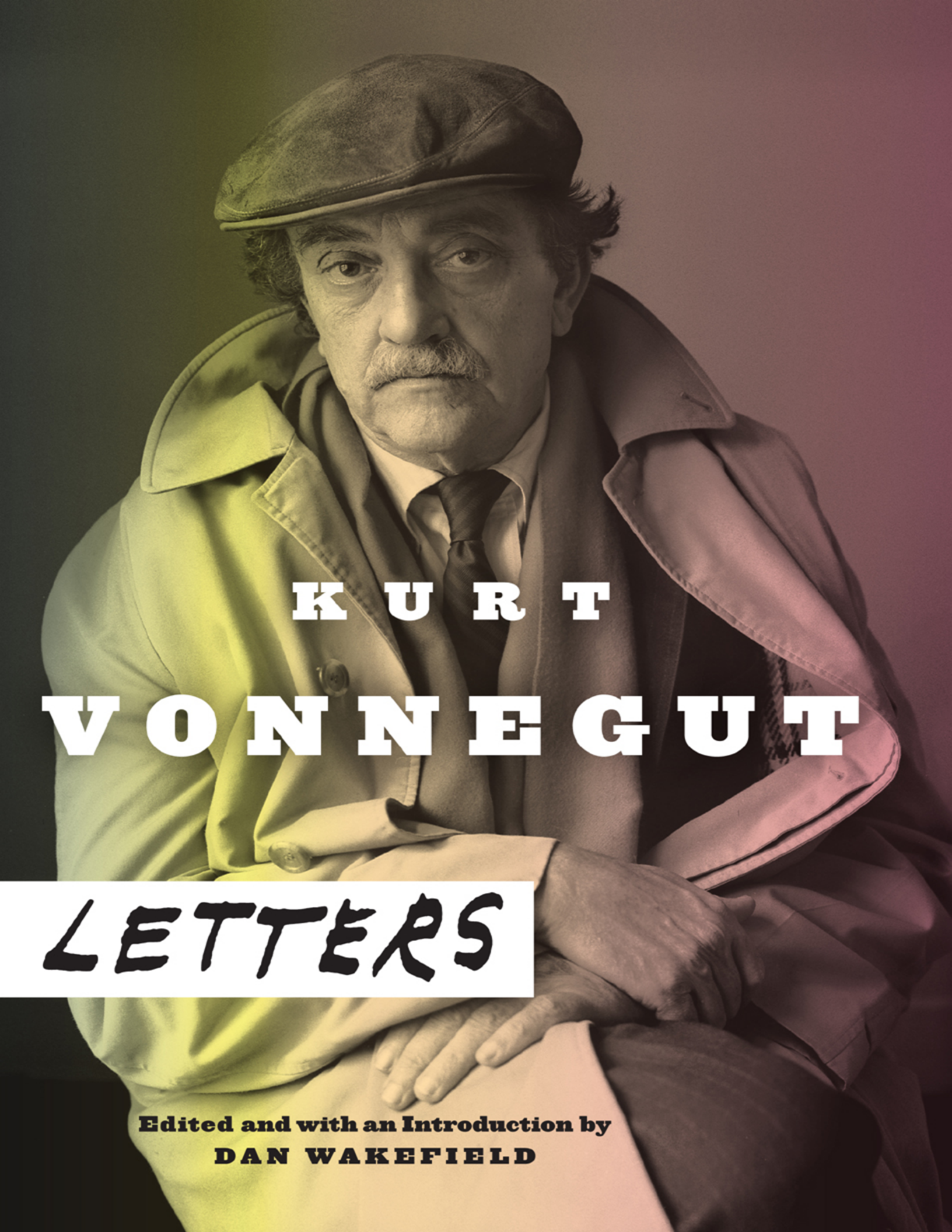

KURT VONNEGUT

LETTERS

Edited and with an Introduction by
DAN WAKEFIELD

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About the Book

These letters are the autobiography that Kurt Vonnegut never wrote.

This collection includes the letter the twenty-two-year old Vonnegut wrote home immediately upon being freed from the German POW camp; wry dispatches from Vonnegut's years as a struggling writer; a letter to the CEO of Eagle Shirtmakers with a crackpot scheme to manufacture "atomic" bow ties; angry letters of protest to local school boards that tried to ban his work; letters to his children including advice like 'Don't let anybody tell you that smoking and boozing are bad for you. Here I am fifty-five years old, and I never felt better in my life'; fantastically wise letters to writers such as Norman Mailer, Gunter Grass, and Bernard Malamud; and his characteristically modest response to being called a 'great literary figure': 'I am an American fad—of a slightly higher order than the hula hoop.'

Like Vonnegut's books, his letters make you think, they make you outraged and they make you laugh. Written over a sixty-year period, and never published before, these letters are alive with the unique point of view that made Vonnegut one of the most original writers in American fiction.

About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922 and studied biochemistry at Cornell University. During World War II he served in Europe and, as a Prisoner of War in Germany, witnessed the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombers, an experience which inspired his classic novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He is the author of thirteen other novels, three collections of stories and five non-fiction books. Kurt Vonnegut died in 2007.

