IN THE TRENCHES

The three friends from Augsburg, Bavaria had been born just months apart in 1898. They grew up happy and strong together; they studied and played sports at the same schools, hiked the same nearby rugged Alps, fished the same clear mountain streams, and eagerly pursued their share of alluring blonde maidens.

Now, it was 1916, and this young German trio had a most important decision to make: to join (or not join) the Kaiser's Army to fight the French, Belgians, and British on the Western Front. Ernst Jung, Werner Beck, and Klaus Rehling were torn as to what to do. Two years earlier, all German men (with few exclusions) ages 20-45 had been conscripted for the war, a total of some 3.5 million soldiers. But now, there was talk of the army needing even more, and younger, men. An eighteen-year-old could either voluntarily enlist, or simply wait to be drafted, it was said.

"My father thinks I should enlist, so I can choose which unit to join," Klaus offered. Each boy's father had been in the military in the past for the legally required two years, but not during a bloody wartime. "He believes that it is a rite of manhood to serve, and part of being patriotic to our country."

"Sermons from the pulpit every Sunday also say it is our duty under God to fight for Germany," Werner remarked. "They say our proud history and all of our beloved traditions are at risk and must be defended. And the newspapers are filled with stories of our continuing victories, and our brave heroes getting medals."

"Of course, most of our teachers also say that we must fight and protect the Fatherland from our enemies," Ernst added. "But are those countries really our enemies? I don't have any enemies. Do you? And if I did, I doubt that killing them is any solution. I suspect this war is all about governments and their treaties and their lust for new territory and more power. It is senseless when you examine it, let alone die for it. Two years it has been dragging on now, with no end in sight. For what?"

Klaus and Werner both stared at their friend with astonishment.

"You better watch what you say, Ernst, or some bystanders might take you for a traitor -- or worse, a coward!" Klaus declared, suddenly looking around nervously. They were standing near the Old Town Hall, under the Pulachturm tower, on this brisk but sunny May morning.

"He's right, Ernst," Werner agreed. "If we don't enlist soon, we'll be branded as outcasts. Our parents will be furious, their names disgraced. Our neighbors and relatives will shun us. And the girls will probably think we are just scared little mice. Besides, we will probably get drafted soon anyway, so there is no real way to get out of this bind. I say we join." He grinned. "Who knows? Maybe we'll even earn a chest full of medals and our share of glory!"

The three young friends argued back and forth for several days. At last, the ultimate, somber decision was made. Ernst made it clear that he was only agreeing to this serious choice if they each promised to look out for each other. They would hence enlist together, provided they were assigned to the same unit. Their recruiting officer in Augsburg agreed. The trio said good-by to their families at the rail station -- fathers beaming with pride, the mothers in tears -- and went off to Stuttgart for an accelerated, three-week form of Basic Training.

Once they arrived at the army base, their hair was clipped short after they were assigned to barracks. They were then quickly put into formation and mercilessly marched and drilled by a brutal senior officer from the stiff Prussian nobility, nicknamed "Old Shiner," so-called because the sun shined off his glass monocle whenever he screamed orders at his new troops. Every recruit was next issued a Mauser Gewehr 98 rifle, bolt-action with a five-round internal clip, and soon became proficient with it. They also practiced digging trenches and stacking sandbags, and were shown gas masks and how to use them. The young men's new grey wool uniforms and boots took some getting used to, as they practiced crawling through slippery mud and under simulated barbed wire entrapments while live machine gun fire traced just over their heads. Their army helmets were made of leather, with a jutting metal spike on top, but they were told that these would be replaced soon with the newer all-steel helmets, which were said to be more protective against both bullets and shrapnel. When not under enemy fire, the men wore a simple grey wool cap, called a feldmutz.

As for equipment, each soldier was given a knapsack (worn only when marching), a waterproof tarpaulin, a mess kit, a canteen, a bayonet, a small shovel, a cartridge belt, and a canvas sack for carrying field rations.

