

Walter F. Knips, 1911-1994

When my father was 75, I began to pester him to write about his experience of living in a British internment camp in India during World War II. After some hesitation he obliged my request, recording his memories during a leisurely journey by freighter from Montreal to South America. A recent reading of these personal anecdotes, hand written in German, inspired me to translate them into English. I felt an urgency that this story not be lost and that it become accessible to my English speaking sons, Andrew and George. The discovery of Christoph Gaebler's website and its "India Forum" was an unexpected reward in my research for the background information I needed to complete the story. It is my pleasure to share translated excerpts from my father's notes, as well as a brief account of the first few years after his release in 1947.

Walter Friedrich Knips, was born in Berlin on March 5, 1911. His father, Christoph, was an engineer employed by Siemens and his mother, Christine, busied herself with raising her family and being an active parishioner in the Catholic church. Walter grew up in Berlin and attended the Arndt Gymnasium in Berlin-Dahlem. Although he described himself as an academic "*Taugenichts*" or "good-for-nothing" (he had failed two grades), he did eventually graduate in 1931. After graduation he was forced to adopt a more serious stance toward his future as employment proved hard to come by:

Choosing a career was not easy for me. The economic conditions in Germany, after its defeat in the First World War, continued to worsen. Unemployment and the need to do without, resulted in steadily increasing unrest in the population and civil upheaval. A university education appeared impossible. I was fortunate to obtain a 3 year Business/Electro-Technical apprenticeship with Siemens in 1931, after which I was taken on as an employee for two additional years. In 1936 I was offered a 5 year position with the British India offices of Siemens. This seemed an enticing offer and I gladly accepted. In the spring of 1936, against my mother's initial resistance, I set sail aboard an Italian passenger ship from Genoa to Bombay, and after a brief interlude, continued on by train straight across India to Calcutta. In 1938 I was transferred back to the Siemens offices in Bombay. There, with two fellow Germans employed by Krupp, I shared a seaside bungalow.

Like all foreign nationals, aligned with the Axis Nations and living in India, he was immediately arrested upon Britain's declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939:

On the eve of the declaration of war, a British officer arrived on our bungalow's doorstep and announced, "Gentlemen, let us have a drink and dinner together, you should then pack a few essential things after which you will need to accompany me for registration as enemy aliens." We were never to see our home or worldly possessions again. And so began my internment in India at the age of 28. No one could have predicted that the British would detain us as prisoners of war for 7 long years in three different camps.

Walter's internment as a civilian POW began at Ahmednagar (1939 -1941), continued briefly at Deolali (1941-1942), and finally ended at Dehra Dun (1942-1947). Dehra Dun camp inmates were assigned identification numbers and Walter's was 2047:

Ahmednagar was the first camp. It consisted of barracks that had been built for English "Tommys." The barracks had been unused for some time, allowing bed bugs to feel quite at home. My time here began with a bout of jaundice and a 3 week stay in the camp hospital. Among the German internees was a dentist, Dr. Schreinert. Willi Zolle, a fellow internee, and I soon applied as volunteer assistants. This was the beginning of a "professional" and personal camaraderie with Willi that would last until the end of internment and continue for years after war's end. I learned a lot from Willi's talented craftsmanship. A part of one of the barracks was sectioned off for the dentist and Willi and I proceeded to remodel it into a makeshift dental clinic. In order to avoid having to sleep with the 50 other men in the barrack, we converted the front area of the clinic into as comfortable a sleeping area as possible. There we alternated our shifts as assistants and so were able to enjoy a satisfying occupation for 2 years.

Since an end to the war was not foreseeable and military bases were needed more and more by English troops engaged in war with Japan and Burma, we were soon relocated to a second temporary camp (Deolali), located in central India. These accommodations were miserable. A desert like environment of high temperatures and sandstorms, along with insufficient provisions, soon led to protests against the English camp management and ultimately to a hunger strike. After 7 days this resulted in the arrival of a telegram from the military authorities in Delhi, entreating us to abandon our strike. It had been decided that a new camp, capable of housing 4000 prisoners from Germany, Persia, Burma, Dutch India, as well as captives from those countries aligned with Hitler, such as Italy, Hungary and the Balkan states, would be built in the north west of India, close to the foothills of the Himalayas, outside the city of Dehra Dun. After several more months in Deolali, we finally moved into the new facility in 1942. We christened this camp "Friesisches Dorf" (Friesen Village), because of the low-slung, straw covered roofs of the barracks that reminded us of houses in Friesland.

