

# The Prairie Light Review

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Volume 14  
Number 1 *Seasonal Dreams*

Article 12

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Fall 12-1-1994

## Echoes

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### Recommended Citation

Lindgren, Robert (1994) "Echoes," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol14/iss1/12>

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## Echoes

by Robert Lindgren

Echoes from the past continue to reverberate in my head, sometimes triggered by a stranger's look, some innocent action, or maybe a phrase from a current news item. Recently when a friend of mine commented on the new movie, Schindler's List, I began to hear old echoes from World War II.

We were in the Harz mountains one beautiful spring day. I thought of the birdseed people as we lay just outside of a German town, below a convenient rise in the land. Our planes had been pounding the town all morning, and smoke poured from some of the buildings. The white and grey billowing made a dramatic contrast with the clean, blue sky. Thirty-one tanks (I remember that number distinctly), other vehicles and troops, all of us were carefully deployed, hidden by the natural terrain. It was really an unusual situation, almost like the ideal textbook maneuver. Then suddenly and somehow an Army jeep brought the town Burgermeister out into the countryside to negotiate. He was typical of his job, mustached, stocky and cocky, and wearing an alpine type hat with a brush of hairs and feathers tucked into the hat band. He said he would surrender his town if the U.S. commander could show him more vehicles than we had. War is not always killing; it's also negotiations. But the negotiations had come to a standstill.

At 2 PM we rolled into the town which had not surrendered. By then, of course, the German troops had disappeared and were hiding in the mountains. We scattered into all parts of the town. I was alone in a street by a stone wall, I remember, near a brick barracks-type building. There were no soldiers to be seen, no Germans, no other Americans. Any civilians in town were hiding. The front door of the building flew open, and people poured out. They were political prisoners, forced workers. I was the first American they saw. Before I knew it, a man ran up to me, kissed my hand, said something unintelligible and was on his way. In all of the confusion, he and I were the only ones to know about it and neither of us understood the other. His uncontrollable joy and my embarrassment collided. I just happened to be there, and we would never see each other again after that instant.

Another sunny day we approached a small, quiet, sleepy-looking village. Olsburg was its name, the same as the nearest town to my aunt's farm in Kansas. White sheets and towels hung from balconies and windows. Other surrender flags of white rags hung from makeshift flagpoles. In extended order and with weapons in hand, we approached the town cautiously. Walking past one particular house always brought a smile or a chuckle to the soldiers ahead of me when each of them looked into a basement window. My turn showed me why. I saw an old man, cloned with the usual Hitler mustache, standing, facing outside. When he saw me, he immediately quit his work of peeling potatoes and with his knife in hand put up his hands in surrender. But down the street a few feet was where the humor vanished. Suddenly, choppy machine gun fire broke out from my right. I was walking on the edge of the street in the shadow of an armored car.

In a fraction of a second, I barely deliberated and made a decision more quickly than I thought was possible. The machine gunner was hiding in a house set back about 70 feet or so from the road, a hedge and a shallow ditch between us. A hedge is no place to hide in wartime. Hedges are routinely sprayed with machine gun fire—just in case. My logical and tactical choice was to dash across the street to an empty field and away from enemy fire. But about 300 feet ahead on that side beyond an open field was another house. Somehow I knew a silent sniper was at an upstairs window waiting for me. I couldn't see him. I didn't know his name, but I knew everything else about him. He couldn't possibly miss me if I flopped over there.

I jumped into the hedge only moments before an armor-piercing shell sailed over, missed the armored car and exploded just across the road, where I should have been. Whichever way I went the sniper had been cheated. Later that day, I brought in a prisoner, a big hulk of a young man with a streak of blood running down his forehead. He looked pathetically dull, so dumb, my mother-in-law would have said that cows wouldn't eat him. That night was a good one to sleep.

