

Werner

The young, slightly rumpled Lieutenant from the Jag office sat in the battered oak chair in a corner of the humid and stuffy hall that the Army was using as a justice facility. How was he supposed to talk<sup>XO</sup> his assigned client in a place like this? Disgustedly he looked around. At the next table a rotund, overdressed French woman was noisily gesticulating and protesting something or other about her property.

There was, he mused, about as much privacy here as there would have been in Grand Central Station at the height of rush hour. Not that there was much use in what he was trying to do. His assigned client, a large, sullen and somewhat battered SS Hauptscharfuhrer, or Sergeant-Major, Werner Schmidt, who had sat silent and unresponsive through their first meeting. Still, this was his first client ever, and, reading the charges over, he wasn't particularly convinced by the prosecution argument. Some sort of unspecified "war crimes" committed by men under his command, and "membership in a criminal organization." presumably the SS.

Were they going to try every SS non-com? Not that he really cared what happened to the bastards, but still, this was his first case, and SS man or not, he wanted to win it. If that SOB would only cooperate, he thought. He had asked for, and just received a

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copy of a translations of his client's service record. It wasn't complete, but it was certainly distinguished. He skimmed over the list of decorations, Iron Cross First Class, Wound badges, many battle badges, including Kursk, East Front, Guerilla Warfare, Close combat medal,...he skipped ahead...assigned LSSAH, 1st Panzers. ....assigned SS penal battalion.... WHAT! Lt. Bronski's hand tightened reflexively on the file he was reading. They hadn't told him THAT...he read on, ..."on April 25 of the same year did willfully cause the death of Oberscharfuhrer Jurgen Klein, said Sgt Klein being a training NCO of the division..."

Nice piece of work this fellow seemed to be; not that he hadn't considered killing his own training officer from time to time, but this guy actually did it. Why, I wonder. He certainly was no raw recruit at the time. Either there is more to this than meets the eye, or the German Army takes a more lenient view of murder than we do. He seems to have served with the Penal battalion for about nine months, and then been returned to the 1st Panzer. Stranger and stranger. Maybe it was political...Bronski felt a surge of hope. Perhaps he did something to get the Gestapo mad at him. A new line of defense formed in Bronski's mind. Now if he could only get some cooperation from Schmidt....

"Excuse me, Sir..." Bronski looked up. Two heavily armed MP's were standing in front of his table. They had brought Hsf. Schmidt from the cell block. His hands were handcuffed behind him. Bronski noticed with surprise the chain that connected them to the irons on his ankles. He looked even more sinister than Brodski remembered.

Hsf Werner Schmidt stood at parade rest, stony faced and indifferent. One of the guards shoved him roughly towards the heavy oak chair opposite Bronski. He staggered, nearly losing his balance. "Watch what the fuck you're doing, " snarled the larger of the two MPs. "We don't want him 'falling downstairs' again this week." They wrestled the unresisting Schmidt into the chair, deftly clipped the vertical chain to the heavy oak bar across the back, and went to stand behind Bronski, machine pistols aimed at the German.

Now this is one hell of a way to establish an attorney-client relationship, thought Bronski. He twisted in his chair. "Is all this really necessary?" he asked, annoyed.

"Yes, sir. Orders, sir."

Bronski turned back to the prisoner. "How are you today, Sgt Schmidt?" he asked pleasantly. No answer. Schmidt, his face expressionless, was looking at the wall. "Damn it, man, I'm here to help you, can't you give me any cooperation? Don't you realize the seriousness of the charges against you?" Bronski's voice rose in anger. "If you won't help me, they will hang you, damn it!"

Bronski was suddenly aware that he was shouting, and that the Frenchwoman at the next table was staring at them. Probably wants to sit in the front row and knit, he thought. Or was that the guillotine. Anyway, she was certainly glaring at him.

Suddenly she jumped up and went to stand by the German, swearing volubly at Bronski, using language that he only half understood. The meaning was clear enough. The lady was clearly displeased with him. Was it because he was defending an SS man? How

could she tell? He started to explain.

