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They Gave Us Eggs for Breakfast

by Karl Harshbarger

Peterson really didn't have any choice. After all, it was the only *Gaststätte* in the village. And the place looked all right. Old, sure. Built maybe 200 years ago. But he noticed cars in the parking lot, even a small bus. So that was a helpful sign. It meant that at least they had a good restaurant.

He parked next to the bus, left his suitcase in the car for the time being, went up the steps and wasn't all that surprised when he didn't find anyone in the hallway or at the little reception desk. He wasn't even all that surprised when he rang the bell at the desk and nothing happened. It was dinnertime and undoubtedly they had a very small staff.

But down the hallway he heard voices, so he went toward the voices and found a door that said "*Bar und Restaurant*." Inside he discovered the group from the bus (or at least he assumed it was the group from the bus) sitting at tables with mugs of beer in front of them. A girl with plaited blonde hair and dressed in a kind of peasant costume with a tight bodice was drawing more mugs of beer from behind the bar.

Peterson waited until she happened to look over in his direction, pointed to himself and then out toward the hallway. She sighed, as if to say, oh, no, not something else?

He had to wait in the hallway for maybe five minutes. Finally she came.

"So. Ein Zimmer?"

"Ja, bitte."

"Hier."

She reached behind her and pulled a key out of one of the cubby holes.

"*Siebenundzwanzig*."

That was it. Just the room number. Twenty-seven. No discussion of price. No asking him if anyone else was traveling with him. No telling him the location of the room. No information about breakfast.

"*Dankeschön*," he said as he watched her go back through the doorway into the bar.

He stood for a moment holding the key to room 27 in his hand. Well, it would be all right, he thought. These sorts of places usually were. These sorts of places were usually more than all right. And probably at heart she was a very nice girl. It was just that this *Gaststätte* had a very small staff and, of course, they were now serving dinner.

* * *

Coming back down the stairway he had a look into the bar and saw that the

group from the bus was getting ready to go into the restaurant. No sense, he told himself, to sit in the restaurant and order behind all those other people. And, anyway, he wasn't hungry just at the moment. Instead he would explore the village.

Not that there was much to explore. The collection of houses and barns hardly qualified as a village. Just one street. No shops or anything like that. No Mom and Pop store at the corner. Not even a corner. Just a bus stop at the village square. And the village square wasn't even a village square, more a triangular patch of grass just big enough to accommodate a bus shelter. And a war memorial.

He paused to look at the memorial.

Every German village had one. Most were basically the same, the names of the fallen cut into the face of a slab of marble, and either a wrought iron German eagle or a statue of a German soldier (but always from the First World War, never the Second) at the top.

For some reason he always read the names of the fallen.

The first name: Achim Beckmann. Born in 1891 and died in 1916. So: Twenty-five years old when maybe some Frenchman got him in his sights.

Peterson always wondered about these names. Who was this Achim Beckmann? Did he have blonde hair or dark hair? Short or tall? Which of these houses had he lived in? Was he a farmer's son? Probably. Back then almost all the men coming from these small villages would have been farmers' sons. Married or single? Probably married at the age of 25. Children?

Well, thought Peterson, the Americans had come. Both times. Both wars. His father had gone over in 1918 and his older brother had enlisted in 1943. The Battle of the Bulge and all that.

"Bye, bye, Achim Beckmann," Peterson said turning away from the memorial.

* * *

Back at the *Gaststätte* he discovered the bar was now empty, and going into the restaurant proper he saw that a couple of tables had been pulled together for the group from the bus. The same girl who had formerly been serving beer behind the bar and who had also had checked him in was now standing at the end of the two tables holding her pad up and taking orders.

He chose a table over toward the side away from the bus group, sat down and picked up the menu. The usual offerings, of course, all very German and no surprises, heavy on *Schnitzel*. As he looked around the room he could see that the *Gaststätte*, or at least this restaurant part of it, was prospering because the room had been recently renovated and an annex with a modern-looking glass roof had been added at the back. A small chain across the entrance to the annex indicated that this new room was off limits currently, but undoubtedly it was used for special celebrations, weddings, anniversaries and the like.

Peterson continued to look around. The restaurant was maybe half full - not

bad for a weekday night - three or four older couples and several families with children. Additionally, of course, the group from the bus. And over on the side near him a group of local farmers. Well, he assumed they were local farmers because of their rough faces and straight hair and the fact that their leisure clothes didn't quite fit them. In any case, they must have finished eating because they had pitchers of beer in front of them and were beginning to pull out their cigars and light up their cigarettes.

Suddenly he heard a man say in loud and in very unmistakable American English, "You know, you just know what? I'm just going to change my order and, by God, I'm going to have a *Strammer Max!*"

Another loud man's voice, and, again, the unmistakable American accent: "Well, I can't let you hang out there all by yourself, Phil. No, sir! I'll just have one of them *Strammer Maxes* myself."

