

My grandfather Heinz Ulrich (1916–2009)

My grandfather Heinz Ulrich was born on 7 January 1916.

His father owned a small construction firm in Gotha. Consequently, my grandfather learnt the trade of bricklaying and went on to study civil engineering (for buildings) at the 'Höhere Technische Lehranstalt für Hoch- und Tiefbau in Gotha', graduating as a civil engineer in 1939.

Perhaps whilst still a student, but certainly after graduating, he worked on the construction site of the Nazi 'Gauforum' in Weimar. It is the only one of the Gauforums planned for the state capitals that was largely completed. Here he specialised in the construction of bunker complexes, and was subsequently involved in the construction of large bunker complexes in the Jonastal valley south of Erfurt.

In 1940, he married my grandmother Johanna, who was from Berlin. The couple were given a newly built flat that had been constructed near the Gauforum in Weimar. My mother, Gisela, was born in 1941.

In 1942, my grandfather joined the NSDAP. From at least that year onwards, he was a member of 'Organisation Todt'. This paramilitary organisation was responsible for the construction of military buildings and other centrally planned infrastructure (roads). My grandfather was stationed in Latvia (Riga) for a time. As he told me, he built bunkers outside Leningrad – obviously during the siege of the city. I have not yet been able to verify whether this is true.

In 1944, he was conscripted into the Wehrmacht and served on the staff of Grenadier Regiment 858 of the 346th Infantry Division on the Western Front. As he suffered from severe knee problems following a previous car accident, he was assigned to serve as a motorcycle messenger.

On 2 November 1944, he was taken prisoner by the British in the Netherlands. I do not know the exact circumstances. As he later reported, he was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in England. According to the index card listing him as a prisoner of war, he was initially held in Camp No. 186. The following incident must have taken place there: He reported that one day all the prisoners were led into a room for a film screening. The film showed the bodies of Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci being hung upside down at a petrol station in Milan on 29 April 1945. Films were presumably shown in the camp on other occasions too, but this screening clearly made a great impression on my grandfather.

Am 28.8.45 ist er im Camp No. 90 gemeldet. As I have now discovered, this was very likely the Wisbech Fridaybridge Camp, P.O.W. Camp 90. According to the postcard I received, he was in this camp at Christmas 1945.

In the camp, my grandfather taught mathematics to other prisoners. He owned three paperback textbooks in German (no longer in existence today) that had been published specifically for this purpose.

I still have a small wooden box with a hinged lid (14,5 x 10 x 6 cm), which features a relief carving of an elephant. My grandfather made it whilst in captivity, presumably in the camp. I do not know whether there were any special lessons for carpentry in the camp. In any case, he had some skills in carpentry, as he later also made small pieces of furniture.

My grandfather reported (or rather, I was told this by my mother) that he had last worked on a farm "in the north of England". He had enjoyed it there very much. It is not entirely clear whether he was still living in the camp at that time. As far as I can recall, it seems he was living on the farm. The family who ran the farm had also offered him the chance to stay on and bring his family over. However, he wanted to return home.

In 1948, he was released from captivity and returned to Weimar.

He initially worked in two small architectural firms and then took up the post of site manager at the newly established Institute for Microbiology and Experimental Therapy at the Academy of Sciences of the GDR in Jena. He worked there until his retirement in 1981.

He died on 13 August 2009.

Figures

01 – My grandfather Heinz Ulrich (1942, as a member of the Organisation Todt)

02 – Postcard (front, with his wife Johanna and my mother)

03 – Postcard (back; text: Christmas 1945. Best wishes from Mother and Gisela)

04 – The wooden box my grandfather made in the camp

05 – My grandfather's registration as a prisoner of war in England (from the Federal Archives in Berlin)

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