

AN INCREDIBLE VENTURE

By Peter Desbarats

LAST WEEK, writer Peter Desbarats described the ingenious and meticulous preparation that went into one of the greatest escapes of World War II — the mass breakout of German prisoners of war from Camp X at Angler, Ont. The escape took place in April, 1941, but the events are still vivid to the men involved. Desbarats talked with some of them recently at their homes in Germany and this week he tells what happened to the Germans when they found themselves free in an enemy country — Canada.

THE EDITORS

TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO, two young German air force pilots sat beside a railway line on the outskirts of Medicine Hat. They felt pretty smug. In six days, they had travelled more than 1,200 miles through enemy territory.

Another few days and they would be in Vancouver. Then a ship for Japan, and home.

Everyone back at the camp had said they were crazy to try to reach the Pacific coast. But here they were, more than half-way there, relaxing in the noonday sun. Karl-Heinz Grund felt so good that he waved to a group of teenaged schoolgirls walking along a nearby road.

The sun seemed to disappear a moment later. Grund and his companion, Horst Liebeck, watched a car speeding toward them on a dirt track beside the railroad. As it drew closer, they spotted one of the "big hats" inside.

"Polizei!" said Liebeck. "What should we do?"

There was no chance to make a run for it. And if they tried? The newspaper in Regina had said that two of their fellow prisoners, Loeffelmeier and Miethling, had been killed by Canadian soldiers two days after the escape.

The car skidded to a stop. First man out was the Mountie.

"Identification cards!" he barked.

Grund turned to Liebeck and said in German: "There isn't a chance."

He spoke to the Mountie in English: "We are

German prisoners of war from Camp X at Angler, Ontario."

The Mountie stepped back and looked carefully at the bedraggled pair.

"That's impossible," he said. "It is too far away. And you don't look like German soldiers."

Eyes blazing, Grund snapped to attention.

"Give me a bath and a shave and you will see that I am a German!"

Today Karl-Heinz Grund is 51 years old, a prosperous real-estate dealer and rental agent in the northern German city of Bremen. He has put on a little weight, lost a little hair, but the old pride remains. Beneath his signature he can still write with a flourish: "*Hauptmann der Reserve der Luftwaffe*" (Captain in the Air Force Reserve).

Since he returned home from Canada in 1945, Grund has concentrated on making up for 11 lost years — six of which he spent in Hitler's Luftwaffe and five in P.O.W. camps.

I interviewed him in the living room of his fashionable flat on Bremen's Hartwig street. He drove me back to my hotel in his Mercedes.

His wife, Ruth Gisela, is a stunning blonde who looks much younger than her 40 years. At an age when many men are becoming grandfathers, Grund is starting a family. His first child, Sybille, was born four years ago and his son, Stefan, is three years old.

He told me — and it seemed to fit the picture — that he was classified as an incorrigible "black" prisoner in Canada.

When he was returned to the camp at Angler from Medicine Hat, he tried to saw through the wooden floor of his solitary-confinement cell. He was transferred to a cell with a steel floor.

A later attempt to escape by garbage truck from a camp in the Rockies ended when he was discovered half-dead in the camp's garbage dump at the bottom of a small ravine.

But nothing matched his 1,200-mile train trip across Canada after the Angler escape. Grund refers to it today as "the greatest adventure of my life." Unlike some of the former escapers I talked with in Germany, he enjoyed going over the story in detail. He was immensely proud that he had almost succeeded in carrying out an escape plan even the other prisoners considered bizarre. And that was saying something, because by early April, 1941, in the camp at Angler were hatched some of the weirdest escape plans ever concocted by desperate prisoners of war.

The method of getting out of the camp was

sensible enough: a beautifully-built 150-foot tunnel leading from beneath Hut 5-B to a gully beyond the barbed-wire fences.

But the tiny railroad settlement of Angler was so isolated that all the prisoners' plans for reaching civilization verged on the fantastic.