Here, we endured another 5 years until our final release two years after the end of war and from where we were transported back to a completely destroyed Germany. Travel by boat in the North Atlantic and North Sea had been impossible any earlier due to the presence of thousands of unexploded mines. These 5 years could easily lend themselves to an entirely separate book, which would describe the privation, hopelessness, and challenges of living in a community of men deprived of freedom, women and children, but also mention the positive experiences. I am convinced that the majority of my peers made the best of it. The confines of camp kept us far from the war in Europe and, by comparison, safe from physical and psychological harm.

As a young teenager, I remember my father speaking warmly of the friendships he had forged during the camp years. In his journal he made special mention of a few of his friends:

***Ludwig Degen** from Cologne, another inmate with whom I spent many hours. He had trained as a watchmaker. He was able to set aside a small space in the camp as his watch repair studio. By working together with him, I was introduced to many different watch brands and the secrets of their construction and operation. I assisted with repairs and cleaning during the long evening hours.*

I also assisted at the camp hospital, initially as a nursing assistant and then primarily as an Operating

*Room assistant. The position had suddenly become available when the British assistant was called up for military duty. The four German physicians working at the camp agreed to offer the position to me, which I immediately accepted. I received my own room at the Hospital and was even paid for my work. Operations were performed 3 days a week, and on the days in between, I was responsible for sterilizing the OR, surgical instruments and towels. While the conditions were quite primitive, they proved sufficient enough even for complicated procedures. During this time, I learned quite a bit about medicine and the mental attitude required of a physician. My colleagues at the hospital were **Willi Zolle**, **Gert Winternitz**, **Lutz Chicken**, and **Mortimer von Belling**, who received the nickname "Herrn von Lassen" (Sir I'll-let-you-do-it) since he always preferred to have others do things for him.*

*After 3 years of internment at Dehra Dun, we were granted day excursions on parole. This meant we were granted excursions without supervision but with the promise that we would not flee into the sparsely populated wilderness surrounding the camp. **Gert Swatek** was frequently my companion. After one of these excursions, we returned with a female Tibetan dog that had been abandoned in the jungle. We were successful in bringing her unnoticed into the camp, however, it didn't take long for her to be discovered by the overseers. They seemed willing to overlook this unsanctioned acquisition. Unfortunately, she contracted rabies soon thereafter and I had no choice but to have her shot by one of the "Tommys". On the very same day, he presented me with a very young and not quite pure bred female Spaniel. I was very moved by this truly amazing English gesture towards an enemy German. She grew and prospered and was baptized "Friede" or "Peace". The inmates actually called her "**Tante Frieda**" and she stayed with me until my release. I left her in the hands of my dear friend Gert, since he had received permission to remain in India after the end of the war. Several years later, I met Tante Frieda once more, at Gert's home in Germany. She had grown old but was still frisky. She had been an unforgettable consolation and loyal companion during my internment.*

Our freedom had been stolen from us from September 1939 until November 1947. The mundane daily routine and the uncertainty of when the war would end, along with the barbed wire milieu, and living without women and children, contributed to several problems. Physically we were kept in good shape through a lot of sports and reasonable nutrition. Our consolation was that we were saved from war duty and that we stayed alive. Internment was a strong test of our patience. For me, jaundice, a concussion as a result of a boxing match, and a psychological crisis did not manage to destroy my health. The British guards were fair and friendly towards us, in spite of numerous escape attempts, and they were generally satisfied with our disciplined behavior. The "Tommys" played football with us and were grateful for our home brewed "Whiskey". We actually never heard much about "those bloody Germans". The commander, who finally released us 2 years after the end of the war, bid us farewell at the train station with both a laughing and a crying eye.

