

## Prelude

It has been said that confession is good for the soul and I have been giving this considerable thought over the past couple of weeks. Since I recently turned eighty-five years old, I figure it can't hurt anything to cover my bases, hedge my bets, and hop on the confession bandwagon before it's too late.

I have never been a very religious man so no-doubt my soul could use whatever help a confession might offer while at the same time allowing me to pass along one hell of a story. Kill two birds with one stone so to speak.

I apologize if this all comes across as self-centered, but there it is. I'm an old man; I take liberties.

I am confessing to a crime that I and a few of my Army buddies committed back when we were young soldiers stationed in Germany a few years after the war had ended.

I don't suppose that our crime would ever have been classified as a major felony. It's not like we robbed a bank or killed anyone. I've been around long enough to realize that our transgression pales in comparison to some of the sins of others. But then, as the Roman philosopher Seneca reminds us, "It is not goodness to be better than the worst." Therefore, I have no intention of trying to justify or downplay what we did.

I remember vividly that summer some sixty-five years ago and look back on those few months with a certain degree of fondness and nostalgia. I probably shouldn't relish this memory in this way because it could very well wipe out any potential confession benefit.

I have decided to offer this confession in the form of a story told through the eyes of the innocent nineteen year soldier that I was when these events unfolded. An attempt will naturally be made by me to put a positive spin on the crime. In doing so, hopefully, the reader might be a bit more charitable and not judge me too harshly.... Here then is:

### The Great Heppenheim Vegetable Heist

With only the dim light from the hazy moon to guide them, Otto and Jacob half-stumbled over the brush and downed limbs as they emerged from the tree line that bordered the farm field. They were wide-eyed and gasping for air, and they each carried an overflowing bushel basket of vegetables along with a large knife and small shovel that were protruding from their baskets. Their pockets bulged with potatoes they were unable to fit into the baskets.

“Hurry, hurry! *Mach schneller!*” Ellie said in a loud whisper as she waved her arms in a near panic. “I can see his flashlight; he is gaining on you!”

The two GI’s opened the trunk of their car and rushed over to help Otto and Jacob with their baskets. They hurriedly threw the baskets into the trunk and slammed it shut before jumping into the car and peeling out, laughing hysterically as they left a large cloud of dust in their wake.

The farmer, whose huge garden was now minus two-bushel baskets of vegetables, stood helplessly in his nightclothes, surrounded by the dust cloud and shaking his fist at them. He had caught only a glimpse of the car as it sped out of sight. “*Drechsau!*” he yelled. When he turned to return home, he stepped on a small potato. He picked it up, put it in his pocket, and stomped angrily through his ravaged garden, cursing under his breath with every step.

Much earlier that same evening Otto and Jacob had been sitting on the steps of the multi-family apartment building where they and their families lived. The day was drawing to a close and the sun had finally dropped behind some trees offering some much needed shade. Although the evening breeze cooled the summer air, it made it difficult for the women to fold their sheets as they removed them from the many clotheslines that crisscrossed the small courtyard. The

women living in the second-floor apartments were doing the same. Their lines were attached to pulleys outside their windows and they were reeling their wash in as well.

The apartment building was a run-down government-subsidized building with twelve apartments that the tenants kept up as best they could . It housed those who, due to no fault of their own, were plunged into poverty along with countless others because of the slow economic recovery after the war. The war had decimated Germany and its economy. Small towns were, for the most part, spared destruction. Large industrial towns were the main targets of the allied bombing raids. Germany was slowly rebuilding its infrastructure and its economy. The Marshall plan had helped to save a starving nation, but now it was the early 1950's, and the Marshall plan was winding down. Times were still extremely difficult for the masses. People were forced to be creative if they were to survive and feed their families.

Few were more creative than Otto and Jacob. They had been friends since childhood and together they had seen it all. The rigors of war along with the stress and hardship that had been thrust upon them during the post-war years had taken a toll. Both were in their early thirties, although they appeared a good ten years older.

It was now essential that they find a solution to yet another crisis. They sat on the steps of the complex sipping their beers while watching a few of the children play marbles on the dirt-packed courtyard. They were discussing the urgent need to find someone with an auto. "Herr Bergmann has a fine garden," Otto said. "I was out scouting yesterday. I don't usually ride my bicycle that far out of town, but if we are going to find a new source for food, we will be forced to find it further from town. His garden and farm fields are huge and not very far off the road."

"You are right of course," Jacob said. "We have taken about all that we can from the small gardens around here, and in fairness, they have been patient with us. They must suspect that it is us who have been pilfering from their gardens, but they have never turned us in. We need a new plan, and we need it soon."

After all of the carnage and suffering that they had seen the previous few years, Otto and Jacob were not big believers in fate or divine intervention. But when the car doors slammed and they heard the squeaking courtyard gate opening, announcing the arrival of two American soldiers, they immediately had second thoughts.

"*Guten Tag,*" Otto said as he smiled and stood to greet them. "Can I help you? *Kann ich Ihnen helfen?*"

These two soldiers were typical of most GI's who were stationed in Germany. They knew a few German words, barely enough to get by, but they were always willing to make an effort. Small talk was out of the question so they simply said, "*Guten tag, Wo ist Ellie?* Hello, where is Ellie?"

