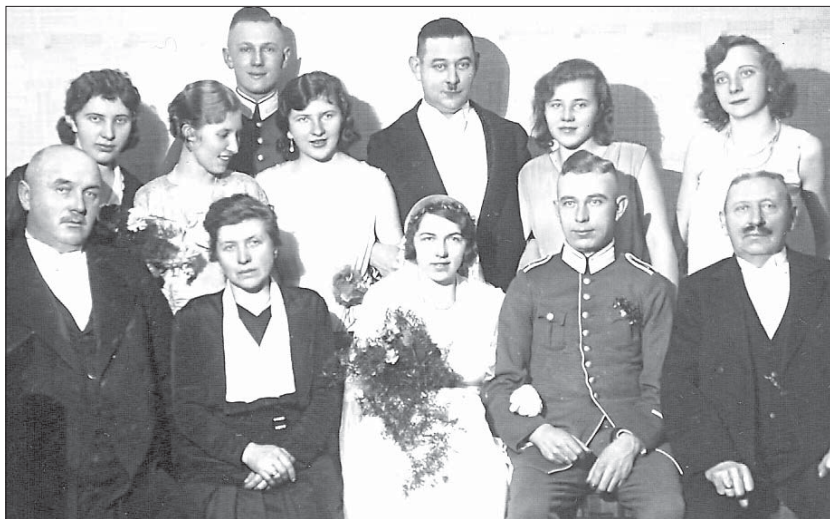


HISTORY

AN *Extraordinary* MAN PART THREE
STORY BY JANE YII • PHOTOS COURTESY OF EBERHARD BURCHERT

Reuniting with Father



The wedding party of Eberhard's parents, Benno Burchert and Paula Thimm Burchert.

The end of April 1945 arrived, and things settled down a bit, and the Burchert family was able to move back into an apartment on the same block as before. The one thing that was missing in Eberhard's family was their father, Benno. He had not been with them all throughout their travels and miseries, due to his active-duty status with the German Army.

Benno Burchert was a Major General at this point in time, and was defending East Prussia, more specifically near the area where Eberhard was born. His unit was driven back and Benno ended up swimming through 5 miles of ice water to get to the Frische Nehrung Peninsula off the Baltic Sea. The Russians had bypassed his position by many miles, but they were still firing grenades into the area, and farmers and their families were fleeing in wagons, trying to cross the frozen water. "Many would break through the ice, and the Russians would strafe them from fighter planes and shoot them while they were trying to get across." Eberhard explains. "Dad was defending the peninsula, and on May 3, five days before end of hostilities, he was moving another officer into position when he was hit by shrapnel." Taken by stretcher to a minesweeper, as there were very few boats left, Benno sailed across the Baltic Sea. Only the severely wounded were taken out by boat.

Ironically, Benno was captured by British forces just before arriving in Denmark, his

intended port. He was treated extremely well by his captors and finally released to an aunt in West Germany. "He knew from postcards that we were in Potsdam," Eberhard explains, "and he was trying to stay in touch with us."

When the family got word that Benno was in Berlin, Eberhard found an old bicycle and, having fixed it enough to ride upon, took his mother on the front of the handlebars and pedaled her 30 miles on the war-torn autobahn to Berlin. Here, they reunited with Benno, who was getting permission to get back to West Germany on some trucks bound for there. He left with his unit, agreeing to meet with them once they returned home.

Meantime, Eberhard came down with a terrible case of dysentery and was very sick. In spite of his crippling attacks, he managed to get his mother the 30 miles back to their home by bike, where he packed their belongings, put the box and his sister on a small bike trailer and rode his mother on the handlebars again, back to Berlin, with his sister and their belongings in the trailer. Back in the city, they found out that their promised means out of the territory had fallen through and they were stuck there.

During the night, they were permitted to hitch a ride under the tarp of a convoy truck, during which after 100 miles of a 200-mile trip, they were discovered and were forced to exit the truck and

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Eberhard and his brother Detlef with their parents in happier days, before war time.