We had received numerous reports about the depressing conditions in Germany. In the end it was with mixed feelings that we looked forward to our return home. We traveled by train via Delhi to Bombay and then continued on a Dutch ship, via Mombasa, to Genoa. In addition to the 2000 Germans on board, there were Italian prisoners of war. After about 5 weeks at sea and all of us sleeping in hammocks, we arrived in

the North Sea. Many shipwrecks were visible and remaining unexploded mines continued to pose a significant danger. With a lot of luck we survived these obstacles and so shortly before an extremely cold Christmas 1947, we arrived in Hamburg. I was required to spend a further two weeks in the transit camp, Neuengamme, where repatriation inquiries had to take place. Before being released, we were examined by Polish officers, who never hesitated to kick and yell at us. At the camp's exit, German women were waiting to offer themselves in exchange for cigarettes and coffee. What a reception! Finally freedom was at hand. As I discovered, my family had survived the war by moving from Berlin to Fulda in order to avoid the bombing. They embraced my return. Sadly, my father had died less than two months earlier. Fate had been kind to us Debra Dun Germans. Many continue to meet once a year but many are no longer alive. Today (1986), the camp at Debra Dun serves as accommodation for Indian refugees from Pakistan.

Shortly after reuniting with his family, Walter returned to Berlin. His hopes of once again finding employment with Siemens proved unsuccessful; however, his visit to Siemens did offer a chance encounter with a family friend from the pre-war years, Dr. Karl Burhenne. The Knips and Burhenne families had met in 1927 during a summer vacation along the Baltic Sea. Dr. Burhenne was delighted to welcome my father back from India with an invitation to a home cooked meal. It was on that occasion that he met my mother, Eva Burhenne. He was 37 and she 29. Following a brief courtship they were married in Bonn on October 30, 1948. Since travel between East and West Germany was highly restricted at the time, only my mother's father was able to obtain permission to attend the simple marriage ceremony. Another old family connection helped my father locate a sales position at the Wiesbaden based pulp and paper company, Zellstoff Fabrik Waldhof. He was able to settle with his new bride into a small unheated attic apartment, where I was born two years later in 1950.

Walter had always held on to his dream of returning to India one day. Shortly after his arrival in Germany he had filed an application with the German Federal Foreign Office for Trade and Commerce, in the event an opportunity might arise for someone with his foreign commercial experience. While awaiting a reply from the newly formed government, opportunity knocked at his front door one spring evening in 1952. The description of my father's encounter with Wolfgang Jaenicke, West Germany's first post-war appointed ambassador to Pakistan follows:

As I opened the door of our apartment, a gentleman standing there immediately asked, "Are you Mr. Knips?"; quickly followed by, "You are going with me to Pakistan." I could not believe my eyes or ears. After a brief discussion it became apparent that Ambassador Jaenicke had learned of my existence and long standing desire to return to India from Gisela Geisse, the widow of my fellow internee and former boss at Siemens in Calcutta. Jaenicke, who was in a hurry to assemble a qualified embassy staff, had sought me out immediately. And so it was that from one day to the next I was called into service by the Federal Foreign Office. Could there have been a more serendipitous coincidence?

My father's life long career as Trade Commissioner in the German Foreign Service was launched in Karachi, Pakistan (1952-1957), and included further postings in Houston, Texas USA (1957-1961) and Montreal, Quebec Canada (1961-1976). After many years of living outside of Germany and watching his family grow up in Canada, my father and mother decided to retire in 1976 to their beloved farm property outside of Montreal. The 18 years of retirement that followed provided my father with plenty of time and space to enjoy a wide variety of hobbies, including travel several times a year, playing Skat with anyone he could find that knew the

card game, raising apple trees and learning how to create stained glass.

In closing it needs to be said that my father had a knack for continuously reinventing himself. He thrived on seeking new horizons and responding to the unexpected. And yet, in spite of a life rich with adventure and success, Walter carried within him a permanent restlessness and sense of being unfulfilled. Perhaps those 7 years of war time internment, during the ages of 28 to 35, had simply robbed him too thoroughly of the confidence and opportunity he could have used to shape his life on his terms.