Americans! thought Peterson looking over at the double table. Touring Germany!

"Well," said a lady also in a loud voice, "I want something very nice. Something very German. What would you recommend?"

She had directed this last remark to the girl standing at the end of the table taking orders.

"*Wie, bitte?*" said the girl.

"What would you recommend?" Then even louder. "What would you recommend?"

The girl bent down and consulted an older lady also at the end of the table, probably the guide traveling with the group. When the girl finally understood she pointed to an item in the menu.

"She recommends *Jägerschnitzel mit Bratkartoffeln und Salat*," said the older lady speaking English but with a German accent. "She says it's the specialty of the house."

"Oh, good!" said the American lady. "That sounds really good. Tell her I'll have that."

Again the guide said something to the girl and the girl wrote more in her ordering pad.

"Any other changes?" said the guide to the group. "No?"

The guide nodded, the girl slipped her ordering pad in a kind of side pouch and left for the kitchen.

For a moment Peterson thought of getting up and going over to the group and saying something like, hello, there, guess what? I'm an American, too, and what are you all doing here, where have you been and where are you going? Of course, they would all ask him where he was from back in the States and what in the world was he doing in Germany.

But he decided against it. Going over to their table. They weren't his kind of

people. He'd never approach such loud and crude people back home. So why here?

And, anyway, the girl in her peasant costume had come out of the kitchen and was heading toward the local farmers' table. He waved and caught her attention.

"Hallo, könnte ich bitte bestellen?"

"*Ja, natürlich,*" she said coming over to his table and taking out her pad, but looking over at the farmers.

And as soon as Peterson finished ordering and she had written it down, the girl left for the farmers' table. She hadn't even asked Peterson what he wanted to drink. Usually that was the first question.

So he was forced to call after her, "*Und, bitte, ein Pilz.*"

"*Gerne,*" she said already at the farmers' table.

Peterson watched as one of the men there put his arm around her waist. Probably her father. Or uncle. In any case, the man with his arm around her waist apparently made a joke and the other men laughed and she laughed with them. It was the first time he had seen her even smile.

"Hello! Over here, please!" That was the loud voice of the lady at the American table.

The man took his hand away from the girl's waist and the girl went over to the American table.

"Those people are smoking!" said the American lady pointing at the farmers.

"*Wie, bitte?*" said the girl.

"Those people are smoking!" repeated the lady even louder.

"*Bitte?*" said the girl.

Peterson watched the farmers. They were all looking at the American lady - as, indeed, was everyone else in the restaurant.

"And if you don't do something," said the American lady to the girl, "you can be assured I shall not let the matter rest here."

The girl bent down and talked with the guide.

"*Nicht rauchen?*" said the girl.

"*Ja, richtig,*" said the guide to the girl.

"Go on! Tell them!" said the American lady. "And right now!"

The guide said something more to the girl, and from his table Peterson

watched the girl walk back toward the farmers.

"*Was ist los?*" said the man who a little earlier had put his arm around her waist.

Peterson couldn't hear what the girl said, but suddenly all the farmers burst out laughing. Several began to thump on the table with their knuckles and one of them held up his mug of beer in a pretend toast to the Americans.

"I demand to see the manager!" said the American lady.

Peterson decided things had gone far enough and it was time for him to intervene. As he got up from his table he formed his tactics: First he would introduce himself as a fellow American, maybe even tell them he came from a small town outside of Chicago. Then he would explain that, actually, as a matter of legal fact, at this time and in this *Land*, smoking was still allowed - although all that was about to change - and therefore the farmers were quite within their rights to smoke. Calling the manager, you see, wasn't going to help.

He was just approaching the Americans

' table and about to begin to say these things when the American lady stood up and addressed Peterson, "So: You allow this sort of thing in your restaurant, do you?"

"*Wie bitte?*" said Peterson.

Just then the real manager showed up. He was a small bald-headed man wearing a cook's apron and had a fixed smile on his face.

"Yes, yes, yes, and how may I be of assist?" he said in his broken English.

The American lady pointed over to the farmers.

"Ah, yes, I am that seeing."

"So?"

"*Ach! Ich denke.* I think."

Suddenly a flurry of shouted orders. The girl in the peasant costume and two other older women wearing white aprons appeared from the kitchen. The manager pointed toward the annex and the girl ran over, undid the chain in front of the entrance to the room and turned on the lights. The other two women had gotten table linen and silverware.

Then the manager started telling the American lady what a superior room the annex was, very new, a glass ceiling, very, very modern, and he was sure that she and her good friends would enjoy that room much more than the one they were in and it would only take a minute or so to make it ready.

