

Collier's

September 18, 1943

p. 13

THEY SAW HAMBURG DIE

BY WALTER TAUB

MANAGER CZECHOSLOVAK PRESS BUREAU IN STOCKHOLM
CABLED FROM STOCKHOLM

Eyewitness accounts of men and women who escaped the holocaust of Hamburg picture the utter horror of a great city's destruction, its people terrified beyond endurance and too dazed for panic. It's a clear preview of what is happening to German morale



By matching sections of its reconnaissance photos (note pins) the R.A.F. obtained this picture of the complete devastation of over four miles of Hamburg's water-front section. Arrow points to the totally destroyed shipyards that were the most important on the continent

THE people of Germany have now learned, through the terror-filled hours of sleepless nights and days, that air mastery—the annihilating blitz weapon of the Nazis in 1939 and 1940—has been taken over by the Allies. They know now that their adversaries have learned how to use the devastating knock-out punch, and that these punches are steadily being rained against Naziism's solar plexus, the morale of the German people.

The most terrible of these punches has been the flood of nitroglycerin and phosphorus that in five days and nights destroyed Hamburg.

These refugees cannot regard you calmly. They wander around as if seek-

H A M B U R G

ing shelter. Their hands shake. Offer them food and they refuse it. They appear sick. But they beg for cigarettes and, after the first puff, as if released from a vise, they begin to describe their experiences. Their words come jerkily. Only later, after checking the Danes' descriptions against those of Swedish, Swiss and German eyewitnesses, can one obtain a complete account of what happened in Hamburg during the last days of July.

The first attack was delivered on the night of July 24th. The attack was concentrated against antiaircraft batteries, with excellent results. Most of the batteries were silenced in a few minutes. Then, say these eyewitnesses, came an absolute novelty in the history of bombing—bearing witness to the scientific care devoted to planning the attack. Special reconnaissance planes appeared over the city, picking out certain industrially important sections with green flares dropped by parachutes. These flares hovered like bunches of grapes in the air and aided the bombers coming in afterward to drop their explosives in a square around the section thus marked, so that buildings for whole blocks collapsed and all roads and communications between that section and the remainder of the city were choked off. This was not done to prevent the inhabitants from getting out, but to hinder the transfer of firemen and fire-fighting equipment from other sections in the effort to save war-important buildings and their contents.

Homes Burn to the Ground

"Not once, but dozens of times I saw firemen concentrate their efforts to save everything from the burning courthouse while dwellings a few blocks distant burned down without the fire brigade even going there," said a Basle merchant I have known for a long time but who, being obliged to return home via Germany, must remain anonymous.

When communications were thus closed, there began a rain of incendiaries that spread fires over such a large area that practically the whole section was drowned in flames. The work of air defense on this and the following nights was enormously hampered by this simple but effective means which, as far as I know, was applied here for the first time.

Mrs. Antoinette Johansson, a German woman nearing seventy who had lived all her life in Hamburg and who is the wife of a Swede now a refugee in Malmoe, Sweden's southern port, refers to "sheets of paper, black on one side and dazzling silver on the other, dropped by thousands from the bombers." The other twenty-five Hamburg Swedes who have arrived here attest to the correctness of her statement. Air-defense searchlight beams were reflected all ways from these sheets, thus being prevented from reaching the raiding aircraft with full intensity and making the job of locating them much more difficult.

The first assault was directed at the inner town. Many who have visited Hamburg's big amusement center in Saint Pauli probably wonder sadly why it was bombed. Yet it was necessary. Imagine Coney Island with all amusement stalls removed—what remains? The amusement park in Saint Pauli was an enormous field over 600 yards long and 400 yards wide. It requires little imagination to see it as a splendid airfield, and that's why it was bombed.

H A M B U R G

The Germans declare that practically all hospitals were hit, but naturally we are skeptical of Goebbels' secret weapon—the British *eneiefedo*—invented by Goebbels. It seemingly drops silently to the ground and creeping toward the nearest hospital, destroys it. But after talks with many eyewitnesses, I can say quite correctly that some hospitals in Hamburg, as well as in many other cities, have been damaged. But this is not because the British and Americans lacked consideration for defenseless sick people, but rather because the Germans lack such consideration.

Ambushed in Churches

It has been revealed by over thirty eyewitnesses from western Germany that the Germans concentrate antiaircraft batteries near hospitals and churches, knowing that the Allies are unwilling to bomb such targets. This naturally means immense dumps of ammunition also located there.