"THE ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY" made special arrangements to enable their own photographer to take this candid series of photographs of internees' living conditions in the Central Internment Camp at Ahmednagar, high up on the Deccan. Here German nationals who were in India at the outbreak of war—and a rest cure their sojourn in camp very obviously is when compared with the recently published pen pictures of life in concentration and internment camps in their own country.

"Interned for the Duration"

GERMANS' LIFE AT AHMEDNAGAR CAMP

EXILED perhaps for the rest of the war, are the German subjects still interned at Ahmednagar Central Internment Camp. These are all that remain of nearly 900 brought there from all over India shortly after war broke out. The rest, over 500, chiefly Jewish refugees and missionaries, have been released.



INTERNEES' DORMITORY at Ahmednagar is well furnished and airy, with mosquito nets, writing tables, and camp beds with good blankets to keep out Deccan cold.

Last November Government appointed an interrogation Committee, headed by Sir Malcolm Darling, and each internee has been personally questioned by members of the Committee, some of them many times. If their release is unlikely to be "prejudicial to the defence and order" of India they are set free, though the Committee has also to make sure they will be able to maintain themselves in freedom. Better (for India) an internee than a tramp. It is not easy for a German to find a job in India nowadays.

No Women Internees

NO women are detained either at Ahmednagar or elsewhere. All of them, Nazi or non-Nazi, are still at liberty, though many Nazis have returned to Germany. Their freedom has been criticised but one may be sure watch is kept on those suspected to support Hitler. Later, a Family Camp may be set up in another part of the country, but only for refugees and their wives and other proved opponents of Nazism.

Women may visit Ahmednagar, but few do. They may stay only 30 minutes, may see and speak to their husbands only in the presence of a camp officer, and there must be no "personal contact", not even a handshake. No risk can be taken of smuggled messages.

Letters in and out are censored but few deletions made. No postage is needed either way and internees may despatch three letters a week, sometimes more.

Healthy Camp

THE camp is a few miles out of Ahmednagar, not far from the site of the Great War Internment Camp, and is in open, healthy country, 2000 feet up. It is divided into two wings, Nazi and non-Nazi, and surrounded by tall wire fences.

About 40 men in the non-Nazi wing pay Rs. 3 a day for special food. The rest are given free the food and lodging of a British soldier and, like him, draw 3½ annas a day "pocket money". They also receive an allowance of Rs. 20 a month for odd expenses.

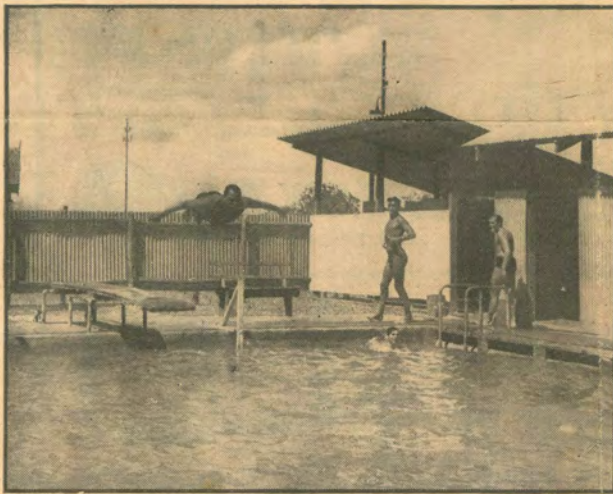
Duties are not arduous, chiefly cooking and washing-up, and all the men take up hobbies, gardening, languages, handicrafts, staff the dental surgery and assist in the hospital—a sinecure at Ahmednagar. They make their own fun—sing, run a dance band and a string quartet, drink, read, sketch, write. Many have their own typewriters and gramophones but no radios are allowed. Indian newspapers are provided and there is a good library, most of the books from the German Clubs of Bombay and Calcutta.