One of the MPs raised his machine pistol. "Ma'am, stand away from the prisoner, please."

Ignoring him, she put an arm around the German's shoulders. "Werner, my old friend, what have they done to you?" She turned a furious face to Bronski. "Why are you tormenting one of the few good Boche le bon Dieu put on this world?" she raged. "First you cheat an honest Madam out of her house, and now this..." she sputtered.

"Giselle, you haven't changed a bit." Werner was smiling as he turned to face the irate woman. Then his face clouded. "Giselle, you shouldn't talk to me. You shouldn't even admit to knowing me. Go away, please. Think of your girls. Think of..."

"Will you please tell me what you think you're doing, Madam?" Bronski interrupted. "Who are you? How do you know this man? What is this all about?"

"He saved the two little girls; he saved all of us when that salot...."

"Giselle!" Werner's voice cut through her excited rhetoric like a saber. "Enough! That is none of their concern. Go away, please." Forgetting he was chained, he tried to stand.

"Freeze! Don't move another inch, Kraut" snarled the larger of the two MPs. Hefting his machine pistol, he pointedly clicked off the safety catch.

Sinking back, Werner said coolly, "At ease, Sergeant, I'm not going anywhere. For God's sake, man, there are civilians all around us. Safe your weapon."

Muttering, the man did, glaring at Werner.

"Will someone please tell me what this is all about?" Bronski complained. "Madam, if you know anything about this man that will help me keep him from the gallows, will you please tell me? I'd have a better chance of defending a stone wall than this stubborn Kraut."

"Excuse me, Mme LaRoche, if old home week is over, can we get back to your claim against the army? I do have other claimants to see today." The attorney seated at the next table turned toward Bronski. "Hi, Dave, see you got a real winner."

"You said it, Sid. I can't get a damn thing out of him except some garbage about not recognizing the right of this Tribunal to try him. I wonder if he'll recognize the rope they put around his neck!"

Giselle LaRoche gasped. "Hang him! You can't! There are lots of Boche I would gladly see dead, but not Werner." Striking a pose, she declaimed dramatically "We all owe him our lives, and although it is unpopular to say so now, the honor of la France demands that the truth be told!" She waited for the effect of her proclamation.

The two attorneys stared. Werner groaned, and said "Giselle, for the last time, shut up. Ta guel'!"

Giselle looked offended. "Werner, such language! What would your..."

"Say Dave, was your client here a couple of years ago? Madam, here, claims the Germans took over her house exclusively, and shut off her other business. That she had to cooperate or else. If that's true, her property won't be confiscated. Maybe your guy can



confirm that, since he seems to know her."

"Well, what about it, Schmidt? Did you confiscate the Pleasure Palace of Mme LaRoche here? "

"Lt. Bronski, I don't know about your army, but in mine a lance corporal, which I was then, didn't confiscate anything. If you are asking about policy, yes, it is true. We were told that certain... well, certain places were, ah,... not exactly approved, but not forbidden. These were reserved for German Soldiers and run under the supervision of the medical staff, and were considered ...uh, safe."

"And did you have personal knowledge of this, Soldier?" Sid asked, leaning forward in his chair. Werner nodded.

"Did he have personal knowledge!" interrupted Giselle. "Oh, Lieutenant, you should have been there. The mighty German Army's Leibstandarte, represented by ten scared seventeen year olds, brought to me by their top sergeant. Der Spiess, I think they called him. They were so cute, even if they were Boche."

"Giselle, the Amis are only going to hang me. You are going to kill me with embarrassment." Werner looked up at her, half laughing, half mortified. His face was scarlet.

Good Lord, thought Bronski, I never thought I'd see a Stormtrooper blush. "Mme LaRoche, you said something about him saving you all, what did you mean? Did it have anything to do with his being sent to a penal battalion ? Can you tell me anything, anything at all that will help me defend him?"

"Bien sur! Why he..."

"Giselle, NO!" he turned furiously to Bronski. "That was a

Regimental matter, it has nothing to do with your investigation. I forbid..."