Eberhardt's parents General Benno Burchert And Paula Thimm Burchert.

were left in the middle of no man's land. From here, the family walked to the border of Eastern and Western Germany, a seven-day trip on foot. After four unsuccessful attempts at crossing the border, they were finally able to sneak back into their homeland in the shadows of three former German GIs, who wanted no part of them. As they went through a swamp at the border, Paula lost her shoes but gained back her homeland.

Benno, in the meantime, had managed to hitchhike to a little village, where he found a room, and spent some time trying to find his family again. When he did

finally locate them, he brought them back to the rented room, where they slept on straw mats and raised chickens and rabbits for food. Every day before school, Eberhard rose at 4 a.m. to milk a neighbor's cows. After school, he went to the neighbor's farm where he plowed fields, and worked the farm until after dark in exchange for a small bit of food for himself.

"In exchange, I got to eat. That was all. I got food. That's all I got," says Eberhard. He also tells of another way they were able to get food to eat.

Hunting for Boars

"This area was very rural, they had a lot of wild boars that caused a lot of damage to fields. Since the German people were disarmed, the American Army would bring out a platoon of GIs, with strict instructions on specific behavior for boar hunts. We would surround a four square mile patch of woods, and go through it to chase the boars out to the armed soldiers to shoot. There was no shooting into woods, they were to shoot boars on the perimeter as they exited the trees." Full-grown boars can weigh as much as 200–250 lbs. After the hunts, the civilians divided the meat to keep for themselves," described Eberhard.

With tears in his eyes, Eberhard remembers one specific boar hunt. "On one of these hunts, all I could hear was ten or twelve shots hitting the trees around me. Then I heard a gargling sound, and peered around a bush where I saw that my cousin, one with my very same name, Eberhard Burchert, was shot in left shoulder, in an artery in his neck, and in the thigh. He bled to death on the spot. He was a year older than me. It was very traumatic for me to see that. The things we had to do to survive..."

"Then things got better, Dad worked as dishwasher for the American barracks, and I developed a proficiency in soccer."

Eberhard played various positions for a local team, advanced to another team and ended up playing on a major-league German team. Eberhard played 10 times on the German National Soccer team, which won the World Championship in 1954.

He still had to have a job, though, so he went to school, and worked as an interpreter in a department store, where he met his American sponsor, a business man offering to help Eberhard come to the United States. After a year's delay, he sold his few things, and with \$64 in his wallet, arrived with his new wife in Cleveland, OH.

The American Dream

Soon, though, the American Dream collapsed for Burchert. The sponsor, looking for cheap labor, had brought Eberhard and wife as domestic help for his 18-room house. With his wife acting as housekeeper and himself as handyman, the Burcherts were paid only \$50 a week for more than 80 hours labor. The sponsor rented them a bad apartment with terrible furniture and a week later informed the couple that they now owed over \$2,000 to the sponsors for the furniture alone. "Our parents had warned us, but we would never admit that we had been taken," Eberhard said.

The first friends that the newlyweds met in this country were a lovely Jewish couple that had lost their family in Auschwitz concentration camps. After six months of enforced slavery to the sponsor, the friends told Eberhard, "You have been had!" and suggested ways to escape. When Eberhard asked his sponsor about a sales position that he had been promised since arriving, the sponsor called him a Nazi and Eberhard and his wife were finally able to leave their indentured servitude.

"My wife took a job in a department store, in alterations, and I had to go with her to work at the start of each day to translate what her day's jobs were to be." Eberhard worked in the men's suit department, and it was at work that he met the manager of Allegheny Ludlum Steel Corp., his future employer. He was offered a job as a sales correspondent, which he eagerly accepted. It was shortly after this that the former sponsor, out of spite, reported the Burcherts to the American authorities, somehow causing Eberhard to be drafted as a Private FC into the American Army. He was then sent to Fort Carson, CO, for his basic training. Ironically, he was later chosen to be the United States Soldier of the Year in 1958, while still a German citizen.

Message to Fellow Americans:

Eberhard asked that this message be given to the readers of this article. He wants to tell "how happy I am to be living in America. Americans are a wonderful people, so down to earth, communicative, and without chips on their shoulders. I feel so fortunate to be an American." Thank you, Eberhardt Burchert, for showing us how precious our American freedom and way of life are.