Two U-boat veterans planned to paddle across or around Lake Superior in a flimsy kayak of wood, tin, oilcloth and wax used to stiffen thread. Four prisoners equipped themselves with hand-carved paddles as part of a scheme to steal Indian canoes. Some of the men intended to hike more than 70 miles north through almost impenetrable bush to hit the main C.N.R. east-west line. Others talked seri-



ALMOST SUCCEEDS



ously about walking to Sault Ste. Marie, more than 250 miles to the east, and crossing into neutral U.S. territory.

Luftwaffe pilots in the camp itched to get their hands on amphibious planes they had seen landing and taking off a few miles to the west. U-boat crewmen discussed stealing a police patrol boat that cruised on Lake Superior within sight of the camp.

"Wrong Way" Grund told the other prisoners they were doing exactly what the Canadian authorities would expect them to do. All routes into the United States would be closely guarded. It was far more sensible to aim for Japan.

Only one other prisoner agreed. Grund was

preparing to go it alone when Horst Liebeck came forward, offering concrete assistance in the form of a Winnipeg address. Liebeck said that the Winnipegger was a cousin.

For weeks before the break-out, Grund and Liebeck stayed awake at night, timing the trains that rumbled past the camp on the main C.P.R. line. They noticed that the westbound steam locomotives always slowed down just east of the camp.

"We decided that there was a hill there and it was the best spot to catch a train," Grund told me. "We even picked the train we wanted — 1 o'clock in the morning."

On the afternoon of Friday, April 18, the men

drew lots for their position in the escape line. How many of the 300-odd prisoners in Camp X intended to escape is uncertain. Grund said there were 82 potential escapers but other ex-prisoners I talked with put the figure as high as 120.

Grund and Liebeck were 22nd and 23rd on the list. Shortly after the 8 o'clock roll call that evening, they bundled together the "civilian" clothes they had made in prison, strapped new boots across their shoulders and disappeared through the trap door in Hut 5-B.

The tunnel, filled with two feet of ice water at its deepest point, was a black, freezing, stifling hell. It seemed to take hours for the men at the face to break through to the surface. At last the line moved forward. Then it stopped again and there was another long, inexplicable delay.

Fritz Wolle



GRUND heard that the first prisoners to leave the tunnel had broken one of the main rules of the escape. The fire buckets and pans they had been using to dig their way to the surface had been left above ground. Other prisoners had clattered over them as they dashed away from the tunnel.

"Word came back to us that the guards must have heard something because they had turned on extra searchlights," Grund said.

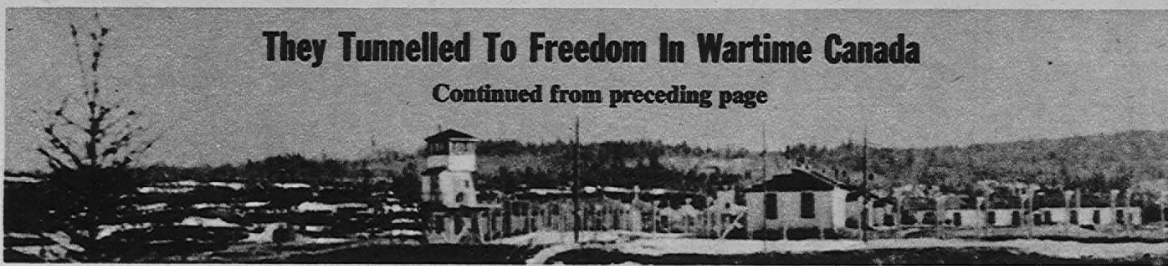
"But I guess they thought it was only a bear in the garbage dump. Anyway, the line began to move forward again. When Liebeck and I came out of the tunnel, it felt as if all the searchlights in the camp were shining on us. The guard must have been reaching for the alarm button at that moment, because only five men escaped after us.

"As soon as we got into the bush, we changed into civilian overalls and jackets, put on our boots and raced toward the railroad tracks. We reached them just in time. The **Continued on next page**

Karl-Heinz Grund served in the Luftwaffe for six years. Today he is a prosperous real-estate agent in Bremen, with a wife and two children — Sybille, four, and Stefan, three. He and Horst Liebeck made the most daring and successful escape try; they got as far as Medicine Hat, 1,200 miles from Angler.

