

Ft. Lincoln – The Barber

Paul Mueller — Bismarck, North
Dakota

Copyright © 2000 by Stephen Fox

I interviewed Mr. Mueller at his home in June 1993. He was born in 1911 at Bremerhaven, Germany, and became a barber's apprentice at the age of thirteen.

Scuttled....

We had only American passengers on board the SS *Columbus*. We ran into Curaçao and refueled; there was an English destroyer lying on the other side of the pier. We refueled and went on to Havana. At Havana we unloaded our passengers and then sailed to Vera Cruz where we stayed four months. We got orders in December 1939 to go home.

On our way, we went through the strait of Florida, through the hemisphere defense zone, all the way up to Norfolk. The USS *Tuscaloosa* was on hemisphere patrol, and when we pulled out of the zone, the *Tuscaloosa* bid us good-bye and Merry Christmas, and we did the same.

Eight hours later the English destroyer, HMS *Hyperion*, showed up and started shooting over the bow. The crew was alerted to man the lifeboats, and some crewmen threw gasoline down the staircases. They opened the sea cocks and scuttled the ship. We manned the lifeboats, and then the *Tuscaloosa* came. Meanwhile, the English destroyer tried to run over us while we were in the lifeboats, so the *Tuscaloosa* took us on board. That was one of the nicest gestures. It was the flagship of President Roosevelt.

Q: Why did they want to scuttle the ship?

We were the third largest ocean liner in the world at that time, and that would have been a prize for the English; they could use it as a transport or anything they wanted. When we boarded the *Tuscaloosa*, there was an American sailor standing there, a mug cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He said, "Welcome aboard, mate." This I will never forget.

Then we were standing on the deck, and Commander Block, the captain, came on the horn and said, "I have told my crew that you were only following the orders of your captain." (They were nice enough because we hadn't any warm meal for four days and were very cold.) "Please remember that the guy who stands behind you is the guy whose meal you're eating." I'll never forget that meal: mixed vegetables, veal cutlets, mashed potatoes, and two packs of cigarettes. Anyhow, the next morning we were at Ellis Island.

Ft. Stanton....

They processed us at Ellis Island, just like any aliens. Then they said, "The ship's commander wants to keep you together. Otherwise we could not hold you here." We got three meals and slept on bunks or cots, whatever was available. They were not prepared to receive immigrants because it had been closed for so long. They opened it up just for us and treated us quite nice. They held us there for three months because they wanted to transport us across the United States and send us home through Japan.

Three months later we were transferred over to Angel Island by Pullman

train. Angel Island was the first place I ever saw the houses of Orientals, and the Chinese at the immigration station cooked for us.

It got closer to the war, and eventually the older men, those over sixty, were shipped home by way of Japan. But the English started picking them off the freighters: stopped the ships, took all Germans off, and sent them to Canada. I was one of the first sixty selected to be shipped to New Mexico as U.S.-German relations got worse.

When we came to New Mexico, there was an old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. Fort Stanton was a marine hospital, and on the other side of the Ruidoso River was this CCC camp where they put up a nine-foot fence with towers. The place was not fit for living; there were still bed bugs. Then, these sixty guys went to work, and the camp became very livable. We cleaned it up, we painted, and we got rid of the bed bugs. We even built wooden sidewalks and a swimming pool.

After I had been there thirty-one months and had started running the laundry for them, the situation got quite tight because the war had gotten very serious. Adolf's birthday came along, and his supporters were going to make a riot that night. They threatened, "We're going to kill all of you," meaning the fifty or sixty of us who were not Nazis. I informed the camp director and the Border Patrolmen about it, but the camp inspector said, "I can't do anything until I have proof." Until they killed the first guy, I guess.

I said to him, "I'm going to stay in the laundry tonight. If there's anybody who wants to come to the laundry, and he is one of the people I know, I will leave the light on. If he isn't I'll turn it off. I would like to have you protect us."

He said, "You go ahead and do that."

About nine o'clock, three barracks started rioting. So the Border Patrol came in and threw a couple of canisters of tear gas in and locked the doors. If you've ever seen a barracks explode, they did. The whistle blew, and everybody was required to go into the sport area. But the people who had come to the laundry stayed. Then they locked the sport area, loaded us onto big "Diamond T" trucks and took us outside the gate. We had to sign papers that we were not actually there, and that we would not complain if they locked us in the county jail in El Paso. They took us to El Paso and stuck us there until they found a permanent place for us. They decided Fort Lincoln was liberal enough to have the "pro-Americans."

The funniest thing that happened in Fort Stanton was when some guys dug an escape tunnel. I used to leave whenever I felt like it. If I had to do something, I drove over to the hospital, to Fort Stanton.

Q: You went unguarded?

Sure. I wasn't a trustee, but I had to get supplies from El Paso. I didn't know what they wanted a tunnel for. [laughs] One of the older guards said, "Just give me six hours. I'll get 'em back."

I said, "How will you do that?"

"My horse tracks like a dog." So he climbed on the horse and he tracked like a dog. And the first thing he found was wrappers that the German government had sent to us—Vitamin C wrappers. Well, fifteen minutes later he had them. That's the funniest thing. I said to them, "If you wanted to get out that bad, you should have just come to the laundry, I'd have told you how."

The worst thing that happened to me was when we were standing in this bunch outside the gate, after the tear-gassing incident, and Captain Dähne, bless his soul, he's dead now, said, "You are a Communist."

