street was under fire; you could hear the whistle and patter of the bullets.

A Russian anti-aircraft battery was turning the corner, four barrels, four iron giraffes with menacing necks tall as towers. Two men were stomping up the street: broad backs, leather jackets, high leather boots. Jeeps pulling up to the curb. Fieldpieces rattling ahead in the early light. The pavement alive with the din. The smell of gasoline drifted into the kitchen through the broken windowpanes.

I went back to the basement. We ate our breakfast as if in a nightmare, although I did manage to consume several slices of bread, much to the amazement of the widow. Even so, my stomach was fluttering. I felt the way I had as a schoolgirl before a math exam—anxious and uneasy, wishing that everything were already over.

After that the widow and I climbed upstairs. We dusted her apartment, wiped down the counters, and swept and scrubbed with our next-to-last bucket of water. The devil knows why we slaved away like that. Probably just to exercise our limbs a little, or maybe we were simply fleeing again into a palpable present to escape an uncertain future.

As we worked we kept creeping up to the window and peeking out at the street, where an endless supply train was passing by. Stout mares with foals running between their legs. A cow drearily mooing to be milked. Before we knew it they had set up a field kitchen in the garage across the street. And for the first time we could make out faces, features, individuals—sturdy, broad foreheads, close-cropped hair, well fed, carefree. Not a civilian in sight. The Russians have the streets entirely to themselves. But under every building people are whispering, quaking. Who could ever imagine such a whole other world hidden here, so frightened, right in the middle of the big city? Life sequestered underground and split into tiny cells so that no one knows what anyone else is doing.

Outside, a bright blue, cloudless sky.

Sometime around noon—the woman from Hamburg and I were just getting the second pot of barley soup, cooked at the baker’s for the entire clan—the first enemy found his way into our basement. A ruddy-cheeked farmer, he blinked as he sized us up by the light of the kerosene lantern. He hesitated, then took a step, two steps toward us.

Hearts pounding. Scared, people offered him their bowls of soup. He shook his head and smiled, still silent.

That’s when I uttered my first Russian words, or rather rasped them, since I suddenly went hoarse: “*Shto vy zhelaete?*” What do you want?

The man spins around, stares at me in amazement. I sense I’ve taken him aback. He doesn’t understand. Evidently he’s never heard one of us “mutes” address him in his own language. Because the Russian word for Germans, *nemtsy*. means “mutes.” Presumably it dates from the Hanseatic League, over five

hundred years ago, when German merchants used sign language to trade textiles and lace for beeswax and furs in Novgorod and elsewhere.

Anyway, this Russian doesn't say a thing, answers my question with a mere shake of his head. I ask whether he wants something to eat. With a little smile he says, in accented German, "*Schnaps*"—brandy.

The cave dwellers shake their heads: regrettably they have no brandy or alcohol of any kind. Whoever has any left keeps it well hidden. So Ivan wanders back off, trying to find his way through the labyrinth of passageways and courtyards.

Cheerful bustle of soldiers on our street. Along with two or three other women I venture out to watch. A young man is polishing a motorcycle in our entranceway, a German Zündapp, nearly new. He holds out the cloth, gestures at me to go on buffing. I tell him in Russian that I don't want to, even manage a laugh; he looks at me in surprise and then laughs back.

Some Russians are wheeling freshly stolen bicycles up and down the driveway. They're teaching one another to ride, sitting on their seats as stiffly as Susi the bicycle-riding chimpanzee in the zoo. They crash into the trees and laugh with pleasure.

I feel some of my fear beginning to dissipate. It turns out that Russian men, too, are "only men"—i.e., presumably they're as susceptible as other men to feminine wiles, so it's possible to keep them in check, to distract them, to shake them off.

The sidewalks are full of horses that leave their droppings and spray their pee. A strong scent of stalls. Two soldiers ask me to show them to the nearest pump—the horses are thirsty. So we traipse through the gardens for fifteen minutes. Friendly voices, good-natured faces. And questions that will keep coming back, heard now for the first time: "Do you have a husband?" If you say yes, they ask where he is. And if you say no, they ask if you wouldn't want to "marry" a Russian. Followed by crude flirting.

These two first address me using the familiar *du*, but I dismiss the impropriety by sticking with the formal form. We walked down the deserted green path as artillery shells arc across the sky. The German line is ten minutes away. No more German planes, though, and hardly any German flak. No more water in the taps, no electricity, no gas. Only Russians.