They Tunnelled To Freedom In Wartime Canada

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train had come over the top of the hill and was beginning to pick up speed again. We hopped aboard one of the last cars.

"By the time we climbed to the top of the car, the train was passing the camp. All the lights were on and we could see guards running all over the place. Then the train turned a corner and we left the camp behind.

"Liebeck and I whacked each other on the back. We had made it!"

The two men had equipped themselves with a saw, hammer and chisel with which they hoped to cut into a car. It took them only a few minutes to realize this was practically impossible.

"Suddenly we heard a loud noise ahead. 'My God!' I said to Liebeck, 'I think we're going into a tunnel.' It was something neither of us had thought about.

"We flattened ourselves on the roof of the freight car and prayed. I think I must have pushed my nose through the roof. It was terrifying. But the real danger came from the smoke and flying cinders. I kept cursing myself for forgetting to bring goggles. Both of us were almost blinded by the sharp cinders.

"We had to do something. Between tunnels, we crept along the top of the train until we came to a car with doors on the roof. We opened one of the doors and saw blocks of ice — a refrigerator car. Quickly we pushed some of the blocks out of the way and climbed inside, wedging our hammer into the door so that it wouldn't close completely.

"After a while the train stopped for quite a long time. We heard men searching it. We closed the door above our heads and lit one of the milk-tin lanterns I had in my rucksack. As long as the flame burned, we figured, it meant that there was enough air. I looked at my map and decided that we were at Nipigon."

THE two Germans rode as far as Kenora, where they left the train and walked into the woods. They made a small fire, heated some condensed milk and tried to thaw out their refrigerated bodies. In a few hours they were back in the Kenora freight yards, sitting in an empty box car, hoping that it was scheduled to move west.

"Then the train on the next track started to move," Grund recalled. "We jumped out of our car and almost ran into a railroad worker. He looked surprised, but before he could do anything we leaped on the other train."

The Germans reached Winnipeg without incident, much to their surprise. They had assumed that the man in Kenora had raised an alarm. Only gradually, as they travelled by freight across the prairies, did they become aware that many other "knights of the road" were riding the rails with them.

The hoboes were a friendly lot. They gave the Germans tips about the best trains. Only a few were impolite enough to look pointedly at the new boots the Germans had taken from the stores at Camp X

a few days before the escape. The European-style rucksacks also attracted comment. Taking an identity from their accents and their black appearance, Grund and Liebeck called themselves "Dutch coal miners from Calgary."

"Why Calgary?" I asked him.

"Don't ask me," laughed Grund. "I must have heard some place there are coal mines in Calgary. Aren't there?"

Neither man realized how inconspicuous he must have been in Winnipeg, where Main street in April is a multi-lingual tangle of Indians, Hutterites, construction workers, down-at-heel city dwellers, German farmers, Ukrainian businessmen and others among the pool halls, cheap cinemas and tacky souvenir shops. When the Germans walked past a policeman on Main street, they pointedly whistled an American tune they had picked up from radios in the camp. The officer didn't give them a second glance.

Standing beside a newsstand, Grund saw the city's English-language newspapers were still carrying headline stories about the escape. He was happy to read that most of the escapers were believed to be still in the vicinity of the camp.

One of the pair's few disturbing encounters in Winnipeg occurred when they tried to buy cigarettes in a small shop. Grund was amazed to discover that the British pounds he had acquired while a prisoner in England were not legal tender in Canada. All his currency was British and he did not dare enter a bank to change it.

Liebeck's "relative" in Winnipeg turned out to be another near disaster. They located the address but the occupants of the house did not even speak German, let alone recognize Liebeck's name. Although Liebeck swore that the address had been sent to him from Germany, concealed in a food parcel, Grund suspected he had picked it up from a Winnipeg newspaper in the camp and used it to persuade Grund to take him along.

Back on Main street in the late afternoon, Grund noticed a young woman reading a German-language newspaper displayed in a shop window. The two prisoners approached her and said a few words in German. They told her they were coal miners from Calgary.

The woman took them home but not into her house. She and her mother brought pans of hot water to a garden shed behind the house. They chatted while the men washed and shaved.

"Are you Germans?" asked the woman.

