

NAKED AMONG WOLVES

by Bruno Apitz

Chapter 21

Riomand's machine gun spat irate bursts at the towers on either side of the gate, and under the protection of this flank cover the special detachments of the camp patrol reached the wrought-iron gate and forced it open with crowbars.

"Cease fire!" Bochow shouted at Riomand, and immediately the machine gun withheld its wrath. At the gate, almost at the same moment, the special detachment was hastening up the steps of the main tower, and hundreds of men from the other groups were storming through the breach of the opened gate, left and right along the barbed wire. Hand grenades were hurled at the charging men, machine guns rattled, but the rebels rushed into the towers like swarms of hornets. Their battle cries and the detonations and gun chatter all about the fence mingled with the tumult of war out in the countryside. Behind the hill brownish-yellow mushrooms of smoke rose into the sky. The observation plane had appeared again; now it was describing its slow circles almost directly over the camp. Low flying planes were shooting at the ground. The rattle of their machine guns could be heard distinctly; they were shooting at fleeing fascist tanks.

Abandoned by their leaders and confused by the sudden attack, the sentries could not cope with the charge. The fury of the prisoners, stored up for years, was like an explosion. Wedged between the now visible front and the thousands of raging prisoners, whose fighting strength grew greater with every captured carbine, with every dismounted machine gun, the sentries no longer had the moral stamina to defend themselves against the storm.

Those who had not fled were taken prisoner, those who would not surrender were put to death. Tower after tower was conquered by the fighting groups and immediately occupied.

When Riomand whipped out the first volley, when the thousandfold cry went up and the mass of people rushed across the grounds, Förste, who had still been lying on the ground weighted down by exhaustion, jumped up. He saw the storm through the window of the bunker, and the cry he let out at this unbelievable happening nearly tore his breast apart. As the iron gate outside was being sprung he burst out of the room and ran, stumbling over the corpses, to cell number 5.

Höfel and Kropinski were drumming wildly on the door and shouting. För-

ste ripped back the latch, but the cell was locked. Suddenly Bochow, Rio-
mand, Kodiczek and van Dalen appeared. They stopped short at the sight the
corpses lying about. Bochow shouted into the semi-darkness of the corridor:
"Höfel, Kropinski! Where are you?"

"Here! Here!"

Förste rushed towards them. "The door is locked, I have no key!"

Bochow sprang to the cell. "It's me, Bochow. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, yes! O my God! Herbert! Yes, yes, yes, we hear you!"

"Get away from the door. I'll shoot the lock through!"

Bochow pulled out the pistol.

"Take care, I'm going to shoot!"

The shots cracked out. Bochow emptied the magazine. With united strength
they shook and pulled at the door. The burst lock was wobbling and clatte-
ring. Höfel and Kropinski threw themselves against it. The door flew open
and they both tumbled out. The men caught them. Gasping, Höfel hung like a
limp rag in Bochow's arms.

Hundreds of prisoners had climbed onto the roofs, and the roads were
alive with milling people. Where the fence was visible, the wildly excited
prisoners saw the rebels racing off and forcing their way into the towers,
they saw fighters appearing on the platforms.

"They've got the towers!" Hundreds ran towards the open ground on the
north slope. A mill was burning in the valley near Hottelstedt. The thund-
ering explosions succeeded one another at ever briefer intervals. Smoke and
fumes rose to the sky. Armed with clubs, stones and branches, whatever they
were able to pick up on the ground, the prisoners rushed towards the neut-
ral zone climbed over the barricades and plunged shouting through the
holes. The captured SS men were torn from the hands of the fighters, brought
back into camp through the holes in the fence and driven forward amid the
raging shouts of the mob into Block 17, which was surrounded by barbed wire.
Armed prisoners were already standing guard there with seized carbines.
Müller and Brendel had put the quaking Zweiling in there as the first pri-
soner.

Pribula and his group had stormed into the woods and onto the road to
Hottelstedt.

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Meanwhile Bochow and his comrades had brought the freed men into Man-
drill's room. The bunker filled up with fighters. Some of them pitched in
and dragged the corpses from the corridor into the bunker washroom. Höfel
and Kropinski sat on the army cot. Förste had brought them a cup of water.
Greedy the exhausted men drank the restoring draught.

A messenger rushed in to inform Bochow that every last tower was occu-

ped.

Running over with joy, Bochow embraced Höfel and Kropinski. "Free, free!" he shouted into their faces, and laughed, because at this moment there was no room in his breast for anything else.

With the ILK comrades he ran to the other side of the gatehouse, into Reineboth's office.

Up on the main tower one of the fighters tore down the swastika flag and hoisted a white cloth that he had brought from somewhere.

Bochow had quickly found out how to work the radio apparatus. He switched on the microphone and his cry rang out over the camp into all the blocks:

Comrades! We are victorious! The fascists have fled! We are free! Do you hear me? We are free!

Bochow sobbed and pressed his forehead to the instrument, and his overpowering joy melted into tears that he could no longer hold back.

But in the blocks the penned-in people leaped to their feet. The flame of the cry set off a conflagration of thousands of voiced shouting! There was no end to it and it roared, generating itself again and again:

Free! Free!

The people laughed, wept, danced! They jumped onto the tables, threw up their arms, shouted it in one another's faces, shouted, shouted, as if madness had come among them. There was no stopping them any more. They burst out of all the blocks. Everyone rushed outside, and like a tidal wave the drunken mass flooded the mustering ground.

One cry and one flood: to the gate!

Not in senseless flight, but carried away by the intoxication of pouring at last, through the hated, terrible gate, with wild shouts of exultation, reeling into the wide-open arms of freedom.

The people who happened to be in the block with Krämer were also swept outside by the tremendous jubilation. Free! Their happiness was so great that they suddenly forgot him and ran off. Krämer laughed and cursed at once: "They've forgotten all about us, the bastards, damn them, forgotten to take us along!"

He shouted so boisterously at the little thing that it burst out into loud and terrified crying. "Roar, that's right, roar! Come on, roar outside with the rest of them! They're all roaring! Don't you hear?"

Forgetting his weakness he bundled the crying child under his good arm and staggered out.

On the way he was caught up by rejoicing prisoners. They wanted to support him and relieve him of his screaming burden.

"Hands off!" he roared jealously; happy, he gasped up the road to the

mustering ground.

He saw them all standing at the top of the hill already, among them Bo-chow who was helpless against the flood he had unleashed.

And Krämer saw - and his heart nearly stopped for wild joy:

"André!" he shouted. "André, André! Marian!"

His cries made no headway against the turbulence, but they had already discovered him.

"Walter!" Höfel exulted, and tottered towards him, the noose dangling from his neck.

"Take the kid, he's getting too heavy for me."

The others had already reached Krämer. Riomand and van Dalen supported the collapsing man. Höfel snatched the child from him. It cried in still greater terror as the man with the unkempt beard pressed it to him. Höfel staggered forward as if his knees would give way, Kropinski caught the child. Laughing, shouting, bubbling over in a remarkable mixture of German and Polish he showed everyone the beloved bundle.

Suddenly Kropinski ran off, holding out the child in front of him, towards the gate, into the raging flood.

"Marian!" Höfel called after him. "Where are you running to?"

But the vortex had already swallowed him up.

Kropinski raised the crying bundle over his head so that it should not be crushed in the irrepressible torrent.

The child bobbed like a nutshell above the surging heads.

It twirled in the eddy through the narrows of the gate. The current swept it along on its liberated billows, which were no longer to be restrained.

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