A Swedish seaman whose ship occasionally put in at Hamburg asked antiaircraft gunners near Grosse Saint Michaelis Church why they were stationed there. "Because the British always attack cultural monuments," was the reply. Anglo-American planes, fired on by guns located there, attempted to silence the batteries, and naturally the buildings near by were damaged or demolished.

The free port, covering an area of more than 3,500 acres, naturally was not spared during this 90-minute attack, but not until the next raid on Sunday—a day raid—was the most devastating blow directed at this pride of Hamburg.

That Sunday, Hamburg displayed an unusual appearance. Even in the forenoon, giant clouds of smoke and dust enveloped the whole town, darkening the sky. Water from burst mains flooded the streets. Then the sirens screamed, and a big formation of American bombers reduced to ashes the continent's biggest shipyards Blohm & Voss, Vulkanwerft and Howaldswerft—where the biggest steamers are built, repaired and docked. The alert lasted until 4 p. m. After it, telephone communication no longer existed. After the all-clear, when Hamburg's inhabitants left the shelters, "No one knew any longer where he was," Bruesseler Zeitung's correspondent reported. Monday night, during the fresh British attack, the big gas plant in the harbor section received a direct hit. That terrible explosion deprived the city of gas.

That evening, none among Hamburg's 1,700,000 inhabitants was willing to retire to bed, for the R.A.F. had dropped leaflets promising a repetition of Sunday's raid on Tuesday. Hamburgers, from whom Hitler was once compelled to admit he had received most "no" votes, always listen to the British radio and they know, therefore, that "the British keep their promises."

Every resident of Hamburg descended to the shelters that night, and the air in them became even fouler.

On Tuesday morning at 11:30, the few remaining sirens screamed. The attack began at 12:30. Roaring explosive bombs, whistling phosphorous bombs and aerial mines played an infernal concert to which five or six thousand people, packed tightly in each of the shelters' seven or eight floors, listened fearfully. "'Will the roof hold?' was the question on everybody's lips," relates another Swedish refugee, Werner Gullberg, who sat there with his wife and year-old son. But there was a still younger occupant: a young Swedish woman gave birth to a child during the raid.

The raid lasted only a half-hour, but it sufficed to convert Hamburg into a veritable sea of fire. With the central water

H A M B U R G

mains destroyed, hundreds of thousands of those leaving the shelters would have given a fortune for a glass of water, but no one could get a drop. The heat was unbearable, becoming even worse when a storm suddenly broke loose and developed into something like a tropical typhoon. The giant bonfire resulted in a rapid consumption of oxygen. The air layer above and around the heart of the fire was rapidly drawn into the vacuum arising from the fire, and terrible fire storms resulted where a few minutes earlier complete calm had prevailed.

"The fleeing people ran helplessly about," says one of the Danish workers, Niels Ericsen. "It was impossible to breathe. My heart beat violently, and everything went black before my eyes." Many were blinded by dust and heat.

The fire brigade arrived only two hours later, but little remained for it to save. Blazing beams, collapsing buildings and heat made salvage work hopeless. All the refugees said, "Everything burned around us—houses, trees, bushes." Wrapped in quilts and blankets, the sick and wounded were conveyed to aid posts where 3,000 awaited treatment. Those waiting for treatment heard the explosions of time bombs going off here and there, making it appear that the attack was continuing, though the all-clear had sounded.

Wednesday morning there was still no light at ten o'clock. The city, like a mass of fire, was hovering in space, cut off from all air and light. Streets and open places lay in ruins and ashes. Sections housing 300,000 people were razed to the ground. The main railway station, Saint Georg, was a terrible sight on Wednesday, with charred railroad cars on sidings and unrecognizably smashed automobiles.

Caught in a Deathtrap

During that night, the industrial sections of Rotenburgsort, traversed by trains to Berlin, Hammerbrook, Hamm and Veddel, and the Elbe bridge had been ravaged. But the old railroad bridge carrying trains southward to Bremen, Hanover and Cuxhaven was usable despite a direct hit, making possible the evacuation that was begun on Wednesday. Not many managed to leave the city, for on Wednesday night, there was a new alarm, and on Thursday morning, an American bomber force spent two whole hours over the city. Women fainted the moment the sirens opened up again.