Bronski had had enough. "You are not in a position to forbid anything, SS Hauptscharfuhrer Schmidt!" His patience at an end, he turned to the other attorney. "Sid, please do me a big favor. Take this lady's deposition while I deal with our Aryan hero here."

There has got to be more here than a soldier's embarrassment over being caught consorting with whores. "Now," he said to Werner "Talk! I want to know the whole story. How you know this woman, and why were you sent to a Penal Battalion and then back to your regiment?"

Werner said something in German that Bronski didn't understand. One of the guards leaned over and slapped Werner across the mouth, forward and backhand. Blood trickled from a cut left by the man's ring. "Look, fucker, don't talk to the Lieutenant that way." he snarled. He stepped around the table and grabbed the German's manacled arm, twisting it behind him viciously. "Lieutenant, let us take him downstairs for a while. We'll get the story for you."

Sweat stood out on Werner's face. "Geht' zur Holle!" he gritted. The guard yanked him to his feet. Werner stared defiantly at Bronski.

Before an appalled Bronski could reply, the other guard sneered, "Or how about we grab a couple of those kids from your outfit and sweat them for a while? The poor fuckers who still think you're gonna to get them out of here? "

"That's enough" Bronski shouted, outraged. "Let go of him!"

Werner's face had lost all expression. His color ashen, he stared at Bronski, then sagged back into the chair. Through clenched teeth he said "It's really not worth torturing my men for, Lieutenant. It's a sordid story that does not reflect well on the Regiment, and certainly nothing that concerns you, but if you will promise to make them leave my men alone, I'll tell you what you want to know."

My God, thought Bronski, what does he think we are, the Gestapo? Then he realized, yes, that's probably just what he did think. "All right, I promise they won't be hurt if you cooperate." and I'll deal with you two later, he thought, glaring at the guards. They looked smug.

Werner looked down, then back at Bronski. "To understand what happened, you need to know a couple of things. First, I was then, and in fact until our unit was surrendered, the hand-to-hand combat instructor for our Battalion. I guess that's why there are so strict orders about keeping me chained up like a dog." Bitterness showed in his voice.

"Are you telling me they keep you chained like that even in your cell?"

"Well, not quite. They do cuff my hands in front, rather than behind my back. It makes ... certain things... easier. "

Lord, thought Brodski, what happened to the Geneva Convention.

"Go on."

"You also need to know the kind of place that Mme LaRoche ran. Yes, it was a whore house, but it didn't seem too much like one. Her girls didn't look like whores, that is, they dressed like the



girls we knew at home, and acted nice. The house was sort of like a pleasant home, and it was kind of like a big party, never rowdy or lewd. Just a good place to go on leave to get away from barracks life, and yes, the girls were willing, but never obvious.

Giselle tolerated high spirits, but never crude behavior. A soldier or girl who misbehaved risked being banned. She catered to us NCO's, never officers, although we did sneak in a young Untersturmfuhrer we all liked a time or two. One thing she made very clear was that she would not tolerate any kind of ... well, deviant behavior. If anyone hurt one of her girls, he would be immediately banned, and Der Spiess backed her up. He told us it was a decent place for us to go, and he wanted it kept that way."

Werner's voice was getting hoarse. He licked his bruised lips. "Would you like some water?" Bronski asked.

Werner looked surprised, then nodded. "Please."

Bronski poured a glass, then got up and held it to the German's lips while he drank gratefully. The guards stirred uncomfortably. "Sir, don't get so close to him. He is dangerous."

Bronski spared them a <sup>fl</sup>irate look. "I'll discuss this with you two later." He looked back at Werner. A surprising expression of wry humor, and as their eyes met, there seemed to be an instant of communication between the two men.

"Perhaps I should growl and snap, so as not to disappoint them? Thank you for the water." Then Werner continued "One night, after, well, after, some <sup>of</sup> my comrades and I were having a good-night drink in the salon, when we heard screams coming from upstairs. Willi and I ran upstairs to find out what was wrong.