Ernst, Werner, and Klaus were notified that their unit would immediately be heading to the battlefields in France after their three-week training period ended. They wrote letters to their families explaining their circumstances and expectations, and then mentally prepared themselves as best they could for the dramatic transition to the now infamous Western Front. The night before they were to transport away, all soldiers were given a rousing 'pep talk' by their officers, then allowed six hours leave to enjoy the comforts of Stuttgart's beer halls and brothels.

Through it all, Ernst kept his skepticism about the war largely to himself, or whispered it under his breath to his two friends when they had a rare moment alone. The trio again vowed that they would survive this war and help each other in every possible way to return home alive.

It was now June 24. As the new recruits moved westward by troop convoy and closer to the fighting, they could hear the loud pounding of huge artillery cannons and could see their first observation balloons, which both sides used to report any troop movements. The latest rumor coursing through the infantry ranks was that a massive offensive by the French and British would begin on July 1 at an 18-mile stretch near the Somme River. The heavy bombardment, just starting, was meant to soften up the German lines prior to the Allies eastward attack, a weary veteran officer explained.

Ernst, Werner, and Klaus and their unit then got out of their trucks and were marched five miles to the German trenches. The first thing they noticed upon their approach was the stench. The foul odor of unwashed bodies in grimy damp wool uniforms, and the wafting stink of rotting flesh from nearby corpse piles, assaulted their nostrils. An invisible fog of cigarette smoke, piss, and shit mixed in with the smell of decaying rats. Mud that never fully dried, even in the summer heat, was widespread too.

The trenches stretched beyond the horizon in a zig-zag pattern in both directions. They were built eight-feet deep, with wooden duckboard floors and stacks of sandbags at the crests. Beyond lay "No Man's Land," where mines and barbed-wire entrapments and dead bodies rested and waited. Looking through a periscope so as not to get shot by a sniper, Werner saw enormous shell craters, some filled with rainwater, and the blackened stumps and limbs of burned and blasted trees. The ravaged land was denuded of all life, except for ravens and rats feasting on an assortment of corpses -- British in khaki, French in blue, German in grey. It was mind-numbing: beyond horrific, beyond nightmarish. It was Hell itself risen from its fiery bowels. In turn, each new soldier was allowed quick peek at the surreal devastation, then informed that this ghastly piece of real estate was what they would be fighting the enemy for. Klaus was appalled. Ernst's prior belief was indeed verified: war is nothing more than insanity.

The three friends and their unit were soon briefly introduced to their company commander, Oberleutnant (First Lieutenant) Erich von Teffe, and their immediate squad officer, Gefreiter (Lance Corporal) Fritz Messler. Messler, though only in his mid-20's, appeared weary and haggard. He looked like a condemned man resigned to his fate, whether for good or bad, as he addressed his new troops.

"Well, men, these are the true, hard facts of life here in the trenches. You serve fourteen days here at the Front, then get a week off behind the lines to recover before rotating again forward. I have been here on and off like that for eleven months so far, with no end in sight -- unless I get seriously wounded and sent home. We live in rain and mud, and endure the bitter cold in winter. We are constantly plagued by hungry rats, biting fleas, and lice. We sometimes deal with outbreaks of dysentery, cholera, or typhoid fever. Another thing: Keep your feet dry and change into clean socks regularly, or you'll get trench foot from standing day after day in the wet mud. You'll know you have it when your feet look like pale grey prunes and the skin starts sloughing off. If you stop brushing your teeth, you'll get trench mouth, or even worse, trench fever from careless toilet hygiene. And don't get excited about the food here. Meal times are not much to look forward to, so don't expect your mother's cooking. Any questions so far?"

The squad glanced at each other, stunned into silence, so Messler continued.