After this raid, a Swedish clerk in a publisher's office, Hjalmar Nilsson, tried to find relatives in another section of the city. He said, "I saw numerous dead in twisted positions, mostly naked because the storm had torn off their clothes. They lay in the streets everywhere. Wearied, apathetic individuals wandered aimlessly before and behind me. The wounded not yet attended lay in a small, grassy open space."

A Swedish girl whom I know only as Miss Persson saw people blazing from phosphorus cast themselves into water—but the phosphorus burned there equally well. Lime was strewn on the corpses scattered about the streets, and the odor of death lay heavy over the whole town.

On Thursday afternoon, police cars fitted with loud-speakers rushed through the town. All the people could catch was "*Die Stadt sofort verlassen!*"—Leave town immediately! This order marked the close of the dramatic conflict between Hamburg's Gauleiter Kaufmann and the military commandant. The latter had demanded evacuation as early as Tuesday, but Kaufmann, the most fanatical kind of Nazi, opposed evacuation on the grounds that it was liable to undermine discipline.

On Thursday at noon, the military commandant stated that, for military reasons,

H A M B U R G

he had given instructions to evacuate. Kaufmann declared he would refer the matter to Hitler. Some days later, the commandant was decorated by Hitler.

Martial Law Proclaimed

On Friday morning (the town was bombed again Thursday night) the whole Hamburg area was put under a military cordon, no one being allowed to enter it. Every three quarters of an hour, a train of at least forty cars left with refugees via the Elbe bridge for Uelzen, a hundred kilometers southward. There the refugees, about 500,000 in all, were distributed in various directions.

While the evacuation was proceeding, the party's field kitchens toured the city, distributing food. Mrs. Johansson says no one could understand "whence came so much food, for no one had seen its like since the war started: butter, cheese, real milk. But people did not rush for the food. They didn't eat at all. They came from the shelters in deadly terror, for each time they saw more devastation.

Thousands of people moved along, trying to find a little free space on the streets to lie down—only to rest, only sleep; nothing else. The Nazis are quite correct in declaring there was no panic. "They were too tired for panic. The horrors were so great that human beings were unable to react any more," said Mr. Nilsson.

One refugee tells how he met a woman wearing only torn pajamas, with a child in her arms. He asked if he could help her, but she answered "No," and simply continued walking. People, half demented by terror, walked around with eyes that gazed but saw nothing. No survivor will ever completely overcome that terror psychosis.

Propaganda Minister Goebbels could not prevent such descriptions and details of people's sufferings. He said cynically, "Now we can organize sympathy. People will begin to have pity on us." But I think he is mistaken. Herr Okras, editor of the *Hamburger Tageblatt*, at a press conference for the foreign press, declared that Hamburgers have now learned to hate. That, I believe is quite correct—but hate whom? When Goering, inspecting Hamburg on August 9th, began an encouraging speech, he was cut short by the cry, "We've got you to thank for this! What did you promise? You've led us into this!" A consular official told me, "They know that those who bombed Warsaw, Coventry, London and Russian cities bear the responsibility for the Hamburg raids."

Why is it people don't decide to leave town? A number of formalities are necessary when reaching the evacuation place, and then people are badly received at their destinations. They feel themselves strangers and are treated like strangers. The S.S. paper, *Schwarzes Korps*, says that the bombed-outs are often mocked by their hosts as the "nightshirt squadron," because they have so little clothing.

Voelkischer Beobachter on August 14th appealed to peasants to be friendlier in receiving refugees from Hamburg. The overburgomaster of Munich issued a decree prohibiting anybody from taking residence without his permission. Viennese, who are not allowed the right to prohibit anything, hate the newcomers, holding that the transferred industries are responsible for Allied bomb attacks.

The frightened bombed-outs, when evacuated, have no baggage, but they carry terror to new homes. There it spreads like lightning. Travelers here from Dresden ask whether the Allies could not be told that Dresden is not of the slightest importance to the war, but that there are many industries in Leipzig. Leipzig people say the same thing about

H A M B U R G

Dresden. One burgomaster from Sudeten Germany came to Stockholm to seek a place to quarter his family. Soldiers receive disquieting letters from their families.

The inner front of Germany has started to sway.

Collier's for September 18, 1943

THE END



(Image added: "We Guide to Strike" by Gil Cohen)

OldMagazineArticles.com