Otto and Jacob smiled and exchanged a knowing glance before Jacob said, "Ah! Yes, yes; Ellie. *Ja, ja; Ellie.* She is a lovely young lady for sure. *Sie ist eine schone junge Fraulein.* One moment, please. *Einen Moment, bitte.*" Jacob stepped away, looked up at an opened second-story window, cupped his hands around his mouth, and yelled, "Ellie!" When she showed herself at the window, he added, "Come down here, please. *Kommen sie hier, bitte.*"

Looking down on the small gathering, she spotted the two soldiers and yelled back, "I'll be down in a few minutes; I will need to change clothes and freshen up."

Ellie's husband had been killed in the war. In order for her to survive, she, along with most folks, had to be resourceful. She took in wash and did some ironing for a few of the more affluent families in town. To supplement her meager income further, she also did a little part-time prostituting on the side. She was very matter-of-fact about it and the other women in the building hardly gave it a second thought as long as she didn't offer her services to their husbands. She had the luxury of hand-picking her clients and did so with an intuition that rarely failed her. She was well-liked by all; friendly and out-going, and the men in the complex, being well aware of her circumstances, were very protective of her.

Knowing that it might be a while before Ellie came down Otto had gone into his apartment and brought beers out for all.

All businesses were struggling to survive but none more than the hospitality sector. Therefore, Otto had been willing to accept a few beers as partial payment for some odd jobs he had done for a friend and owner of a small Gasthaus in his neighborhood. He handed one to each of the soldiers, then extended his hand. As they shook hands, he said, "*Ick bin Otto.* I am Otto." The soldiers introduced themselves as Hank and Charlie.

Introductions complete, they all sat down on the steps. Due to the language barrier, they sipped their beers in relative silence, watching the kids play and periodically smiling at one another, while speaking a word or two now and then that might be recognizable to all.

Otto and Jacob naturally saw this as a golden opportunity to possibly initiate their plan later that evening and made every effort to size them up. When, after a few minutes, Ellie had still not

shown herself, Otto and Jacob decided to break the silence. They both stood and presented a little demonstration that managed to bypass the language barrier. Instead of speaking, they offered a series of humorous hand gestures and various hip gyrations that made clear Ellie's talents in the bedroom and how she could make this a night of bliss for them that they would not soon forget.

They were working on their second beer and it was obvious that the beer was having some effect, as they were all giddy when Ellie finally did show up. She had caught the tail end of Otto and Jacob's little presentation and said in flawless English, "If it weren't for their ugly mugs these two might have made a go as half-assed gigolos." This brought on another round of laughter after she repeated it in German. She smiled, extended her hand and said, "Hi I'm Ellie."

Another soldier named Paul had told Hank and Charlie about the lovely part-time prostitute from Heppenheim, which explained why they were here at this moment. Paul had been well aware that Ellie chose her clients carefully. He also knew that Hank and Charlie were, for the most part, a couple of decent men, and figured they might have a chance with her.

They blushed, introduced themselves, and made every effort look her in her eyes, which was a challenge, considering the low-cut dress that she was wearing. "Nice to meet you boys," she said. "Who told you about me?"

"Corporal Duncan sent us," Hank said. When Ellie looked puzzled he added, "You probably know him by his first name, Paul. He told us that you are, um, a very nice lady, and umm, very pretty, and some other stuff like that."

"Yes, of course, Paul. He is such a sweet young man. I met him back when I tended bar in Viernheim. And yes, I believe that he is correct; I am a nice lady." She smiled and added, "Perhaps we will talk about 'other stuff like that' a bit later."

Hank and Charlie were spellbound. It seemed that everything about Ellie, from her large emerald green eyes to her smooth milky-white complexion, mesmerized them. Her bubbly personality and contagious laugh made it easy for them to fall for her charm.

They spent the better part of the next hour sipping beer and getting to know one another, with Ellie translating for the men. Ellie, Otto, and Jacob asking the usual questions, 'How long have you been stationed in Germany?' 'Where are you from in the States?'

Otto and Jacob were asked if they had fought in the war. They answered that they had but quickly added that they never injured any American soldier. No surprise there. In all the time

that Hank and Charlie had been in Germany, they had yet to meet a German man who would admit to ever shooting at an American, let alone injuring or killing one. Otto abruptly ended the talk of war by summing up what had now become the popular sentiment of most Germans. He stood up for effect, and in a thunderous angry voice said, "*Hitler war ein stuck scheise!* Hitler was a piece of shit!"

Hank asked Ellie where she had learned to speak English so well. She answered that she once worked at a bar in the town of Vernheim that was close to a military base. The bar was frequented mostly by American soldiers.

Without really understanding the conversation, it became obvious to Hank and Charlie that something was brewing because Otto kept interrupting and seemed to be egging Ellie on to speak to the soldiers about something.