Dan Wakefield first befriended Kurt Vonnegut in 1963. Like Vonnegut, he was born and raised in Indianapolis. He is a novelist and screenwriter whose books include the bestselling *Going All the Way* and the memoir *New York in the Fifties*.

Also by Kurt Vonnegut

A Man Without a Country
Armageddon in Retrospect
Bagombo Snuff Box
Between Time and Timbuktu
Bluebeard
Breakfast of Champions
Canary in a Cat House
Cat's Cradle
Deadeye Dick
Fates Worse Than Death
Galápagos
God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian
God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater
Happy Birthday, Wanda June
Hocus Pocus
Jailbird
Like Shaking Hands with God (with Lee Stringer)
Look at the Birdie
Mother Night
Palm Sunday
Player Piano
The Sirens of Titan
Slapstick
Slaughterhouse-Five
Timequake
Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons
Welcome to the Monkey House
While Mortals Sleep

KURT VONNEGUT

Letters

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Dan Wakefield

INTRODUCTION

The letters by Kurt Vonnegut collected in this book tell the story of a writer's life—a writer whose influence is still widely felt throughout the world and, by every indication, will continue to be felt for a long time to come. They are as personal, as witty, as entertaining, and as disarmingly profound as the work he published in novels, stories, articles, and essays. No outside interpreter will ever be able to express this life as truly and as deeply as these letters he wrote to his children, his friends, his publishers, his academic advocates, his critics, and those who sought to ban his work.

Reading these letters has allowed me to know my friend Kurt Vonnegut better and to appreciate him even more. Nothing came easy for him. Nothing deterred him—not the many editors and publishers who rejected his books and stories; not the anthropology department of the University of Chicago, which rejected not one but two of the theses he wrote for his M.A. degree (awarding it to him only after he was famous); not the Guggenheim Foundation, which rejected his first application for a fellowship; not the doubting relatives and friends from home like his uncle Alex, who said he couldn't read *The Sirens of Titan*, after Kurt had dedicated the book to him, or his aunt Ella Stewart, who would not stock his books in the bookstore she owned in Louisville, Kentucky, because she found them degenerate; not his Cape Cod neighbors who didn't read

his books and expressed no interest in what he did for a living; not the school boards that banned his books (and in one case burned them in a furnace) without ever reading them; not the academic critics who spurned and dismissed him; not the backbiting reviewers who tried to drag him down after he became famous; not the bureaucrats he battled for the rights of writers throughout the world; not the right-wing Christian religious groups that condemned this man who described Jesus Christ as “the greatest and most humane of human beings.” Anyone who imagines a writer’s life has ever been easy—even one who eventually achieves fame and fortune—will be disabused of that fantasy after reading these letters. And they will be inspired.

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I first heard the name Kurt Vonnegut in the spring of 1950, my senior year at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, when I admitted to a teacher that I wanted to be a writer. His brows furrowed in concern, he rubbed his chin for a moment, nodded, and said, “Well, there’s one boy did that—boy named Vonnegut.” I learned that “the Vonnegut boy,” who got his start writing for the *Shortridge Daily Echo*, had published his first short story in *Collier’s* magazine earlier that year. To me, that meant he had reached Mount Olympus.

Neither that high school teacher nor anyone else in the world—with the exception of his childhood sweetheart and high school classmate, Jane Marie Cox, who became his first wife and the mother of his first three children—believed that Vonnegut would become a world-famous writer whose work would be translated into all the major languages of the world. His oldest son, Mark, wrote in his memoir, *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*, that during the years of Kurt’s struggles, “My

mother … knew my father was going to be famous and it was all going to be worth it. She believed more than he did that he would someday be a famous writer.… ”

Growing up in Indianapolis in the 1930s and ’40s, my friends and I and our families all knew the name Vonnegut—the Vonnegut Hardware Company had its headquarters downtown, and there were branches throughout the city. In summers during high school, Kurt worked at the main store for his great-uncle Franklin Vonnegut, making up packages in the shipping room and for a while running a freight elevator. He later wrote to a fan in Indianapolis who had also worked in that store: “My idea of hell was shaped by that experience. Hell is running an elevator throughout eternity in a building with only six floors.” But he respected the company begun by his ancestors, commenting in *Palm Sunday:* “I liked what we sold. It was honest and practical.”

I knew as a kid what the Vonneguts had contributed to the city in terms of business, but I was ignorant until much later of the family’s immense cultural contributions. Kurt’s great-grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, emigrated from Germany in 1848 and settled in Indianapolis in 1850 and not only established the Vonnegut Hardware Company but also became a major influence in the city’s cultural affairs. He founded the Freethinker’s Society of Indianapolis and the Indianapolis *Turngemeinde*, the center for German culture and gymnastics in Indianapolis. It later became known as the Athenaeum Turners, serving the whole community and offering theater, lectures, and music as well as gymnastics. The building that houses it today is called the Athenaeum.