During all this Peterson had retreated back to his table. Now he sat there watching the American group get up and the manager scurry here and there.

Suddenly - he really didn't know why - Peterson realized he was angry. Not just angry, but very, very angry. Where, for example, was his beer? For God's sake! His *Pilz!* He'd ordered it, hadn't he? Some time ago! So where was it?

He looked at the girl in the peasant costume and the two older ladies with aprons passing back and forth carrying trays to the annex. That was all very good and well. For those Americans. But what about him? After all! He lived in Germany! Permanently now!

And that manager, the way he was scurrying around. Groveling. Trying to pretend that everything was all right. That nothing bad had ever happened. For God's sake, why didn't the manager just tell those Americans where to get off? Tell them to go to hell.

Suddenly, and to his surprise, Peterson found himself getting up. Also to his surprise he realized he was about to go over and tell that groveling, sniveling little man a thing or two.

Except that just as he was getting up he saw one of the men at the farmers' table wave to him - the same man who earlier had put his arm around the girl's waist. And, what was this? Some of the other men at the table were moving their chairs to make room and one man had actually gotten up and found an extra chair.

"*Ich?*" said Peterson.

"*Kommen Sie rüber,*" said the man at the table smiling.

So instead of aiming for the manager right away, Peterson diverted - momentarily - to the farmers' table.

"*Guten Abend,*" said the man.

"*Guten Abend,*" said Peterson.

"*Setzen Sie sich,*" said the man who had waved to him. He indicated the empty chair.

Peterson looked across the room for the manager. But he didn't see him. Perhaps he had gone back into the kitchen.

"*Bitte,*" said the man repeating his invitation.

Peterson sat down.

"*Woher kommen Sie?*" said the man.

"*Woher ich komme?*" said Peterson.

"*Nicht aus Deutschland!*" The man smiled and winked at Peterson. All the other men were watching.

The idea crossed Peterson's mind to tell them he was a Canadian - that was the usual way out.

But he found himself saying in German that he was American.

"You see, I told you!" said the man in German to another man across the table. Apparently the two of them had made a bet.

"Well, well, well, I figured you for an Australian," said the man across the table, also in German.

Peterson continued to talk in German.

"No, no, I'm an American. Very much an American."

"Please, I have an uncle living in Denver," said another man down the table.

"Oh, really?" said Peterson.

"He's been there for 12 years."

"My wife's brother works in Silicon Valley," said still another man. Like most Germans he mispronounced "valley" making the word sound more like "walley."

"Does he work in IT?" said Peterson.

"What?"

"Does he work with computers?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, computers."

The man sitting next to Peterson touched him on the shoulder. "Herr Beckmann down there was actually a prisoner of war in the United States."

Peterson looked to the other end of the table and saw a very elderly gentlemen with very white hair. Unlike the other men he wore a stiffly pressed wool tweed suit.

"Gramps," said another man at the end of the table, "you were a prisoner of war. In the United States. Is that right?"

"What?" said the older man in almost a whisper.

"You were a prisoner of war. PRISONER OF WAR!"

"What?"

"PRISONER OF WAR! IN THE UNITED STATES!"

"Yes. In the United States. I was."

"Gramps, this gentlemen down there" said the man at the end of the table pointing to Peterson, "is an American. He comes from the United States."

"What?"

"HE COMES FROM THE UNITED STATES!"

"Who?"

"THE GENTLEMEN DOWN THERE!"

Peterson waved from his place halfway down the table. "HELLO. AND HOW ARE YOU, SIR?"

The old man stared in Peterson's direction.

"They gave us eggs for breakfast."

"EGGS?" said Peterson.

"Yes, eggs."

The man sitting next to Peterson touched Peterson's shoulder again. "You see, Gramps is, well, how can I say it . . . ?"

"You don't have to say it."

"The western front."

"Yes, of course, I understand."

A man across the table stood up and raised his beer mug. "I have the pleasure to propose a toast to the president of the United States!"

Everyone stood, including Peterson, even the old man at the end of the table.

"To the president of the United States!" said the man who had proposed the toast.

Everyone drank from his mug and then pounded the table.

"And I propose a toast!" said Peterson before anyone could sit down. "To your chancellor. To the chancellor of Germany!"

Again everyone drank from his mug and pounded the table.

As they began to sit down Peterson noticed that the old man at the end of the table remained standing.

Suddenly he started to sing in his quiet, whispery voice.

Over there!

Over there!

Send the word!

Send the word!

Over there!

That the Yanks are coming!

The Yanks are coming!

The drums drum drumming everywhere!

Then he stopped singing and everyone at the table sat there looking at him.

Peterson heard loud laughing coming from the American bus group in the annex.

"That's all right, Dad," said the man at the end of the table.

But Peterson could see the old man was crying.

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