CHAPTER 8: FROM GUSTROW TO CORNELL

Earlier in Gustrow, I and other POWs had been forced to work in a foundry. Now that Germany had surrendered, the owner of the foundry invited a few Americans, including me, to his home (despite the fact that the town was now being occupied by the Russians). No doubt, he had expected to be arrested by the Russians, which I believe, happened soon thereafter. The foundry owner had two attractive daughters, and he asked us to take them back to the American lines, rather than have them fall into the clutches of the Russians! After the way the Germans treated the Russians, he had reasons to fear for their safety. Of course, we refused his request. I remember the incident not only because of the girls, but also because they had an extensive record collection of popular American music.

The Russians soon rounded up all the American POWs in the area, and transported us to Luneburg, west of the Elbe River, where Canadian troops welcomed us. The Elbe River became the boundary for what became, for many years, East and West Germany. It was here with the Canadians that I was washed, deloused, given clean clothes (Canadian army uniforms), and for the first time in many months, a decent meal. We stayed with the Canadian army for a few weeks, until early June, enjoying our freedom and their hospitality. I guess I did not realize how thin I had become, until my mother pointed it out to me back in the states! Finally, the Canadians handed us over to the American troops, and we were flown in army DC-3 aircraft from Luneburg to “Camp Lucky Strike”, a tent facility near Le Havre, France, which was set up to receive many of the returning American POWs. It was great to be back again in American uniform. I had

assumed that we would be returning to our original outfits, since, although the war in Europe was over, there was more to come in the war with Japan. However, we were to remain at Lucky Strike until transport was arranged for us to return to the States. During this time, we underwent medical exams, and were interrogated about our imprisonment. It was here that I had the honor of meeting and shaking the hand of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was visiting the camp to check on conditions, and to bolster our joy of being repatriated. There were many times as a POW that I doubted I would survive, let alone ever to return to the USA, so meeting the General gave me a wonderful feeling of coming home. We remained at Lucky Strike for a few weeks, but, unfortunately, were not given passes to leave camp, or blow off steam in Paris.

We finally boarded ship at the port and headed west. I'm not sure what vessel it was in "civilian life", but it was an ocean liner, taken over during the war by the Navy, repainted in navy gray, and definitely not fitted out as a cruise ship. I had the pleasure of sleeping in hammocks both going to and returning from Europe, but we were on our way home! The weather at sea was perfect, and after a week en route, we disembarked in Boston, and were transferred to Ft. Devon.

After a two day layover, I was given a months furlough, and took off as fast as possible to New York City. This was about a five-hour train ride, coming into Grand Central Station in Manhattan. My mother knew that I was on my way home, when I telephoned her from Boston. She was living in the Bronx, near Mosholu Parkway, with my brother Arnold, who was 14 years old at the time. My sister, Dorothy, was living in

Queens while her husband (Barry's and Gail's father) was in the army. I took the subway to the Bronx, hauling my duffel bag. What I remember most about that homecoming was my mother's concern about how thin I had become. Needless to say, she plied me full of food, much of which I could still not eat. I lived at home for several weeks, running around, mostly going downtown, trying to look up old friends, or make new ones. Being in uniform did not hurt in this regard. I was in NYC through the end of the war in Japan, and got caught up in the crowds celebrating in Times Square. Shortly thereafter, I was ordered to The Lake Placid Club in upstate New York, which had been taken over by the Army as a rehabilitation hospital. It was a great vacation! We ate exercised, gained weight, canoed, hiked, and looked for women. It was hard to believe that this was the army. But all this ceased after about one month, when I was ordered to Ft. Meade, Maryland. I thought I was going to be reassigned to another infantry unit, but instead I became a clerk doing useless work in a quartermaster company. I became bored, restless, a "goof off", and wanting to become a civilian again. I had absolutely no interest in my work, and I'm sure I became a screwup. That whole period was a blur. The only thing that made it sufferable was frequent passes to Baltimore, where we spent most of our time in the bars and burlesque houses, and chasing after women. This went on until late October, when at Ft. Meade, I got into a tussle with a server in the mess hall. It happened that the servers were German POWs, who had been well taken care of here, and were veterans of the Afrika Korps, when German prisoners were still shipped to the USA. This particular POW was serving food, and when I asked for a larger serving, and he refused me, I guess I went beserk. I grabbed the guy over the counter, yelled at him and took a swing or two at him, but did not do any damage. I was stopped by an officer,

restricted to quarters, and threatened with a Courts Martial. It was then, I guess, that my company commander (not a combat veteran) became aware that I was a repatriated POW. A few days later, I was told that I would be discharged. The great day soon came, and on November 30,1945, I was mustered out of service, given an honorable discharge and a partial disability.

I returned to NYC, stayed with my mother until the New Year, then headed north to Ithaca, New York, to see if I could restart my education at Cornell University. The fact that I had previously been a student at Cornell allowed me to be automatically readmitted. This was very critical, since thousands of veterans, as well as recent high school graduates, were competing for admission to college. For the next two years, it was almost impossible to be accepted for admission at any major university if you were not a veteran. But now, living costs, and education expenses were available to me, to a significant degree, through the GI Bill, and other acts of Congress affecting disabled veterans, for which I was qualified. Although I still needed to work part time, I would be able to devote myself primarily to being a student. Despite this advantage, it took me months to adjust to civilian life, even though I had been out of the army since December. At first, I could not concentrate, and would waste lots of time partying,, drinking, smoking, and not studying during that first semester back at Cornell, until my grades began to suffer. There was a real possibility that I would be "busted", expelled for academic reasons. I was fortunate enough to befriend other Jewish combat veterans, and we helped each other. I came to my senses and realized what I really wanted. I had rented a room back in College Town, but soon thereafter, we veterans reopened, cleaned, and repaired the ∑AM fraternity house, which had been closed during the war, and we all

moved in. It was not your typical frat house. We all helped and needed each other, and a place to live. All of the brothers worked in the fraternity at one job or another. There was no differentiation between servers and those being served. I worked as a waiter at the same time that I was social chairman of the House. In this atmosphere, I was able to come back down to earth and get on with my life. A new phase of my life was beginning, and I wanted to fulfill my dreams of getting an education and becoming a scientist. Over the next few years, I would be able to study and work at Cornell, Duke, Washington University, and Vanderbilt. I have been a very fortunate man.