Clemens served on the school board of the city and became its chairman; he was a strong advocate of public education, seeing to it that classics, history, and social sciences were part of the curriculum. A believer in physical fitness, he exercised daily in all weathers, carrying large rocks in each hand, dropping them to chin himself on low-

hanging tree limbs. Little wonder that Kurt found Clemens, a skeptic who wrote his own funeral oration, “the ancestor who most beguiles me.” Noting that Clemens was described as “a cultivated eccentric,” Kurt wrote in *Palm Sunday:* “That’s what I aspire to be.” Both Kurt’s grandfather Bernard (“who didn’t like the trade in nails”) and his own father, Kurt, Sr., aspired to do something in the arts and became prominent architects in Indianapolis. Bernard Vonnegut, the first licensed architect in Indiana, and his partner, Arthur Bohn, designed some of the most important buildings in the city, including the John Herron Art Museum, Shortridge High School, and the Athenaeum. The year Bernard died, his son, Kurt, Sr., graduated from M.I.T. and returned home to become an architect and join his late father’s partner in the business.

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In a speech at the Athenaeum in 1996, Kurt told his audience: “I bring you a piece of Indianapolis history that may astonish you. This landmark building, designed by my grandfather Bernard Vonnegut, who I never knew, wasn’t always called the Athenaeum. Some people, I’ve heard, splashed yellow paint on its façade when it was called something else.”

It was originally called *Das Deutsche Haus*, but in the anti-German sentiment that swept the country during World War I, its named was changed. (Today the popular restaurant in the building, the Rathskeller, boasts a “Vonnegut Room,” with a bust of the author.) Anything German was viewed with suspicion or hostility throughout the country during the war; in Indianapolis, which owed much of its cultural heritage to its German families, the city orchestra was disbanded because the soprano soloist was German, the restaurants serving German food renamed

their *kartoffel* salad “liberty cabbage,” and the board of education stopped the teaching of German in the schools.

“At about the same time as the yellow-paint monkey business,” Vonnegut continued, “my father, Kurt, who had been Bernard Vonnegut’s partner in architecture, received an anonymous note telling him, ‘Stop teaching your kids Dutch.’ And he did.… ”

So Kurt’s older brother and sister, Bernard and Alice, stopped hearing German at home, and by the time Kurt was born on November 11, 1922, no German was spoken there. His parents raised him “without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the oral family histories which my ancestors had loved,” he wrote in *Palm Sunday*. “They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism.”

In his Athenaeum speech, Kurt said, “During the Second World War, there was a saying in my family and others that the only thing wrong with Germans was that they were in Germany. I say now that everything there is to admire in German culture, the poetry, the music, the architecture, the etchings, the beers, the wines, the sentimentality about Christmas, the work ethic, came from several Germanies. Everything I loathe about it came from one.” He meant, of course, Nazi Germany, which he told the American Psychiatric Association in 1988, “gave us a nightmare from which, in my opinion, there can never be an awakening.”

The family fortune made from the hardware business, as well as his grandfather and father’s successful architecture company, enabled Kurt’s parents to enjoy a lavish lifestyle and send their children to the socially elite private schools of the city, the Orchard School for boys and Tudor Hall for girls. But when the Great Depression hit, almost all building stopped, and Kurt, Sr., was forced to close his office. Kurt was taken out of private school and sent to Public School No. 43, which his mother, Edith, who was from one of the grand and wealthy German families of the

city (the Leibers), regarded as a tragedy. She assured him that when the Depression ended he would resume his proper place in society, playing tennis and golf at the Woodstock Country Club and enjoying the privileges of the elite. Young Kurt saw it another way, as he explained in *Palm Sunday:*

"We were at least as well off as most of the people I went to public school with, and I would have lost all my friends if we had started having servants again, and worn expensive clothes again, and ridden on ocean liners and visited German relatives in a real castle, and on and on.... [Mother] could not understand that to give up my friends at Public School No. 43 would be for me to give up everything."

Kurt always said he was lucky to have been born in Indianapolis. "That city gave me a free primary and secondary education richer and more humane than anything I would get from any of the five universities I attended [Cornell, Butler, Carnegie Tech, Tennessee, and Chicago]."

I felt the same way, which was one of many bonds I was fortunate to share with Kurt Vonnegut. Another bond—the one that originally launched our lifelong friendship—was our mutual ineptitude at sports. I had read all four novels he'd published when we met for the first time in 1963 at a friend's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Vonnegut was living on Cape Cod. There were eight people at the dinner, so I was only able to exchange a few jokey comments about high school with Kurt, but I liked him at once. He was a tall, thin, tousle-haired man with a shaggy mustache and a kindly Midwestern demeanor. His offbeat sense of humor and his openness, his friendliness to everyone there, made me feel I knew and could trust him and gave me the courage to send him a book I wrote the next year, called *Between the Lines*, which combined journalistic articles with personal commentary. In the book

I confessed that my dreams of athletic glory in high school were shattered by my inability to break the seven-minute mile—a time I imagined a well-conditioned grandmother might have equaled. Kurt wrote me back a warm, funny letter, confessing that he, too, had been unable to break the seven-minute mile in high school and that we had so many of the same teachers and experiences, “I almost feel that there shouldn’t be two of us.”