Back with the buckets, now full of water. The horses drink as the two men look on contentedly. I stroll around, talking to this Russian and that. It's past noon, the sun so hot it feels like summer. There's something strange in the air, though, something I can't put my finger on, something evil, menacing. A few men look past me shyly, exchanging glances. One young man, small and sallow and reeking of alcohol, gets me involved in a conversation. He wants to coax me off into the courtyard, shows me two watches on his hairy arm, he'll give one to me if I …

I draw back to the passage that leads to our basement, then sneak out to the inner courtyard, but just when I think I've shaken him he's standing next to me and slips into the basement along with me. Staggering from one support beam to the next, he shines his flashlight on the faces, some forty people all together, pausing each time he comes to a woman, letting the pool of light flicker for several seconds on her face.

The basement freezes. Everyone seems petrified. No one moves, no one says a word. You can hear the forced breathing. The spotlight stops on eighteen-year-old Stinchen resting in a reclining chair, her head in a dazzlingly white bandage. "How many year?" Ivan asks, in German, his voice full of threat.

No one answers. The girl lies there as if made of stone. The Russian repeats his question, now roaring with rage, "How many year?"

I quickly answer, in Russian: “She’s a student, eighteen.” I want to add that she’s been wounded in the head, but I can’t find the right words so I resort to the international word kaput. “Head *kaput*, from bomb.”

Next comes a conversation between the Russian and myself, a rapid back and forth of questions and answers that would be senseless to record, for the simple reason that it was senseless. All about love: true love, passionate love, he loves me, do I love him, whether we want to make love. “Maybe,” I say, and start heading toward the door. He falls for it. The people all around are still paralyzed with fear, don’t have the faintest idea what’s going on.

I flirt with fluttering hands, hardly able to speak because my heart is pounding so. I look the man in his black eyes, amazed at his yellow, jaundiced eyeballs.' We’re outside in the hall, it’s nearly dark, I prance backwards ahead of him, he doesn’t know his way in this labyrinth, he follows. I whisper: “Over there. Very beautiful there. No people.” Three more paces, then two stairs … and we’re back out on the street, in the bright afternoon sun.

Right away I run to my two horse handlers, who are now combing and currying their steeds. I point at my pursuer: “He’s a bad egg, that one, ha-ha!” The man looks daggers at me and takes off. The horse grooms laugh. I talk with them a while and catch my breath. Little by little my hands calm down.

As I was chatting away, a number of heroes visited our basement, but they were more interested in watches than in women. Later I would see many an Ivan with whole collections on both arms—five or six pieces, which they would constantly compare, winding and resetting, with childlike, thief-like joy.

Our street corner has become an army camp. The supply train is billeted in the shops and garages. The horses munch their oats and hay; it’s comic to watch them stick their heads out the broken display windows. There’s a hint of relief in the air—oh well, there go the watches. “*Voyna kaput*” as the Russians say. The war is kaput. And for us it *is* kaput, finished, all over. The storm has rushed past and now we’re safely in its wake.

Or so we thought.

Things started happening around 6:00 P.M. A man built like a bull came into the basement, dead drunk, waving his pistol around and making for the distiller’s wife. No one else would do. He chased her with his pistol up and down the basement, shoved her ahead of him, toward the door. She fought back, hitting him, howling, when all of a sudden the revolver went off. The bullet went right through the supports and hit the wall; no one was hurt. The basement broke into a panic, everyone jumped up and started screaming. The hero seemed to have frightened himself and slipped off into the corridors.

Around 7:00 P.M. I was sitting upstairs with the widow, peacefully eating our evening porridge, when the concierge’s youngest daughter burst in yelling, “Come quick, you have to talk to them in Russian. There’s more of them after Frau B.” The distiller’s wife again. She’s by far the plumpest woman in our group, very buxom. People say they like that. Fat means beautiful; the more woman there is, the more her body differs from that of a man. Primitive people are said to have had particular respect for women who are fat, as symbols of abundance and fertility. Well, these days they’d have a hard time finding such symbols here. The older women in particular who had once been quite plump have shrunken terribly, at least for the most part. Of course, the distiller’s wife is an exception. Since the war began she hasn’t lacked for things to trade. And now she’s paying for her unmerited fat.

When I came down she was standing in the doorway whimpering and shaking. She had managed to run out and escape. But she didn’t dare go back to the basement, nor did she dare go up the four flights of stairs to her apartment, since the German artillery was still firing occasional shells. She was also afraid the Russians might follow her upstairs. Digging into my arm so firmly that her nails left marks, she

begged me to go with her to the “commandant” to request an escort, some kind of protection. I couldn’t imagine what she was thinking of.