And farther along at another time, another place we approached Clausthal-Zellerfeld. Someone called it the twin cities and in the same breath mentioned Minneapolis and St. Paul. The German places were twin towns, or villages maybe, but certainly not cities. And I almost didn't get there. A mile or two out of town, we were walking the edges of a highway, Gilmore on one side, I on the other. We were the last ones in extended lines of 12 or 15 men. It was another nice, sunny day. On the left side of the road where I was, a derelict mining operation of some kind was rusting away. On the other side of the road a meadow stretched out in a huge elongated rectangle. And ahead of us were the towns of Clausthal and Zellerfeld. I remember at the time being completely unconcerned. After all, I was at the tail end of the infantry column, walking as peacefully as if I were on my way to grade school when I was a kid. But Machine gun fire cut through my thoughts, and red tracer shells flashed down the highway between Gilmore and me. Instantly the highway was deserted. Then slowly, one by one, the men who had been on my side of the road left our ditch, dashed across the road, hit the ground and disappeared. All the time machine gun fire continued to pound away. I was alone, all alone, on my side of the road, not another person in sight. But not for long; I hung onto my gear, made a run for it and hit the dried grass in the meadow. My steel helmet popped off on impact. Just as quickly, I got it back and in place. All of us were pinned down with machine gunfire, no hands and knees stuff. We were "creeping and crawling". I've never been so close to the ground in all my life, before or after. By that time, Gilmore was making his way back to a stone wall, the glowing red tracers about 8 inches above his helmet. Other guys were moving across the meadow and away from the highway, toward a dropoff which must have been a small stream. In that area, they seemed to be drawing less fire than we were. But it was a long haul over there. Through the commotion, men from behind the stone wall motioned to us and yelled.

"Get back here--With us. Come on!"

I was the last one to make it. And as I leaned against the safety of the back of the wall, friendly strangers laughed and slapped me on the back. They thought I wouldn't make it.

Clausthal was not taken that day.

The next night though, we slept in town, Clausthal or Zellerfeld, I've forgotten which. The house we chose for bedding down had a big open porch and rattly windows. As usual, Gilmore and I scrutinized the houses in town and then chose that place. Maybe fate helped us--and the occupants too. In sloppy high school German, I told the people living there that we would sleep in their best bedroom, and they could stay in the house. In wartime, that was a house for them. That night, as we often did, we shared food and ate our evening meal with the German civilians. Then, later in the dark of night, the windows in the old house rattled almost to breaking, and a distant rumbling sounded like an own town approaching storm. Gilmore and I ran to the porch to see but realized that we were being attacked by artillery fire. The German troops who had been driven out were shelling their own town and people as well as us occupying Americans. Without hesitation, one of the women about my mother's age came out, put her arm around me and said she was taking us down to the basement where we would be safe. Her concern for us was really a surprise.

The next morning, perhaps I surprised her. A friend of hers staying the night in that house needed to see her daughter in another part of town. The lady said she wasn't allowed on the streets, too much military activity. I grabbed her by the arm and we started on our way. The stone sidewalks and street were narrow, much too narrow. She walked in the gutter, tanks and other vehicles dangerously close.

"Get up here," I said and pulled her up with me. She stammered and said the law wouldn't allow her to walk on the sidewalks when American soldiers were there. I didn't care. Walking together on the sidewalk, we saw the usual bold signs posted on walls and closed shops: Luten ist Verbotten, Looting is Forbidden.

I got the poor old soul delivered and found my way back to Gilmore on the big front porch. Then we were on our way to war again. Not very far from there in a dreary countryside, no buildings of any kind, we came upon a couple of idle railroad cars on a siding. Suddenly, someone inside slid open a side door. Excited men ran across a field toward us. They were happy, finally free. Somehow we communicated. I'll always remember their faces and their hands, happy faces, mutilated fingers. The men were eager to show us how their fingers had been cut to the bone at the joints--and told us how the cuts had been soaked in salt water. Then being free, they went their way, we went ours.