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I didn’t realize till years later how deeply Kurt’s “nonathletic” experience in high school had affected him. When he’d finally gained fame and fortune after years of struggle and moved to New York, he was sitting up late one night by himself, drinking bourbon, and called Indianapolis information, asking if they had a listing for the man who’d been the football coach at Shortridge High when he was there. Kurt said that in his era there had been a tradition of faculty members giving “joke presents” to well-known seniors at a gathering of the class. He told me he had been “a tall, skinny, gangly kind of kid” in high school, and the coach had “awarded” him a subscription to the “Charles Atlas Bodybuilding Course.” The course was famous for its ads showing how a ninety-pound “weakling” could become a muscular hero. It had hurt and embarrassed him, and it still rankled, even after all his success. He told me that when he got the coach on the phone all those years later, he said, “My name is Kurt Vonnegut—you probably don’t remember me, but I wanted to tell you my body turned out just fine.”

I thought no more about it until I read, in his introduction to a collection of his stories called *Bagombo Snuff Box*, a reminiscence of coming home from high school one afternoon and sitting down to read a short story in *The Saturday Evening Post*. He began: “It is raining outside,

and I am unpopular." I knew from reading his high school yearbook that Kurt had been president of the Social Committee, which sponsored dances and parties, co-chairman with his best friend, Ben Hitz, of a "hilarious comedy act" in the prestigious Junior Vaudeville, a member of the Student Council, an editor of the *Daily Echo*, and, most impressively to anyone who went to Shortridge, he was one of the ten senior boys nominated for "Uglyman"—which did not mean the ugliest but the most-popular boys. Along with the ten most-popular girls, nominated for "Bluebelle," these twenty were voted on by the entire student body as the pinnacle of high school popularity.

Kurt's friend from high school Victor Jose, a fellow member of the Owls Club (one of the many social clubs that were not sponsored by the faculty but flourished at Shortridge in my time and theirs), also worked with him on the *Daily Echo*, and after their service in World War II, they worked together in the Chicago News Bureau in 1947, remaining friends and corresponding off and on throughout their lives. When I asked Vic Jose how Kurt could have felt himself "unpopular" after all his high school kudos and accomplishments, he said he felt it must have related to "Kurt's adversarial relationship with the so-called sports heroes of our time…. "

Kurt poked fun at the sports gods, "probably in his writing, probably in the *Echo*," Jose recalled. "Anyway, there was bad blood there, and, in retaliation, some of the jocks caught Kurt in some unobserved location, picked him up, and stuffed him in a trash can somewhere in the [school] building. I know all this only secondhand, Kurt never told me, but it was common knowledge. It was no lighthearted joke but seemed to fester with time, because it surfaced at our fiftieth reunion." Two of the "jocks" of the class opposed having Vonnegut give the main speech at one of the fiftieth-reunion events—but the rest of the organizing committee insisted on having him as the headliner. The

point became moot when Kurt called two days before the event to report that he'd contracted Lyme disease and wasn't able to come. At the sixtieth reunion, Jose said, the same former "jocks" were disgruntled that the class was presenting a bronze bust of Kurt at a Saturday-night dinner at the Athenaeum and left the dinner before the presentation was made to their most famous classmate.

Kurt wrote in an introduction to *Our Time Is Now: Notes from the High School Underground* (1970) that "High school is closer to the core of the American experience than anything else I can think of." I believe from my own experience that those adolescent years shape much of our attitudes and perception of the world throughout our life and that Kurt's lifelong love of the underdog began with his antipathy to the "sports gods" of his time—and his humiliation by them in the trash-can incident. Seeing his father lose his fortune and having to close down his architecture office during the Depression, then losing what little business was left when building stopped during World War II, was surely also a significant factor in Kurt's becoming a champion of the underdog throughout his writing.

Writing about the Republican Convention for *Harper's* magazine in 1972, Kurt concluded that "The two real political parties in America are the Winners and the Losers. The people do not acknowledge this. They claim membership in two imaginary parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, instead. Both imaginary parties are bossed by Winners. When Republicans battle Democrats, this much is certain: Winners will win."

There are two sources that are quoted throughout Vonnegut's writing, or are referenced in it, that seem essential to his outlook. One is the Sermon on the Mount. Invited to preach on Palm Sunday at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in New York in 1980, he said, "I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it

seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another good idea by and by—and then we will have two good ideas." The other is a quote from Eugene V. Debs, his fellow Hoosier, from Terre Haute, Indiana:

"While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free."

He called that quote of Debs's "a moving echo of the Sermon on the Mount" in *Timequake* and used it as the epigraph to his novel *Hocus Pocus*, whose protagonist is "Eugene Debs Hartke." Hartke was named "in honor of Eugene Debs … a Socialist and a Pacifist and a Labor Organizer who ran several times for the Presidency of the United States of America, and got more votes than has any other candidate nominated by a third party in the history of this country."

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In Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*, about a proudly false prophet named Bokonon, he introduces his concept of a "*karass*."

"Humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a *karass* by Bokonon … 'If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reasons,' writes Bokonon, 'that person may be a member of your *karass*.'"

It was one of the great good fortunes of my life to find myself in Vonnegut's *karass*, and lucky for both of us to be in the same *karass* with the publisher Seymour "Sam" Lawrence, who Kurt said years later in *Timequake* had "rescued me from certain oblivion, from *smithereens*, by publishing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and then bringing all my previous books back into print under his umbrella."