Only one door was closed, and that one was locked, which never happened. We could hear what sounded like a child's voice screaming and begging some one to stop. I kicked the door in. It was Hsf Klein, one of the training instructors we all hated. He had two little girls, daughters of one of the maids, and..." Werner's voice faltered, he looked down. "Oh God, to think that one of ours would do this, he had raped one of them, blood was running down her legs, and she was standing there naked, staring at us, screaming..." he took a ragged breath. " He was forcing the other child to perform... an unnatural act..." Werner was silent a moment. " Willi was ahead of me. He grabbed Klein and hit him, knocked him down. We each grabbed a blanket from the bed and wrapped the two children up. I picked up the smaller one, and raced downstairs. The hospital was only two blocks away, so we decided just to carry the children there. " Werner stopped for a moment, took a deep breath, and continued. "I don't ever want anyone to look at me again like that nurse did. She didn't dare say anything, because we were in uniform. I have never felt such shame, knowing what she was thinking. Anyway, when we got back, Klein was gone, and Mme LaRoche was chasing out a very subdued group of our comrades. She talked with us a moment, thanked us. I couldn't say anything, I felt so rotten about it. All the way back to barracks Willi and I argued about what to do. Finally he convinced me not to do anything until the next morning. Then, he said, we'll go talk to der Spiess, and get his advice. By next morning, however, all hell had broken loose. Willi and I and some of the others were called out of morning formation. We were told

to report to Standartenfuhrer Bremer's office on the double. Once we got there the place was swarming with SD and Gestapo. They took us off one by one and questioned us about what had happened last night. We heard Mme LaRoche had been arrested. Evidently Klein had lodged a complaint against her as a subversive. I couldn't stand still for that. Although der Spiess told me not to, I asked for and got an interview with the Gestapo major who was conducting the investigation. He gave me a pretty hard time about why I was so interested in defending some French whore, but in the end I guess he had heard somewhat the same story from all his sources, because he did give the order for her to be released. As I was leaving the building, a couple of Gestapo grabbed me and hustled me into an interrogation room. They slapped me about a bit, how dare I take the word of a French whore against one of my comrades. By that time, I had had it with them. I threw one of them through the one way glass mirror, and broke the other one's arm." Seeing Bronski's look of surprise, he added, almost smiling, "After all, hand to hand combat is my specialty, and I was pretty mad. It took all afternoon to get that sorted out. Finally they let me go." Werner paused, his eyes resting hopefully on the water pitcher. Bronski poured another glass, helped him with it. He drank gratefully.

"Thanks" Werner waited a moment, then went on " When I got back to base, there was more explaining to do, but I finally thought that it would be all right, the authorities knew what happened, and we could get on about our business. I was very wrong. I found there had been a schedule change. We were listed

to have a live fire exercise the next morning. It seemed rather strange at our stage of training, but we did have some new recruits we were working with, and the unit could probably use the practice."

"What's a live fire exercise in the SS like?" asked Bronski warily. He had heard rumors.

"Not too different than the Army, I guess," Werner grinned. "We like to tell them we have to catch the bullets in our teeth, but I don't think they really believe us. "

Bronnski chuckled. "No, seriously, how is it set up?"

"Well, the field is usually one or two kilometers, broken terrain, and we have a time limit to cross it. Exceed the limit, and you draw punishment detail. Depending on who's setting up the course, it can contain ditches, mud, and usually a stream or two. Part of it you can cross on foot but most of it you have to crawl, usually as low as you can get, and even then you usually get hit."

"Hit with what?" asked Bronski, appalled. "Live rounds?"

"No, not usually." Werner smiled. "After all, we are trying to train them not kill them. They are special wax bullets, most of them, and in every belt there are one or two live rounds with a quarter charge. The recruits don't know that, though. They think they are regular bullets. It keeps their heads down. Another thing the recruits don't know is that the packs that they are given to carry, although they look and weigh the same as regulation packs are really armor, fitted to protect the spine and back of the neck. When you get hit with a wax bullet, it leaves a dye splotch. It also stings! If you get 'killed' before you cross the halfway mark

you have to go back and do it over again. Getting 'killed' twice before the half way point means punishment detail that evening. There is a lot of rivalry among the squads to see who can get through with the fewest casualties."

"How high is the line of fire?"