"All right then. We sleep whenever there is a lull in the bombardment. Mostly, we get shelled at night. It will get on your nerves, so much so that after so many months, some of the men get to shaking uncontrollably and crying. We call this nervous breakdown getting 'shell shock.' It's not a pretty sight seeing a grown man breakdown like a baby, but I've seen it happen. Other than that, there is lots of boredom in the trenches, unless of course we have to go over the top and are ordered to charge the enemy trenches across No Man's Land. I'll let you know in advance when that happens, and then blow my whistle and lead you. It's not fun. You'll be dodging machine gun bullets, mortar fire, grenades, dead bodies, bomb craters, and barbed-wire. Sometimes, aeroplanes will even drop bombs on us from the sky above. But the worst is a poison gas attack. I'll be issuing each of you a gas mask. Never lose it. Take it with you everywhere, even when you piss or shit. If I yell the word "GAS!," put it on immediately. Chlorine gas is yellowish-green and smells like pineapple mixed with pepper or bleach. Mustard gas is yellow and smells like garlic or horseradish. Either one will kill you, quick or slow. Be careful, day and night."

The Lance Corporal paused and scratched at some pesky lice on his scalp. Then he went on.

"So, while we all wait to kill or be killed," Messler smiled sardonically, "you can play cards, write letters, smoke, drink -- if you can find any alcohol, eat, pray, converse, sing, daydream, or preferably sleep. Just do me one favor: Don't die. I need you, and the Kaiser needs you. Too many of our countrymen have given their lives for us to lose now. That's all, boys. You're dismissed."

Ernst, Werner, and Klaus found an area in the trenches to settle in as best they could -- their home the next two weeks. The reality of their situation hit the young friends deeply. "I wish we could just leave from this awful place and never come back," Klaus quietly confided. "There's none of the glory here that we used to read about."

The rumored major offensive by the Allies began at 7:30 a.m. on July 1, under clear skies. Thousands of blue- and khaki- clad soldiers rushed at the German lines. "Here they come!" Messler yelled. "Fire at will!" Dozens of German machine gun batteries opened up, as the three friends, shoulder to shoulder at the sandbag crest, fired their rifles at the swarming enemy charge. Mortars were launched, grenades were thrown. Rifle barrels grew hot from continuous use. But the Allies kept coming in waves, and were slaughtered, their wounded and dead piled atop each other, many bodies grotesquely entangled in punishing coils of barbed-wire. This major planned offensive was meant to ultimately break through the German lines, but it failed miserably. After several hours of fighting, by late afternoon, the British and French retreated in disgrace. Firing on both sides ceased. Allied medics with stretchers tried to find and collect their wounded in the horrific No Man's Land.

The Germans, however, were too exhausted to cheer and celebrate their victory. Instead, they ate as much food as possible, with little conversation between mouthfuls, then most dozed off fitfully for short periods. Munitions and other supplies were assessed, then restocked as needed.

The pattern was thus set: every few days, at varying times day or night, the Germans would charge the Allied lines, then the Allies would alternate and do the opposite. When not charging at night, artillery cannons on either side would bombard their enemy's dug-in positions. During the German charges lead by their Lance Corporal, the three friends stayed as close by each other as possible, as they had earlier vowed. The battle action was surreal, like being in a hyperactive nightmare, with screams of pain and agony amid whizzing bullets, blood misting in the air, and ears ringing with explosions seemingly everywhere. And the steel helmets which had been newly issued proved to be mostly useless against flying shrapnel, it was soon learned.

When Werner, Klaus, and Ernst got their first one-week leave rotation, they were very thankful to exit the blood-soaked Western Front. Once at the rear troop recovery station, they had better food, drank beer, took baths, did laundry, wrote letters home, but most of all slept. Werner kept remarking how the British kept marching to their deaths in unbroken formations, shoulder-to- shoulder, only to be mowed down by continuous, raking machine gun fire. "It was like they were committing mass suicide," he added in disbelief. "Didn't their commanders care about their own men?"

Klaus added that they each must have killed or wounded dozens of men over the last two weeks. "But I was so scared, I didn't even notice their faces in the noise and smoke and chaos. I just kept doing it. Do you think God will ever forgive me for killing like that?"

"God is not here, my friends. He must be somewhere, but He's certainly not anywhere around this absurd tragedy," Ernst ruefully noted. "We just need to stay alive together -- whether Germany wins or loses. We just have to get home again."