Sam had published *Slaughterhouse* in 1969. A year later, when my agent sent my long-awaited (by only *me*) first novel to ten publishers, three made offers, but Sam was the only one who loved it. He asked if I minded him sending a copy to Vonnegut, since my novel was set in his own hometown of Indianapolis, and his endorsement would help Sam get the okay from his co-publisher and financial backer, Delacorte Press. I said it was all right with me, but at that point I had met Vonnegut only once in my life and I had no idea what he'd think of the novel. The book I had sent him in 1965 was nonfiction, and my novel was nothing at all like Kurt's novels in style or story. The next thing I heard was that Kurt had sent a telegram to Sam Lawrence, telling him he must publish my novel and "get that boy in our stable."

Kurt was like the godfather of that novel, *Going All the Way* (though his own suggested title was *Getting Laid in Indianapolis*). Sam even commissioned him to be my editor, and Kurt sent me a letter with ten suggestions to improve the book, stressing I should do only the things that "rang a bell" with me and not do anything just because he suggested it. I did seven. (Vonnegut requested and received from Sam an Eames chair as payment for his editorial work.) Kurt came up from Cape Cod to Boston, where I was living, and took me to lunch at his favorite restaurant, Jacob Wirth's, an old German alehouse with sawdust on the floor. He later came up with his wife, Jane, to celebrate the publication. As if that weren't enough, he reviewed the novel for *Life* magazine, breaking all the rules of book reviewing by confessing he was a friend of mine and he would praise the novel even if it was "putrid," but he would not give his "word of honor" it was good and proceeded to endorse it with his word of honor.

As far as I know, it was the only time a writer gave his "word of honor" in a book review or used the word "putrid." He was always coming out with words that

surprised you, words like “putrid,” which you hadn’t heard for a long time—maybe since childhood—but seemed to perfectly suit the situation.

During the hippie days, Kurt and I were once invited to visit a Vermont commune (made famous in the era by its founder, Ray Mungo, in his book *Total Loss Farm*). Ray told us that he and his friends wanted to learn how to survive in primitive conditions because “We would like to be the last people on earth.” Kurt said, “Isn’t that kind of a stuck-up thing to want to be?” I hadn’t heard anyone bold and honest enough to use the term “stuck-up” since high school, but it fit the occasion perfectly.

In his conversation as well as his books and stories, Kurt was always speaking the unspeakable—articulating what other people thought but were too politically or socially correct to say. It was in his DNA to point out that the emperor had no clothes, that there was an elephant in the room that everyone else was pretending not to notice. “You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff,” Kurt observed in *A Man Without a Country*. “You’re not expecting it.”

Vonnegut spoke at a memorial service for his old friend Richard Yates; he not only championed Yates’s work, he also loaned money without question to this masterful but often struggling writer, who was never fully appreciated until after his death. In a spontaneous remark at the memorial service, Kurt said Yates was just as good a writer as another friend, Nelson Algren, but had never received the same literary acclaim. As if thinking aloud, Kurt noted that Yates, unlike Algren, had never had an affair with Simone de Beauvoir; then he paused for a moment, and added, “These things count.” There was spontaneous laughter, the kind that comes when someone says something others recognize as true but none have the wit or courage to say.

Vonnegut wrote in that same spirit of naked honesty, which explains why many people (including some of those

Indiana relatives) were offended by his books. He wrote the way people spoke and used the words that are used in everyday speech, which often led to his work being banned by public-school boards and attempts being made to remove them from public libraries across the country. Vonnegut's worldwide bestseller, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, was actually burned in a furnace in Drake, North Dakota, on orders from the local school committee. His searing letter to the chairman of the Drake school board, like a number of his letters protesting such attempts, supporting teachers and librarians, and defending the First Amendment, will be found in this book.

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Vonnegut's writing, like his conversation, is often surprising, because it makes you laugh and makes you think by saying what was on your mind—or *in* your mind—that you hadn't dared say or think. It is disarming because it is done with such seemingly simple language and style that it sometimes seems shocking, and it is the shock of self-recognition. Robert Scholes, the first academic critic to recognize Vonnegut's work (and one of the most perceptive), explained in his book *The Fabulators* in 1967 that Vonnegut "… uses the rhetorical potential of the short sentence and the short paragraph better than anyone now writing, often getting a rich comic or dramatic effect by isolating a single sentence in a separate paragraph or excerpting a phrase from context for a bizarre chapter-heading. The apparent simplicity and ordinariness of his writing masks its efficient power …"

This very "simplicity and ordinariness" made things difficult for most reviewers and critics, who resorted to pigeonholing him in ways that misconstrued and maligned his work. When Vonnegut worked in public relations for General Electric, he was "completely surrounded by

machines and ideas for machines, so I wrote a novel [*Player Piano*] about people and machines … And I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer. I didn't know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life," he explained in the essay "Science Fiction" in *The New York Times Book Review* (later collected in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*). "I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled 'science fiction' ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal."