The men are fit. All but the oldest take exercise or play games, hockey, soccer, tennis. The swimming bath is open to them every day, the cinema programme changes three times a week. The latest British and American films are shown, Reveille is at 6-30, lights-out 10-30.

The Darling Interrogation Committee has now completed its enquiry and left Ahmednagar so that fewer releases must now be expected. A decision will soon be made whether or not to set up a Family Camp, but even if this is done most of the remaining internees, being Nazi, cannot hope to be moved from Ahmednagar. As enemy aliens they cannot complain. Where, while war lasts, would they be treated better?



ALL READY FOR THE CINEMA SHOW. Movies are just one of the many facilities provided for killing time in the internment camp until the war is over. The camp also has a library, store, lounge (frescoed by an interned interior decorator), and ground where internees may do gardening.

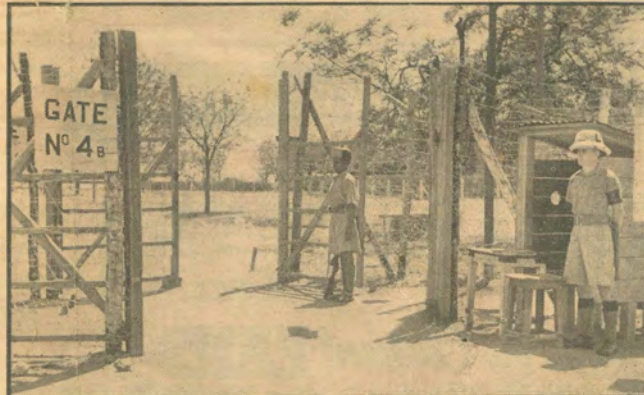


CAMP SWIMMING BATH is really used for swimming and not as an aquarium for raising fish for food as in internees' home country. Hockey and tennis are also available. *Below:* At work in the camp censors' office—one of the few features of the camp which differentiates it from holiday camps.



Dr. Schreinert
Dentist
assisted by
Walter Knips

CAMP DENTIST GETS BUSY: Internees' physical condition is not allowed to deteriorate. The camp also has its own hospital. *Below:* A camp gate. British and Indian sentries and double fence of barbed wire ensure that internees really are interned.—Photos, I. W.





Dr. Lutz Chicken

Kroll, Dr. Magner, Zwickert.
 Dr. Pickenbrock, Tepler am, Krumm, Lang, Schmidt E., Hebling, Schmidt H.,
 Reiter, Kröner, Voth, Lang, Heilmann, Koyfeld.
 Fuchs, Heilmann, Heist, Sinn, Klass, Booth, Heil, Jähnisch, Lohr,
 Janz, Kemp, Kallander, Heilmann, Reinhard, Gubler.
 Müller, Dr. Karlsrufer, Heilmann, Birkhoff, Dr. Hülsting, Guss, Hoss,
 Lindner, v. Birkhoff, Müller, Heist.
 Schlegel, Heist, Heist, Koppmann, C. Heist, Schmidt H.,
 Dr. Heilmann, Heist, Heist, Dr. Heist.
 Ahmednagar, 1941 - Baracke 15.

Ahmednagar 1941 - Barrack # 15



L: Heinrich Harrer

R. Dr. Rolf Magener

Fussball - Barracken - Meisterschaft, Ahmednagar - 1941.
 Barracke 15 nach 3-maligen unterschiedlichen Durchschüssen durch Barracke 14 mit 2:0 geschlagen.
 Leyfried, Crätner, Körmel, Fehrmann, Kohnhoffer, Bader, Blass, Harter, Dr. Magener, Dr. Rohmeyer, Dr. Hüller, Haast (Führer)

Football Championship - Ahmednagar 1941

Barrack #15 defeated by Barrack #14

in Shootout - final score 2:0



Rosenthal, Wilde, Müller O.E., Lotmann, Dr. Vogl, Gebhardt, Jellin,
 Reinhardt, Schmidt, Ruffmann, Meyer, Eisenberg, v. Klenke,
 Heber, Kuntz, Aufdenacker, Koltachen, Wagner v. Tschirach,
 Frölich, Kimmich, Trumbauer, Sommer, Hoff, Frey, Müller
 Hennig, Schäfer, Dr. Trübner, Dr. Vach, Köster, Schmidt, Dr. Kellner,
 Hiller, Voigtländer, Wieding,
 Cronest, de Zorck, Kammert, Kowitz, Färber, Kötter,
 Palms, Oetters,
Ahmednagar 1941 - Barrack # 16.