I said, "Captain, the time will come when I come after you. Just for that insult. In my own life, I've been a better German than you have ever been. But don't ever call me a Communist."

He says, "You might die for that." That was the nastiest incident I had—that somebody called me a Communist.

Ft. Lincoln....

They had some political problems at Ft. Lincoln, too, but they were not so serious as at Ft. Stanton. I didn't like Ft. Lincoln. It was all big dorms, and they were so entrenched in their way of living. We were newcomers, outsiders. A Red Cross nurse I had first met at Angel Island said, "Paul, you worked for me at Angel Island. Why don't you work as a nurse in the hospital here?" I still didn't like it.

So Willy Meier and I sat down and wrote a petition to President Roosevelt, with sixty signatures on it. And three weeks later they gave us a hearing. I got out the 3rd of January 1942, so it was in late December of '41. Commandant I. P. McCoy said to me, "You guys must have been reading American law."

"Why?"

"Well, sixty petitions forces us to forward it to the highest level." Inspector McCoy was a very fine gentleman. I had worked in the blacksmith shop in Fort Stanton, too, because my father was a blacksmith, and I had made a couple of swords out of files. He said, "You can have them."

"No, be my guest. They're yours."

"My God."

"No," I said, "keep 'em. I'll make more if I feel like it."

When I got back from the service and I had my barbershop in McKenzie, in the Prince Hotel, he still came to see me every time he came to Bismarck. Even the missus came to visit me after he passed away.

Anyway, back to the petition and the hearing. I had contacted Jack Kelly, who worked for the *Bismarck Tribune*, and he was a guard out there. I said, "Jack, look around and if you can't find a job for me."

Q: You were confident that you were going to get out?

Well, it wouldn't have made any difference. If I hadn't got out I would have stayed.

The FBI men came and gave us a hearing. "Yeah," the FBI guy said, "you can become a gandy dancer for the railroad."

I says, "Oh, no. Forget it. If I want to become a gandy dancer, I stay right in here."

He says, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "My sponsor is right outside."

At my hearing, I said, "I'll stay right here."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I got a man right out here."

Albert Brujell had a barber and beauty shop in the Paterson Hotel. One of the finest men I ever met. He said, "I'll hire him, and he can work for me. I'll pay him the same as any barber beautician in town. Sixty five percent." This FBI man said to me, "Who arranged this? It was Dan Kelly. "Where you going to stay?"

I said, "The nurse who works at the hospital will rent me a room. So I came

to the shop, and he said, "Well, this is the place," and I went to the nurse who rented me the room.

Paroled to the army....

Q: So all of you who signed that petition got out?

Yes, I started working for Albert Brujell, and I was there about a month or so, when this colonel upstairs, Colonel Goodlink, called down: "Mr. Mueller, I want to talk to you." So I went up and he said, "In case of war between Canada and the United States, would you be willing to protect this part of the country?"

I says, "Yeah."

"Well," he says, "we have an idea. We want to put two companies of Germans together and drop them off in civilian clothes over Germany."

"Uh-uh, not this guy. No, you give me a uniform, you give me a pay book, and you give me a dog tag. Then you can drop me off any place you want. But not dressed in civilian clothes. Uh-uh."

So he said, "Well, son, from a 4-F you just became a 1-A." Five weeks later I left for Fort Snelling. I was in the service till '46.

Postwar....

Q: When did you start thinking about becoming a citizen?

We were all illegally in the country. I came out of the service and they wouldn't give me my papers. They didn't even make me a citizen when I got an honorable discharge. So I said to

Albert Brujell, "Albert, I have to have my papers."

He said, "Wait a minute, my brother-in-law is the commissioner of veterans affairs in North Dakota. So we contacted him, and he contacted Senator Young. And Senator Young drafted a law, by which 400,000 GIs in the United States became American citizens. There were that many aliens in the service. I said to Senator Young, "This will never go through." He said, "Paul, you don't understand the politics. It will go as a rider to something else." So I became an American citizen about nine months after I was out of the army, through the veteran's association.

Q: Were you ever threatened with deportation?

No, never. You see I always maintained that if you're Arab, Jewish, Norwegian, American, Italian, Japanese, or whatever, the minute I develop a dialog with you, we develop an understanding. We could part as enemies, but you can also part as friends. And I have never met a person I didn't like.

Q: Why did you decide to stay in Bismarck?

I came back here out of the service from Chicago, just to say hello to the people I had met. Then I went back to work for Al Brujell. He said, "I'm gonna go hunting. I haven't been out of the shop since you left. Here're my keys, I'll see you in six days." He trusted me. So, when he went hunting, he gave me his billfold because he didn't trust his wife. That's how well we knew each other. When he came back he said, "I haven't seen my brother for six years; he lives on the West Coast. Will you stay here?" I was

on my way to Montana; I had a girl there. Anyway, I stayed for another four or five days in the shop, and that's when I met my wife. I never got to Montana.

We had a terrible snowstorm here in '52. My wife and I walked from the corner up to [where we're standing]. There was a 29-foot snow bank on the corner of the park. So I walked over to the house—both our faces were frozen—and said to my wife— it had snowed for five days—“If it snows tomorrow we are go-

ing to get out of North Dakota.” The next morning I was sitting on the steps of the house, but it was as calm as you ever want to see it, this quiet, soft snow. We stayed.

Paul Mueller passed away in 2000. His barbershop was at the same location for fifty years, in the Prince Hotel, which later became the Kensington, then the Karrington. He was still cutting hair two days before his death.