The categorization did not prevent Vonnegut from using elements of classic science-fiction writing—imaginary planets and life-forms, space travel to other worlds—to illuminate human dilemmas as down-to-earth as love and hate, fear and folly, in places as "real" as Schenectady and Indianapolis, Dresden and Cape Cod, the Galápagos Islands and West Virginia. By 1967, even before the breakthrough bestseller *Slaughterhouse-Five* blew apart the conventional lines between science fiction and literature (with its hero, Billy Pilgrim, coming "unstuck in time" and moving between decades and places as distant as Toledo, Ohio, and the planet Tralfamadore), Robert Scholes could see that "Just as pure romance provides us with necessary psychic exercise, intellectual comedy like Vonnegut's offers us moral stimulation—not fixed ethical positions which we can complacently assume, but such thoughts as exercise our consciences and help us keep our humanity in shape, ready to respond to the humanity of others."

Young university teachers and critics like Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer began to teach Vonnegut's work and write about it, first in a collection of essays called *The Vonnegut Statement*, in 1973. They dug out of libraries and old magazines previously uncollected articles and essays and convinced him to publish them in book form, as *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, in 1974. They were joined by other young academics like Peter Reed, Marc

Leeds, and Asa Pieratt, who appreciated, taught, compiled, and interpreted his work to new generations.

None of this attention, or the success that followed *Slaughterhouse-Five*, made Vonnegut immune to the outburst of rancor that came in the negative response to his 1976 novel *Slapstick*.

"What was unusual about the reviews was that they wanted people to admit now that I had never been any good," Vonnegut told his interviewers from *The Paris Review*. "The reviewer for the Sunday *Times* actually asked critics who had praised me in the past to now admit in public how wrong they had been.... The hidden complaint was that I was barbarous, that I wrote without having made a ... study of great literature, that I was no gentleman, that I had done hack writing so cheerfully for vulgar magazines —that I had not paid my academic dues."

The interviewer asked if after the barrage of bad reviews he "needed comforting."

"I never felt worse in my life," Kurt answered. "All of a sudden critics wanted me squashed like a bug."

Maybe it felt like being stuffed in a trash can by the high school jocks.

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Vonnegut has often—and aptly—been compared to Mark Twain, as a public speaker as well as a writer. When the critic Granville Hicks reviewed *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he wrote that he had heard Vonnegut give a speech once and that he had "a vernacular appeal" like Twain's and a "personal presence" that was captured in his novel. Kurt told Jerome Klinkowitz, "People do seem to like my work best when they've heard me speak first."

The first time I heard Kurt give a speech was at a Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Rochester, New York, in the eighties. The Unitarians are the only religious

denomination that Vonnegut could comfortably identify with, since they have no creed or dogma and “welcome people of different beliefs” including “Atheism and Agnosticism, Buddhism, Humanism, Paganism, and other religious or philosophical traditions,” according to the “Beliefs and Principles” explained on their website. They even include Christians, and I was there as a member of King’s Chapel in Boston, one of the few Christian churches in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Most Unitarian churches are Humanist, and though Kurt was not a member of a church, he was honorary president of the American Humanist Society, which made him a highly appropriate speaker for this assembly. He described himself as a “Christ-loving atheist” and has said, “In order not to seem a spiritual quadriplegic, to strangers trying to get a fix on me, I sometimes say I’m a Unitarian Universalist.”

Kurt started his talk with a surefire crowd-pleaser for the occasion. He was wearing a round pin on his lapel, like a political campaign button, and he said it explained his admiration for the Unitarians. “It has a picture of a frankfurter and a big ‘X’ through it,” he said. “It means, ‘No Baloney.’” That brought cheers as well as laughs. He was off and running, and, as usual, he won over his audience, which he was able to do regardless of the occasion. I heard him speak in different places for different purposes after that, and whether speaking with anger and passion against the first invasion of Iraq at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York or with humor and nostalgia on “Spirit and Place” at Butler University in Indianapolis, he was always able to do as a speaker what he did as a writer, which was follow E. M. Forster’s rule: “Only connect!”

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Kurt connected with friends as well as with audiences. One of the elements that run throughout these letters I chose out of more than a thousand is the sustaining friendships that ran throughout his life, from kindergarten to high school and Cornell and the Army, with relatives from home (even those who dismissed his books), his children, his students, teaching colleagues, fellow writers, scholars and critics who wrote about his work. His letters are like his books, stories, articles, and essays—they make you think, raise your spirits, evoke your anger at injustice, make you see things in new ways, question society's "accepted wisdom," and, always, entertain.

Vonnegut's heroes included the comedians Laurel and Hardy and the radio satirists Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding, whose *Bob & Ray Show* made his generation laugh. Kurt liked to laugh and make other people laugh, sometimes with silly jokes that came out of the blue. As I walked down the street with him in New York after lunch one day, he suddenly turned to me and said, "What's the opposite of an upholsterer?" After a minute or so I said, "I give up," and Kurt said, "A down-polsterer," and rasped out his coughing laugh.

He also laughed about himself and the unintentional slips he made from his Humanist views. "Humanists," he explained in *Timequake*, "try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife." Kurt told me after one of our New York lunches that he really messed up while giving a eulogy for his friend Isaac Asimov, the noted science-fiction writer, who'd preceded him as honorary president of the Humanist Society.

"I said I was sure that Isaac must be in heaven now," he said with a smoky cough and a laugh. "I forgot."