Back in the trenches, the days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months. Hours of worry, then boredom, then sheer terror. When it rained, the additional mud and wetness added still more misery to the troops. In addition, unexpected gas attacks alarmed the men when they least expected them. The murderous chemicals were housed in glass canisters inside of artillery shells, and were designed to break open on impact, then silently spread their cruel death.

September, however, brought a terrible new weapon to the battlefield which the Germans had yet to produce, and thus had no defense against: the steel-plated, manned and gunned, mobile British tank. It could safely flatten the multiple lines of barb-wire entrapments, and then continue and roll right over the German troop trenches with impunity. The Germans frantically responded to this threat with the placement of more mines and booby traps, and attempted more precise artillery fire, while accelerating the development of their own armored war machines.

The three friends were together in the trenches on September 21. The atmosphere was calm, the weather cloudy but mild around noontime. Soldiers were napping, or playing cards, talking or smoking, some lost in their own thoughts. Klaus noticed a small bird that had landed on the top of a sandbag at the crest of their trench as it faced west. The bird -- a Eurasian robin -- was chirping merrily, its downy tan feathers (with reddish orange breast up to its beak) lightly ruffling. Klaus was transfixed at seeing and hearing such a remarkable rarity of long-forgotten nature in this horrid killing ground. He wanted to observe the tiny robin more closely, so he slowly raised a wooden floor duckboard slat vertically and gently rested it against the trench siding, so as to climb up a little bit higher to see the bird better without scaring it away. Meanwhile, Werner had gone to empty his bladder, and Ernst, sitting and eating, was turned away from the scene, thinking. But Lance Corporal Messler happened to casually glance in Klaus' direction just then and quickly saw what Klaus had dangerously done. Fritz immediately screamed at him, "No, Klaus...Get down! Your head's above the sandbags! NO!"

A waiting sniper's bullet neatly pierced Klaus Rehling's steel helmet, killing him instantly. The bird flew away as the youth reeled backwards, his warm, bright red blood oozing out from his skull, as he landed in the mud.

Ernst, Werner, and the other troops nearby in the trenches rushed to Klaus's body. It was so unreal. The two remaining friends looked at each other in horror and disbelief. Werner began to wail and weep. Ernst hugged his friend, then took a deep breath to control himself, and said he would write to Klaus's family. The corpse would be sent home for burial in Augsburg in about a week, Lance Corporal Messler promised, being first moved to the rear relief station where hundreds of other bodies were organized, waiting their grim turn.

It was a cold, cloudless night under the new moon on October 5 when Messler roused his unit awake. "We have orders to charge, men...get ready!" He blew his brass whistle and the troops rapidly clambered over their sandbag crests. Allied mortars and machine gun fire was ready to embrace the Germans in war's relentless caress of death. Flares shot up skyward to illuminate the battlefield.

Werner and Ernst stayed close by each other, as always, as they ran forward, charging the enemy trenches. When the flares extinguished themselves, the Germans scrambled ahead, but when new flares were brightening the inky night sky, the men dropped to the ground and froze in place until it darkened again.

About twenty minutes into the attack, Messler suddenly screamed the dreaded words -- "GAS! GAS!" Lethal green and yellow clouds appeared, then spread toward the advancing line of soldiers in a wide swath. Ernst immediately donned his gas mask, but Werner's slipped from his fingers and fell into a rain-filled bomb crater as he tripped over a corpse. Just then, the overhead flares went out, and the area around the two men was plunged into pitch darkness. Messler and the rest of the unit, meanwhile, were somewhere ahead.

"My mask...I can't find my mask, Ernst!" Werner yelled. "Help me!" he pleaded.

At that very instant, a mortar round exploded beside Jung. His ears were deafened by the explosion. He felt searing pain in his right hand and leg and in his right eye, where hot shrapnel had pierced the goggle of his gas mask. Then he slipped into unconsciousness...

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Eighteen hours later, Ernst Jung awoke in a field hospital, surrounded by scores of other wounded soldiers in beds -- some moaning in pain, others still unconscious or asleep, others sitting up and taking a meal. Ernst was disoriented, and felt groggy and weak. Doctors and nurses were making their rounds, checking temperatures, changing bandages, and making reports on their medical charts.