A man came by with stars on his epaulettes and I tried to explain to him how afraid the woman was but couldn’t think of the word for “afraid.” He just shrugged us off impatiently. “Don’t worry, nobody’s going to do anything to you, go on home.” Finally the distiller’s wife staggered upstairs, sobbing. I haven’t seen her since; she must have snuck off somewhere. .And a good thing, too—she was too compelling a decoy.

No sooner was I back upstairs than the concierge’s girl— evidently the designated messenger—came running in for the second time. More men in the basement. Now they’re after the baker’s wife, who’s also managed to keep a bit of flesh on during the years of war.

The baker comes stumbling toward me down the hall, white as his flour, holding out his hands. “They have my wife ...” His voice breaks. For a second I feel I’m acting in a play. A middle-class baker can’t possibly move like that, can’t speak with such emotion, put so much feeling into his voice, bare his soul that way, his heart so torn. I’ve never seen anyone but great actors do that.

In the basement. The lantern is no longer burning; it’s probably out of kerosene. By the flickering light of a so-called Hindenburg lamp—a wick in tallow encased in cardboard—I see the baker’s wife in a recliner, her ashen face, her twitching mouth. Three Russians are standing next to her. One is jerking her up by the arm, but when she tries to get up, another shoves her back in the chair as if she were a puppet, a thing.

All three are talking to one another very quickly, evidently arguing. I can’t understand much; they’re speaking in slang. What to do? “Commissar,” the baker stammers. Meaning, find someone who has some authority. I go out on the street, now peaceful, calmed down for the evening. The shooting and burning are far away. As luck would have it, I run into the same officer who had been so dismissive with the distiller’s wife. I speak to him in my most polite Russian, ask him for help. He understands what I’m saying and makes a sour face. Finally he follows me, reluctant and unwilling.

The people in the basement are still scared stiff and silent as if they all, men, women, and children, had turned to stone. It turns out that one of the three Russians has backed off. The other two are still standing next to the baker’s wife, arguing.

The officer joins the conversation, not with a tone of command but as among equals. Several times I hear the expression “*ukaz Stalina.*” Stalin’s decree. Apparently Stalin has declared that “this kind of thing” is not to happen. But it happens anyway, the officer gives me to understand, shrugging his shoulders. One of the two men being reprimanded voices his objection, his face twisted in anger: “What do you mean? What did the Germans do to our women?” He is screaming. “They took my sister and...” and so on. I can’t understand all the words, only the sense.

Once again the officer speaks, calming the man down, slowly moving toward the door, and finally managing to get both men outside. The baker’s wife asks, hoarsely, “Are they gone?”

I nod, but just to make sure I step out into the dark corridor. Then they have me. Both men were lying in wait.

I scream and scream ... I hear the basement door shutting with a dull thud behind me.

One of them grabs my wrists and jerks me along the corridor. Then the other is pulling as well, his hand on my throat, so I can no longer scream. I no longer want to scream, for fear of being strangled. They’re both tearing away at me; instantly I’m on the floor. Something comes clinking out of my jacket pocket, must be my key ring, with the key to the building. I end up with my head on the bottom step of the basement stairs. I can feel the damp coolness of the floor tiles. The door above is ajar and lets in a little

light. One man stands there keeping watch, while the other tears my underclothes, forcing his way –.

I grope around the floor with my left hand until I find my key ring. I hold it tight. I use my right hand to defend myself. It's no use. He's simply torn off my garter, ripping it in two. When I struggle to come up, the second one throws himself on me as well, forcing me back on the ground with his fists and knees. Now the other keeps lookout, whispering, "Hurry up, hurry."

I hear loud Russian voices. Some light. The door opens. Two, three Russians come in, the last a woman in uniform. And they laugh.

[…]

Source of English translation: Anonymous [Marta Hillers], *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City*. New York: Picador, 2000, pp. 44–53. Excerpts from the book A WOMAN IN BERLIN by Anonymous; translated by Philip Boehm. Copyright © 2000 by Hannelore Marek. Copyright © Eichborn AG, Frankfurt am Main, 2003. Translation copyright © 2005 by Philip Boehm. Forward copyright © 2005 by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Introduction copyright © 2005 by Antony Beevor. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company. All rights reserved.

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