Ellie finally sighed and said, "Here is our situation. We are in desperate need of an auto. Our neighbors and their children are poor and cannot afford to buy potatoes or other vegetables. They will go hungry unless we find a way to help feed them." She pointed at the small courtyard. "As you can see, we have no place to plant a garden, and no one has the money to rent a plot of land to put in a garden either. You no doubt noticed the many farms that you passed when you drove into town. They all have huge gardens and we are looking for someone who has an auto to drive us out there very late tonight so we can get some vegetables."

As she spoke, Otto and Jacob were smiling and encouragingly nodding their heads while trying to judge their reaction to her request.

Charlie and Hank glanced at one another before Hank said, "So what you are saying is you want us to drive you out to a farm tonight so you can steal vegetables from some farmer's garden?"

"That is exactly what I am saying. You two would not be involved. Otto and Jacob would gather the vegetables. All you would be doing is transporting us there and back." She then offered a flirting smile, undid another button on her dress and said, "Of course I would make it worth your while. The usual fee for my services is twenty marks. If you would be willing to do this for us I would be willing to accept ten marks."

Otto and Jacob picked up on what she was offering and both began talking at the same time. They were quite animated and speaking loudly, as if yelling would somehow make them better

understood. They were spewing out German gibberish mixed with an English word thrown in here and there at a speed that Hank and Charlie had no prayer of understanding.

Ellie raised her hand to silence them, smiled, and began translating their ramblings. In a calm voice, she said, “Basically, what they are saying is that you would be fools to pass up a generous offer like this.”

Hank and Charlie were many things, but they were not fools. They stole a quick glance at her ample bosom as she leaned over to place her empty beer bottle on the steps. She gave them a knowing smile and said, “Why don’t you boys come with me.” She then turned and began walking towards her apartment, beckoning them with her swaying hips.

Without hesitation, they followed.

Had they bothered to glance back, they would have seen Otto and Jacob smiling and sharing a victory hug.

It was a well-deserved victory, and their plan was initiated successfully later that same evening in spite of the close call with Herr Bergmann, the above mentioned irate farmer.

When they returned to the complex very late that night with their goods, they opened the big wooden gate to let the car into the courtyard so it would not be noticeable from the street as they unloaded. They were all exhausted. Otto and Jacob went to their respective apartments and Hank and Charlie spent the night with Ellie.

When the two soldiers came down to the courtyard early the following morning to drive back to their base, Otto and Jacob were handing out the vegetables to the small crowd that had gathered. Grateful nods and genuine smiles were directed at them as they backed the car out of the courtyard. A few of the children ran alongside their car and waved as they drove away.

Word soon got out regarding the lovely part-time prostitute from Heppenheim who offered her services at a discount to those willing to take a small risk. There was no shortage of volunteers. Those who became willing conspirators grew to genuinely like Ellie and became protective of her, sending only those who they were confident would treat her with respect. Naturally, the offer was also limited to the few soldiers who happened to have a car.

And so began what the handful of GI’s who were involved jokingly referred to as, ‘the great Heppenheim vegetable heist.’ Throughout the summer of fifty-two, it became a weekly ritual, carried out by Otto, Jacob, Ellie, and one or two of the GI’s.

The crime was never officially solved; the perpetrators never brought to justice. The farmers naturally demanded action and the police sympathized with them and promised to find and punish those responsible. The popular theory was that several poor folks living at a particular apartment complex were somehow involved as cars were seen coming and going late at night.

Frau Brunengraber, while being interviewed by the officer, echoed what others in the complex had said, "Of course cars come and go. Ellie is a lovely young lady, she has many boyfriends." The diligent officer assigned to the case was not one to give up. He continued his investigation, visiting and interrogating various tenants, usually around lunch or supper time. It was naturally difficult to resist the many offers of fresh potato or vegetable soup. It was also rumored that Ellie had the decision to extend her discount program to a couple of the men in blue.

Otto and Jacob, along with Ellie and the many soldiers who were involved never expected to receive any sort of humanitarian award for helping to feed the poor. After all, they didn't exactly follow the letter of the law. Instead, they got what most good people get. The satisfaction of doing what is right and necessary when it counts the most, regardless of the risk involved.

As has been noted in this story, this dreadful crime that was perpetrated against the many farmers in and around Heppenheim in the summer of 1952 has never been officially solved.... That is, until now...

### Epilogue

So there it is; my confession. I cannot honestly say that I feel any better having told it but perhaps my soul feels better. Hell, I didn't feel guilty back then and, at the risk of putting my soul in peril once again, I am willing to admit that I don't feel guilty even today.

As I've noted, technically it was a crime and had we been caught we no doubt would have had to pay restitution and would possibly have received a dishonorable discharge.

About the only thing that I feel some remorse for with regards to this story concerns Ellie. I would like to believe that she genuinely liked us and that the money she accepted was perhaps seen as a token of friendship, but that's probably a stretch at best.

I sincerely hope that Ellie eventually found herself a good man deserving of her kindness and that she ended up having a good life. She was a nice young lady who, like countless others, happened to be trapped on the wrong side of history.

Corporal Hank