"And how are you feeling, my son?" asked a kindly gray-haired physician with a bushy mustache. "I'm Doctor Konig. I'm afraid that your hand was so badly mangled that I had to remove it at the wrist. But the stump will heal fine. When it does, we'll fashion a snug leather cuff over it. Your leg suffered a severe wound too, but it did not cripple you. It will likewise heal well. You are a strong, young man! As for your right eye, I'm afraid it is lost. You will be fitted with an eye patch soon too. The good news is that you are alive and will be going home...to Augsburg, isn't it?" he flipped his chart to check. "Yes, Augsburg...well, anyway, the war is over for you."

"Thank you, Herr Doktor. But tell me, how is my friend Werner Beck? We enlisted and served together. I was with him when I was wounded at the Front. He lost his gas mask during our last offensive when we were being gassed. Is he alright?" Ernst pleaded.

A stout, middle-aged nurse nearby, who overheard the question, checked her latest casualty list. "I'm so sorry, young man, but your friend is dead and his remains were sent to the rear to await shipment home," she gently announced. "Without a mask on, poison gas completely sears the lungs, so he probably suffocated to death on the battlefield."

First Klaus and now Werner, Ernst realized. Dead. And himself disfigured. He was once right-handed, but no more. He would have to learn to write with his left hand somehow. And what kind of future would he have? What kind of employer would hire a one-handed man? And what woman would ever want me as a husband? This God-damned awful war. Was there ever a worst mistake devised by an insane mankind? Ernst plunged into a deep depression and withdrew from others. The illogic of war was truly incomprehensible...

The Battle of the Somme ended on November 18, 1916. Three million men fought each other, and one million died or were wounded. On the first bloody day back on July 1, the British lost close to 20,000 troops, compared to the German loss of 6,000 men. It was the biggest single-day wartime disaster in British history. Incredibly, only a few pathetic acres of territory were gained by the Allies after five and one-half months of combat. Yet still, the endless bloodshed continued, with no end in sight.

When Ernst returned home wearing a black eye patch and his leather wrist cuff, his parents were relieved that he was simply still alive. They pledged to help him all they could in finding a job and in becoming independent someday. "You are still smart, my son," his father, Gottlieb, declared. "Maybe you could support yourself as a journalist on a newspaper, if you learn to type with your good hand. Or maybe you could be a school teacher," he added optimistically. Ernst didn't answer. Instead, he went to pay his respects to the Rehling and Beck families, and then visited the graves of his deceased friends, Klaus and Werner. There, at sunset, he wept bitterly in full realization of the unfairness of life and the finality of death.

The winter of 1916-1917 in Germany would later be known as the "Turnip Winter," because the poor vegetable that had formerly been fed only to livestock now became the main replacement meal for people, due to the increasingly scarce supply of meat and potatoes. Soup kitchens appeared in the hungry cities. Morale among the citizenry sank. Because the British Navy had fully blockaded the northern Baltic Sea ports, coal supplies also ran out, leaving German civilians cold and miserable.

Ernst Jung eventually found a modest-paying job in February as a reporter at the Allgemeine Zeitung, a weekly newspaper published in Stuttgart, so he moved there from Augsburg. The editor, Otto Schmidt, admitted that he hired Jung because he looked compassionately upon jobless wounded veterans, and because Ernst resembled the son that Otto himself had lost in the war. When, after six months on the job, Ernst quietly asked his boss why the readership was not informed about the stark reality of the sad progress of the war -- because by now everyone suspected that Germany would never win it -- Schmidt told him that the government censors forbade it. "I would be forced to fire you, Ernst, then I would be put in prison if the truth was ever printed, " he admitted in resignation. "My family therefore would also be ruined. The main duty of our newspaper is to prevent despair and panic among the public, my young friend...and to pray to the Almighty for an end to the madness."

The cease-fire of the Great War -- as it was now being called -- occurred at the 11th hour on November 11, 1918. The guns at last fell silent. The staggering slaughter of four years had finally ended. Few would remember in the years to come why it even had to happen. But the 20 million dead soldiers and the 22 million wounded could never be forgotten.