Ahmednagar 1941 - Barrack # 16



Gerhard Buelle

Hockey - Ahmednagar, Ahmednagar 1940/41.

K. K. Kulkarni, Dr. H. H. H. H., Ruffmann, Kämer, Kulkarni, Broder, Kelly, Müller, Müller
 Landt, Lindhoff, Müller, J.E., Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Sommer
 Paulisch, Linnemann, K. K. Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni
 Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni
 Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni, Kulkarni

Hockey Team - Ahmednagar 1940 - 1941 - Barrack # 16



Top Row:

L: Walter Knips

M: Gert Swatek

R: Gert Winternitz

Mortimer v. Belling

Willi Zolle

—. Pradek, Winkoritz, Pöllen, Koberling, Meuss,
 Meyer, Schmitt, Kloss.
 Paul, Thierfelder, Kille, K. Lohmeier, Edert, Kersch,
 Tischer, Edelmann, Adler,
 Bornemann, Hundling, Waller, Öhring, Wippmann,
 C. Kellner,
 Schuster, W., Zolle, Götze,
 Ahmednagar — 1940.
 Barrack - 17 - West

Ahmednagar 1940 - Barrack # 17 West



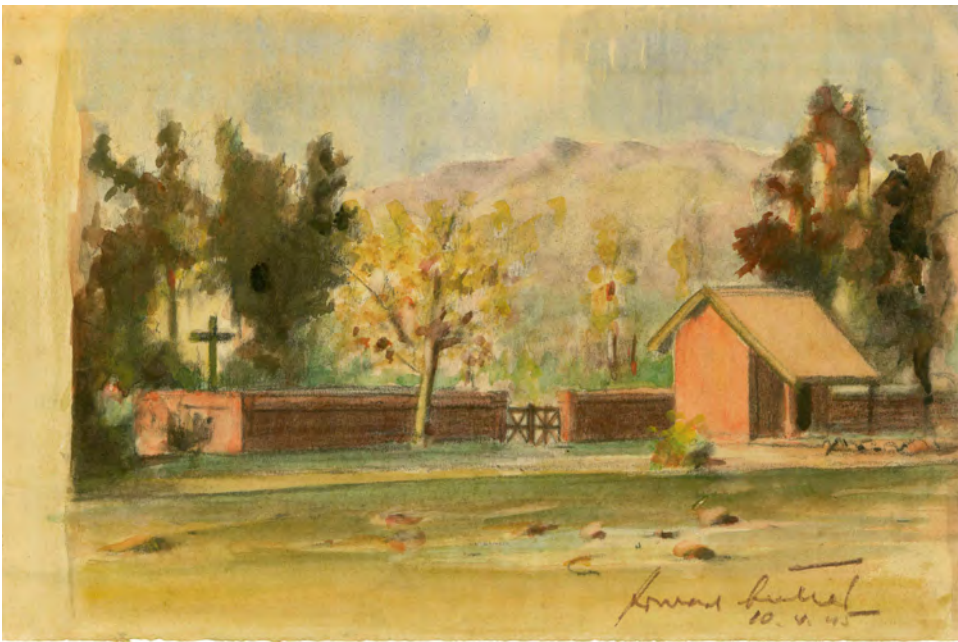
Walter Knips

Geisse

"Siemens" Ahmednagar - 1941.

Klora, Hoffmann, Schmitt, Reiss, Herth, Gnoth, Zacharias,
 Schulze E., Müller W., Monjau, Müller R.,
 Riethmüller, Wilhelm, Jantke, -- Nees, Jürges, Seasing,
 Moebis, Schümmer, Römer, Galle,
 Rieger, Dehlinger, Crewell, Reuter, Geisse, Warko,
 Deutler, Kopp, (Kunisch?!)