Some echoes from those days I don't hear; actually I turn a deaf ear. I tune them out, Buchenwald for instance. But the Schindler's List discussion with my friend brought me back to that one afternoon in Buchenwald, a prisoner of war, slave labor and death camp. Those echoes were faint at first, then got louder, less muffled and more distinct. I'm putting them down on paper now and, hopefully, they'll fade away--or even die.

Gilmore and I for some reason, not ordinary war business, were on our way to Buchenwald. Our official U.S. Photographer arm patches opened the gate for us. We had a tour with a guide who was a prisoner, himself, a day or two earlier. His poor English and my just as poor German helped us understand what we couldn't see.

One of the first things the man said to us was, "We have a saying here. We come in the front gate and go out the smokestack." He pointed to a tall chimney atop the crematorium.

He took us everywhere. Early on, we walked through the halls of an almost empty small hospital building.

After we passed an open doorway he said, "That man will be dead tomorrow,"

The emaciated man in rags we had just seen was lying on the floor. There were no beds in the room.

"Why?" I asked. "Can't the Americans save him, now that we're here? Give him some medicine?"

It's too late was the curt answer.

He took us into a museum room with a variety of crude and freakish exhibits in glass cases. After 50 years, I can still see them, both mounted in the verticle position. One was a peice of human skin, probably 7 or 8 inches by 10 inches, with a colorful tatoo in the center. The other half of a penis sliced longitudinally. Other items from that miniature museum have faded away with time. We left the place and walked to, but not into, a filthy latrine building. Our guide explained that the open sided small building was for washing and toileting. More than a thousand men tried to use the facility which always malfuctioned. It was impossible so the outside surrounding area had to be used as well.

Nearby, he showed us the sleeping barracks, row after row of wooden racks from floor to ceiling. Each cubicle approximately 5 feet wide by 6 feet long and no more than 2 feet high, accommodated 6 or 7 men. Some had to sleep on top of others.

Quickly, we moved on to another area, the worst place in the camp. Through an outside doorway, we entered steps to a very newly whitewashed basement room. The paint had been wet a day or two earlier. The squarish room was fitted with huge meat hooks, mounted at least 6 feet from the floor, hooks the kinds used in slaughter houses. Our guide knew all about that room and told us too much. It had just been cleaned, scrubbed, and painted. He pointed out sets of slight indentations in the concrete walls, about 18 inches apart. Each set was beneath a hook. We were in the basement of the crematorium.

He explained the process. The prisoners were hit on the head with a wooden mallet, dropped through a trap door near the door to the basement stairs(steps). The stunned men then were hung by the back of the neck on a meat hook. The indentations on the walls? They were from thousands of dying men clawing into the concrete until they died. An elevator took the bodies upstairs.

It has been half a century, but I still remember at least three and possibly six ovens, side by side. One oven had the ash still holding part of the victims shape. If touched it would have settled sown to a heavy layer of dust. In some cases, the victims weren't quite dead when they were slipped into the open end of a coffin-like oven. The bodies wiggled or twitched. We left the place.

Later outside, we saw sturdy telephone-pole thick whipping posts secured in a cobblestone courtyard. I had read in the Army newspaper, Stars and Stripes, about those posts, the guards and the camp watchdogs. I thought at the time it was American propaganda. Unfortunately, I was wrong. Prisoners were lashed to the posts for various reasons, different degrees of punishment, beatings, and even entertainment. Sometimes satanic guards tied naked prisoners to the posts. They teased the watchdogs, the jiggled the prisoners' genitiles with small flexible branches. The big dogs lunged and ripped of everything from the crotch. We saw the posts, and I vaguely remember some of the dogs. It was good to be outside again, to look up at the blue clear sky and to feel the wash of freedom.

Our guide had been patient with us, and we with him. We were more than ready to leave.

Gilmore and I climbed into our vehicle. It was either a light truck or a jeep, probably a light truck. We drove for at least fifteen minutes without either of us uttering a single syllable. We had seen and heard too much for any kind of conversation. At that time, nothing else was worth saying--nothing--absolutely nothing.