If it turned out there *was* an afterlife, Kurt reserved places in it for people he loved. In his last novel, *Timequake*, he said he was sure his first wife, Jane, was in

heaven, and so was Sam Lawrence, the publisher who saved him from “smithereens.”

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Kurt never failed to show support for his writer friends. The year before he died, he came to a talk I gave at St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in New York about a book I had recently published, and afterward he took me to dinner. While he had a Manhattan, his customary predinner drink, and I had a glass of wine, two young men kept staring our way from another table. Finally one of them got up and came over to ask, “Are you the real Kurt Vonnegut?” Kurt said he was and immediately introduced me and told the stranger about my new book, urging him to read it, which the poor guy had no interest in at all. After Kurt politely answered some questions about himself and his work, he gave a smart hand salute of dismissal and the man thanked him, backed away, and returned to his table. It was typical Kurt, diverting attention from himself to try to promote the unknown book of a friend, responding to a stranger’s well-meaning intrusion with grace, and taking leave of him with dignity, leaving both friend and fan well treated, living the commandment that he made his habit, to “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

He wrote in *Timequake:* “When I myself am dead, God forbid, I hope some wag will say about me, ‘He’s up in heaven now.’”

For the record, let me say of Kurt Vonnegut: “He’s up in heaven now.”

THE FORTIES

VONNEGUT GRADUATED FROM Shortridge High School in 1940 and enrolled in Cornell University. Due to his family's financial troubles brought on by the Depression, he was told by his father and older brother not to waste time on "frivolous courses" but to study practical subjects, such as physics, chemistry, and math. He continued the social and writing activities he had engaged in at Shortridge, joining the Delta Upsilon fraternity and writing for *The Cornell Daily Sun*, becoming a columnist and managing editor.

He was failing his courses (after a bout with pneumonia) when he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943 and was assigned to the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program), which sent him to Carnegie Tech and the University of Tennessee for training in mechanical engineering, then assigned him to the 106th Infantry Division. While he was home on leave from Camp Atterbury, outside Indianapolis, before being sent overseas, his mother, Edith Leiber Vonnegut, committed suicide from an overdose of sleeping pills on May 14, the day after Mother's Day. "It is not known why my mother killed herself," Kurt wrote in a letter of "biographical stuff" he sent to Professor Klinkowitz on December 11, 1976. "She never said anything about the awfulness of fighting against the homeland or anything like that. In fact, I don't recall my parents' ever having spoken of Germany as the homeland.... It was war itself that wrecked my mother, and not war against Germany. Also,

she was taking an awful lot of barbiturates at a time when the side-effects were thought to be negligible."

There were other factors, as recounted by Kurt's "Uncle John" Rauch in "An Account of the Ancestry of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., by an Ancient Friend of his Family" (quoted by Kurt in *Palm Sunday*). Rauch, a Harvard graduate and Indianapolis lawyer (and not really Kurt's uncle but the husband of a first cousin), wrote that "With her other financial problems the prospect of losing her son in the impending holocaust made her cup of troubles overflow. She became despondent and morose. Wanting money desperately, she attempted to write short stories which she could sell, but it was a futile, hopeless venture; a tragic disillusion. She simply could not see daylight."

As an advance intelligence and reconnaissance scout with the 106th Infantry during the Battle of the Bulge, Vonnegut was taken prisoner by the German Army and sent to Dresden, where he survived the firebombing of the city in an underground meat locker with other prisoners. He wrote in his "biographical" letter to Klinkowitz that "practically all my fellow prisoners were stockpiled in ASTP. Our own suspicion afterwards, since we had so little ammunition and were still awaiting winter equipment, and never saw an American plane or tank, and were not warned that the Germans were massing large numbers of tanks for one last major attack, is that the 106th was bait in a trap. In chess this is called a gambit. Take the exposed pawn and you've lost the game."

Kurt's lifelong friend Victor Jose, who went to Swarthmore with Jane Cox, believes that when Kurt was home on leave in 1944 he went to see Jane, whom he had met in kindergarten and dated when they went to Shortridge High School together. Victor remembers that Kurt "appeared on the scene just in time" to persuade her to break off her relationship with a college boyfriend and wait for him till he came home from the war. Kurt later

wrote a fictionalized version of such an encounter in his short story “Long Walk to Forever” (collected in *Welcome to the Monkey House*).

After being honorably discharged from the Army in July of 1945 and awarded the Purple Heart, Kurt married Jane that September in a Quaker ceremony (Jane and her family were Quakers). A voracious reader, Jane had graduated from Swarthmore College as a Phi Beta Kappa the year before and was awarded a prize for having the best personal library of any graduating student. Kurt later told a friend that the books Jane brought to their marriage were her “dowry.” Kurt wrote in *Fates Worse Than Death* that, during their honeymoon, “She had me read *The Brothers Karamazov.…* She considered it the greatest of all novels.”