When the Treaty of Versailles was inked in the Hall of Mirrors on June 28, 1919, it was exactly five years to the day that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria had been assassinated in Sarajevo -- the relatively minor event that sparked the tragic eruption into total war. A defeated Germany was shocked at the harsh terms and at the huge amounts of reparations it was required to pay the Allied Forces. The coming generation would be bankrupt, which was the punishing intent of the victors. To make matters worse, the Spanish Influenza epidemic had earlier hit both Europe and the rest of the world, ultimately killing over 50 million people, including Ernst's mother, Gertrude Jung. Civilization itself seemed to teeter on the brink of the abyss...

Yet even in its darkest hours, life can and must go on. The Weimar Republic was proclaimed to rule Germany and struggled to help her survive. Ernst Jung met and fell in love with Amalia Mathus, a bright but somewhat plain young woman four years older than him who worked at his same newspaper office as a secretary. She was frankly happy to find a willing, young unmarried man, even with his not-too-major disfigurements -- compared to the many wounded veterans, wandering without work in the streets, some who were missing complete limbs, many on crutches, or confined in wheelchairs for life, others sadly wearing flesh-colored, rubber, partial face masks when out in public to disguise their missing jaws, cheeks or noses.

The couple got married and moved to Berlin in 1920, after Ernst secured another, slightly better paying newspaper job at the Berliner Tageblatt there. They were mostly healthy and content, despite the country's perilous circumstances, and they were soon joined by the birth of a daughter, Frieda, and later a son, Friedrich.

But in 1922, the unrealistic payment demands set by the Treaty of Versailles pushed Germany into a crisis of hyperinflation. Bread that cost 160 marks that year skyrocketed to 200,000,000,000 marks by late 1923. Paper currency was basically worthless, so people frantically traded any goods and services to avoid ruin and starvation. The Weimar reacted by recalling the Reischmark and replacing it with the new Rentenmark, which slashed twelve zeros off every money note and market price. Germany limped along, trying to survive as a nation, for a few more years, until the world-wide Great Depression hit with still more increasing hardships in 1929.

Ernst, Amalia, Frieda, and Friedrich made their lives together as best they could. But each day was a challenge.

In 1933, the aged and failing German President Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler, a rising political star in the ranks of the National Socialist Worker's Party -- the Nazis -- as the new German Chancellor. The Weimar Republic had ended. Hitler promised a return to Germany's former glory, but Ernst Jung was wary. When he dared to warn his newspaper readers of the dangers that Hitler represented, he received piles of hate mail, and was even accosted on the street and denounced by rabid, brown-shirted Hitler youth. Ernst was soon warned by his editor to cease that viewpoint in his articles. Sadly, Ernst had no choice but to comply, for the sake of his family and his tenuous livelihood. Rent needed to be paid. Mouths needed to be fed.

On August 31,1939, Friedrich Jung, now age 18, came home from a gathering. Several of his friends had recently been inspired by Herr Hitler's rousing Nationalistic speeches and lofty oratory, and eagerly wanted to join the Nazi Party. "Father, I think we have a chance under this new leadership to help Germany rise again from her shame of defeat in the Great War. May I have your permission to at least attend a rally and see for myself?"

Ernst and his wife were both appalled at their son's request, but knew that they had to allow him to make up his own mind. "You are a man now, Friedrich, but I must in all good conscience add my counsel: the Nazis are absolutely not the right path to take to help rebuild our nation," he warned. "Their militancy and fanaticism can only lead Germany into another horrid catastrophe. I beg you to consider my words carefully, my son."

The following day, Germany invaded Poland. The date was September 1, 1939.

"Oh no...please dear God, not again! Don't let it happen again!" Ernst wailed when he heard the news, clutching his wife and daughter. The never forgotten nightmare was coming back -- The overwhelming avalanche of death. The senseless destruction. The unimaginable despair. The utter darkness of Hell itself, mocking mankind, again unearthed.

But it was too late.

What was soon to be called World War Two had just begun...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

March 30, 2020