"Depends on the experience of the troops. For beginners, usually 60-70 cm. It can go as low as thirty, though, for more experienced troops. Also, for advanced training, they sometimes put nasty surprises along the field, such as finding the rotting carcass of an animal in the ditch you just dove into, or worst one for me was a hive of angry bees. At the same time, targets will pop up, and you are supposed to take them out with your rifle or a practice grenade. No one enjoys it very much, but it really pays off in combat."

"Have you ever been 'killed' ?"

"Many times, and yes, I've stood punishment detail a time or two also." smiled Werner.

Bronski considered. I wonder if we do anything like that. He couldn't remember ever doing it in Basic. Perhaps the Marines, or Special Forces. Uncomfortable as it sounded, it did seem like a good idea. "So what happened then?"

"Something just didn't seem right when we went out that morning. Klein was just too pleased with himself. He was running the exercise, and went up the gun emplacements. Willi and I were getting the recruits ready to start. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing, I don't know why. I decided to check on the line of fire, because some of the kids were new, and I didn't trust that



sadistic bastard. When he saw me climbing up the hill, he started yelling at me. I was going to check the line no matter what he said, so I kept on going. When I got there I saw what he was trying to hide. Training belts for the guns are bright orange, so there could be no mistaking them for the real thing. The belts he was loading were field grey. All live rounds. He was planning on a handy oh so tragic "training accident" to kill all of us who knew what he had done, and he wasn't above sacrificing the lives of the recruits to do it." Werner stopped, his face grim. He took a deep breath. "I knew then that I had to kill him, there, on the spot, or none of us would ever be safe. I was unarmed, we don't carry side arms or knives on this exercise. He pulled out a knife. I didn't waste time, I took him out quickly, broke his neck. By the time Willi and Dieter got there, it was over." He sighed. "That's about it. I asked for a court of Honor. I was tried for murder, sentenced to the penal batallion. I have killed in combat, naturally, but never another German soldier. I knew he was vermin, but still..."

"What's a court of Honor?" Bronski asked, his professional curiosity piqued.

"Except for state crimes, like treason, if you are SS you can ask to be tried by a panel of your own officers. You just tell them in your own words what happened, and they decide what to do with you. There are no outsiders involved. It seemed better that way."

"What's a penal battalion like?"

"Believe me, Lieutenant Bronski, you don't want to know. It

is as close to hell on earth as it can be made. They do all that they can to make you as miserable as possible, you have nothing and you are nothing. No one wears rank insignia, not even the officers, and you are beaten if you fail to salute, or salute some one who is not an officer."

"How are you supposed to know?"

"You just have to find out the hard way, and the officers are forbidden to tell you, although some of the decent ones do. We got every dangerous and dirty job there was, and usually half rations, if we were lucky. Some days they just didn't bother to feed us. You weren't allowed to talk to anyone, although of course we did, and then were punished for that. They would keep us up all night, and then lay on 25 or 50 kilometer marches with full pack. You were beaten if you lagged behind. Some of the training courses they put us through were impossible. I think they were using us for guinea pigs to see how far they could push us. The men were a mix of felons, politicals- usually officers who had offended some Party official, and misfits, dregs of the standard. Some of the officers were sadists, some were decent men. One I remember in particular, tried to look out for us, get us better food. He was severely punished for it, but he kept trying. He even let us sing when we were out of earshot of the camp, during the long marches. It was strictly forbidden, and one of the things we hated worst about them was having to slog kilometer after kilometer in silence. I owe him my life. We were ordered to defuze defective land mines; he countermanded the order and instead had us blow them up with grenades. He was flogged for that, but he saved us. I don't know

what happened to him, he disappeared just before I was released back to my regiment."

Werner stopped, and the two men sat in silence for a while. Even the two guards seemed stunned. Finally Bronski spoke. " I know one thing, I'm going to do my damndest for you. I guess I never knew what it was like to be pushed that hard. You took all that, and still came back and fought. How could you, after what they have done to you?"

Werner looked him in the eyes for a long time. "I am an SS soldier. Meine Ehre heisst Treue.