Kurt and Jane were both accepted into graduate programs at the University of Chicago and moved to that city in December of 1945. (Jane dropped out of her classes in Slavic languages and literature when she became pregnant in 1946.) Like many returning veterans, Kurt used his G.I. Bill to supplement his education, studying for a master’s degree in anthropology, and also worked as a reporter at the Chicago News Bureau. When his thesis was rejected—a comparative study of the Ghost Dance Society of the Plains Indians and the Cubist painters—and his first son, Mark, was born in 1947, Kurt decided to drop out and apply for jobs to support his family. (Their daughter Edith was added two years later, and their third child and second daughter, Nanette, was born in 1954.) Kurt turned down an offer from Bobbs-Merrill publishers in Indianapolis to accept a position in public relations for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, where his older brother, Bernard, worked as an atmospheric physicist. The pay was better, and both Kurt and Jane wanted a change of scene. Kurt’s classmate Victor Jose told me that “If they stayed in Indianapolis, they feared that Jane would be expected by her family to join the Junior League, and she and Kurt

didn’t like that ‘socialite’ kind of life. They both were rebels even then.”

Working in public relations by day, Kurt wrote short stories at night and on weekends and sent them out to the leading popular and well-paying magazines of the era. This was “the golden age of magazines,” when William Faulkner published stories in *Collier’s*, F. Scott Fitzgerald appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, John Steinbeck in the *Woman’s Home Companion*, and Ernest Hemingway in *Esquire*. Four weeklies and six monthlies published three or four stories in every issue, and “the Vonnegut boy” was able to make a (precarious) living, support his family, and begin his career as a writer, selling short stories to those magazines.

Unlike his mother’s failed efforts in the same enterprise, Vonnegut succeeded. The break came when Knox Burger, a Cornell graduate who’d gone on to become fiction editor at *Collier’s* magazine, recognized Kurt’s name on a story submission. He asked in a scrawled note at the bottom of a rejection slip if he was the Kurt Vonnegut who’d gone to Cornell and written for *The Cornell Sun*. It turned out to be the start of a relationship that led to acceptance of his first short story and launched his career as a writer.

May 29, 1945
[Le Havre]

FROM: PFC. K. VONNEGUT, JR., 12102964 U.S. ARMY
TO KURT VONNEGUT, SR., AND FAMILY

This was the first letter that PFC Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., wrote to his family after being released as a prisoner of war.

Victor Jose, Kurt’s friend from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis (and later the Chicago News Bureau), wrote in a note to me that “I believe this letter was first read

publicly in 1945 at a meeting of The Portfolio Club of artists and literary people [in Indianapolis], to which my parents belonged." Jose said his parents told him the letter was read to the group by Kurt's father, who was also a member of the club.

This letter recounts the experience—the firebombing of Dresden—that would shape the theme of Kurt's later work and come to its powerful fruition with his 1969 novel Slaughterhouse-Five, *which became an international bestseller and catapulted its author to worldwide fame. There is also a foreshadowing of his future style in the understated dark irony of the grim events he reports and his own survival. "But not me … but not me" seems later to echo in the phrase that would famously be repeated in much of his published work: "So it goes …"*

Dear people:

I'm told that you were probably never informed that I was anything other than "missing in action." Chances are that you also failed to receive any of the letters I wrote from Germany. That leaves me a lot of explaining to do—in precis:

I've been a prisoner of war since December 19th, 1944, when our division was cut to ribbons by Hitler's last desperate thrust through Luxemburg and Belgium. Seven Fanatical Panzer Divisions hit us and cut us off from the rest of Hodges' First Army. The other American Divisions on our flanks managed to pull out: We were obliged to stay and fight. Bayonets aren't much good against tanks: Our ammunition, food and medical supplies gave out and our casualties out-numbered those who could still fight—so we gave up. The 106th got a Presidential Citation and some British Decoration from Montgomery for it, I'm told, but I'll be damned if it was worth it. I was one of the few who weren't wounded. For that much thank God.

Well, the supermen marched us, without food, water or sleep to Limberg, a distance of about sixty miles, I think, where we were loaded and locked up, sixty men to each small, unventilated, unheated box car. There were no sanitary accommodations—the floors were covered with fresh cow dung. There wasn't room for all of us to lie down. Half slept while the other half stood. We spent several days, including Christmas, on that Limberg siding. On Christmas eve the Royal Air Force bombed and strafed our unmarked train. They killed about one-hundred-and-fifty of us. We got a little water Christmas Day and moved slowly across Germany to a large P.O.W. Camp in Muhlburg, South of Berlin. We were released from the box cars on New Year's Day. The Germans herded us through scalding delousing showers. Many men died from shock in the showers after ten days of starvation, thirst and exposure. But I didn't.

Under the Geneva Convention, Officers and Noncommissioned Officers are not obliged to work when taken prisoner. I am, as you know, a Private. One-hundred-and-fifty such minor beings were shipped to a Dresden work camp on January 10th. I was their leader by virtue of the little German I spoke. It was our misfortune to have sadistic and fanatical guards. We were refused medical attention and clothing: We were given long hours at extremely hard labor. Our food ration was two-hundred-and-fifty grams of black bread and one pint of unseasoned potato soup each day. After desperately trying to improve our situation for two months and having been met with bland smiles I told the guards just what I was going to do to them when the Russians came. They beat me up a little. I was fired as group leader. Beatings were very small time:—one boy starved to death and the SS Troops shot two for stealing food.

On about February 14th the Americans came over, followed by the R.A.F. Their combined labors killed 250,000