Siemens- Ahmednagar -1941



April 10, 1945

Watercolor



Hospital
Camp Dehra-Dun
July 1946

Watercolor



Camp Dehra-Dun
August 1946

Watercolor

Collection Walter Knips

Debra-Dun, 25. 6. 46.

Liebe Eltern, nachdem ich kürzlich von Masport
den ersten Brief nach langen Monaten er-
hielt, habe ich nun auch von Euch wenigstens
ein Lebenszeichen. Wenn dieses auch nicht von
Euch direkt ist, so weiss ich doch wenigstens,
dass Ihr Euch weiterhin in Fulda befindet &
dieselbst hoffentlich einigermaßen aufgehoben
seid. Nach allem, was so nach & nach zu uns
dringt, müssen die Zustände in unserem
lieben Deutschland ungleich trostlos & schwierig
sein. Welche erbärmungstodes Furcht hat un-
ser Volk & jede einzelne Seele davor zu tragen.
Wird man jemals die Zeit der letzten 10 Jahre
verstehen können? - Die meisten von uns hier
haben die Hände, obwohl nun schon 7 Jahre hinter
Ort, hier in Indien wollen ihr Glück zu versuchen.
Ich habe diesen Gedanken ebenfalls erwogen. Aber für
mich als Kaufmann ist die Lage weit ungünstiger, als für
technisch Gebildete, abgesehen davon, dass es nun
ja nur wenige gestattet sein wird, hier im Lande zu
verbleiben. Ausserdem ist heute Allen die Lebensarbeit
nach der Heimtat & Euch Allen sehr gross. Der Staat-
druck wird nun doch langsam sehr von oben.

In Liebe & Gedanken
Euer Walter

P.O.W. #2047 Walter Knips

Camp Dehra-Dun - British India

June 25, 1946

Letter to his family, living in Fulda in the American Zone

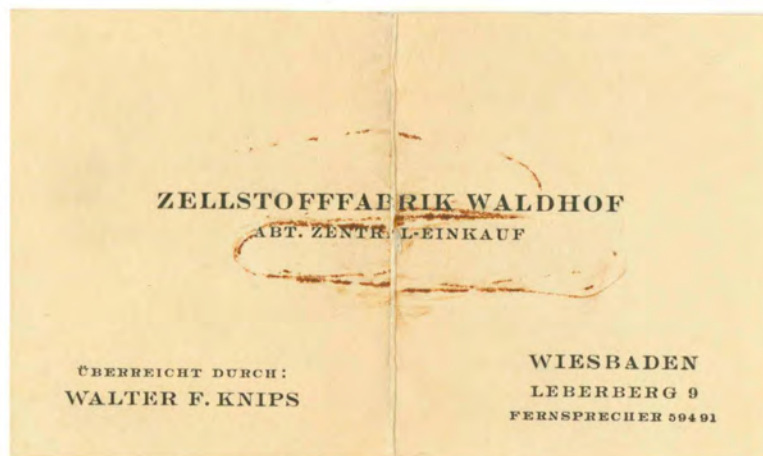
Translation of Walter's letter to his family from Camp Dehra-Dun - June 25, 1946

Dear Parents,

I received Margit's letter, the first in many months, and now I finally have a sign of life from you and the knowledge that you are both still living in Fulda, where hopefully you are safe. Judging from the news that has trickled down to us, the conditions in our beloved Germany continue to be incredibly hopeless and difficult. What an unrelenting fate has befallen our nation and must again be borne by every individual. Will we ever be able to comprehend the events of the last ten years? In spite of spending these 7 years behind barbed wire, most of us here have the desire to re-try our luck in India. Even I have given this some thought. But the chances of employment for me as a salesman are far less likely than those for the technically trained, and aside from all that, permission to stay in India is rarely granted. Moreover, I have a tremendous yearning for home and all of you. The barbed wire sickens me.

With loving thoughts,

Walter



First post-war employment - 1948-1952