"No, Austrians" Grund explained.

Her mother brought soup from the house and said the two men could stay in the shed until it was dark.

In the evening they walked back to the freight yards and caught another train.

The following days were so uneventful Grund now has trouble remembering specific incidents. He recalls that other hoboes warned them at Portage la

Prairie against drinking water from sloughs beside the railroad. He remembers sitting with Liebeck one afternoon in a city square but cannot recall whether it was Brandon or Regina.

"By the time we reached Saskatchewan we realized people took us for tramps," Grund said.

"We weren't even attempting to hide. We were very sure of ourselves. Several times we knocked on the back doors of houses and asked to fill our canteens with water."

When the train stopped in Medicine Hat, the two men were gossiping inside a box car so loudly that for a moment they did not hear a railroad policeman order them to come out. They opened the door and jumped down.

"Who are you?"

Grund, who speaks tolerable English, launched into the miners-from-Calgary story. This time he added a sick wife and starving children to his imaginary biography.

"Well, I'll give you a chance this time," said the policeman, "but get out of these yards!"

The two men sauntered through Medicine Hat, stopped at a house to fill their water bottles and hit the railroad again at the west end of town. But the railroad policeman must have been having second thoughts about his "Dutch miners." He went to the Mounties and a short time later, Grund was standing in R.C.M.P. headquarters in Medicine Hat, bathed and shaved, listening to the Mountie say: "You know, you *do* look like a German."

THAT night, hundreds of people filled the railway station in Medicine Hat to watch the prisoners leave for Ontario. The two men talked with newspaper reporters, signed autographs and distributed souvenirs from their rucksacks.

In his living room in Bremen, Karl-Heinz Grund finished his story, looked back more than 20 years to that night in Alberta and chuckled to himself.

"It was the craziest part of the escape," he said. "We felt more like Hollywood celebrities than recaptured prisoners."

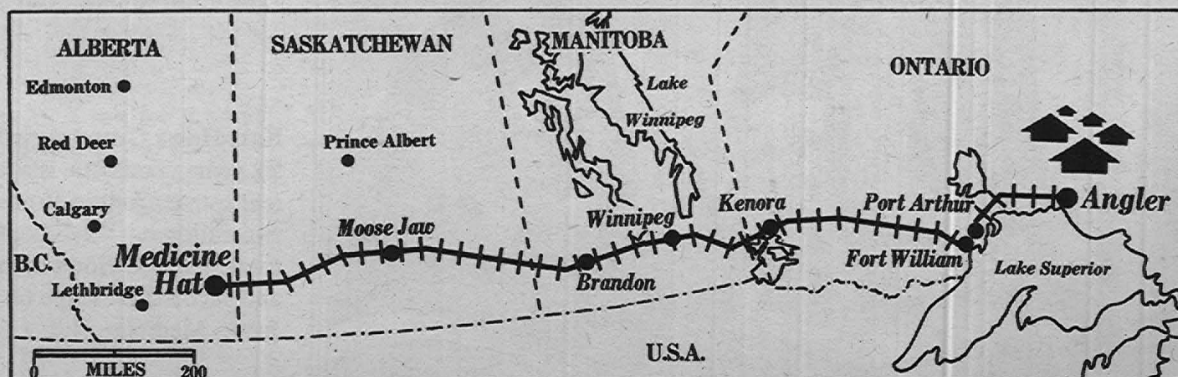
"We even had an interview with a local minister. I remember him looking at me very seriously and saying: 'Do you believe in God?'"

"When we got back to the camp at Angler, the commandant shook hands with us and said: 'Congratulations! Good sport! But you've broken the law, you know. I'm afraid you'll have to spend 28 days in the punishment cells.'

"Later, when they let all the escapers go back to the main barracks, we were greeted by the prisoners' band and given a heroes' feast, complete with raisin wine."

"Yep," said Grund, "Canada wasn't a bad country to spend the war in, now that I think of it."

NEXT WEEK: Two prisoners are killed and three wounded before the exhausted fugitives are recaptured.



Route shows Grund and Liebeck's train trek. They hoped to reach Vancouver, escape to Japan. ◀