Estonian Patriot Was Eyewitness to Firebombing of Dresden, Nuremberg Trials

The Historic Life of August Kuklane (1923-2006)

BY CHRISTOPHER BOLLYN & HELJE KASKEL BOLLYN

August Kuklane was born on July 5, 1923, on a large and progressive farm at Roouge-Viitina, near Vooru in the highlands of southeast Estonia. The oldest of four sons, August had taught himself to read at the age of 6. The Kuklane family was one the largest land owners in the province of Voorumaa. Their well-run farm of 470 acres was equipped with modern Swedish and American farm equipment, which August's grandfather had purchased.

In Estonia, a German province for over 500 years, the German tongue was considered a necessary language for educated people, and August's parents made sure that their children read and spoke German well. His father, a veteran of World War I, had fought with the Estonian Independence Army in the Battle of Luutsniku.

Kuklane attended secondary school at the Vooru Gymnasium where at the age of 13 his military education began. His teachers of military subjects were a Capt. Karjel and Lt. Imre Lipping.

During his school years, in 1938, the independent Republic of Estonia ceased to exist when it became a satellite of the Soviet Union. In 1940, the Red Army occupied the Baltic states, and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were formally annexed to the Soviet Union.

August Kuklane (1923-2006) as a young man in Estonia.

After graduation, as an Estonian patriot, August joined the Kaitseliit, the Estonian National Guard. In 1943, after the German army had pushed the Red Army out of Estonia, August, age 20, joined the Baltic Legion, a Waffen SS unit comprised of Estonians fighting alongside the German army.

His career with the German army began with nine months of training at a *Fuehrer Schule*, a school for SS officers at Bad Toelz, near Munich, from which he graduated as a second lieutenant in the Waffen SS.

NARVA FRONT

In July of 1944, August took part in the Battle of the Narva Bridgehead holding back the invading Soviet forces on the Eastern Front. The Battle of Narva was waged to prevent the Red Army from sweeping into the Estonian capital of Tallinn along the narrow strip of land between the Baltic coast and Lake Peipsi. The fighting on the Narva front is also known as the Battle of the European SS due to the large number of Waffen SS foreign volunteers fighting alongside German forces.

Volunteers from Scandinavia, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Spain and the Baltic states joined German formations in the valiant defense of Estonia at Narva.

Kuklane served with the 20th Panzer Grenadier Division of the 2nd Regiment of the famous Narva Battalion under *Obersturmpanfuehrer* (Col.) Riipalu fighting against the Red Army, who August noted, "were not sparing any lives."

At the Narva front, August commanded a *Schwer Maschin Gewaehr* (SMG) platoon of heavy machine guns. He placed the machine guns where he thought the Russians were most likely to attack, and as he would later recall with pride, he was right 90% of the time.

"The Narva Front never fell, nor did the Germans abandon us. They provided whatever help we needed," August said.

On the Narva Front, he saw how the Red Army, which had invaded his homeland, had been supplied with U.S. weapons. He found Soviet fighters armed with Remington guns and other weapons bearing Western markings.

When the Red Army threatened to break through the front at the Emajoogi River near Tartu in July and August 1944, fighters were sent from Narva to support the front at the Emajoogi River.

SAXON STATE LIBRARY

Left, as a high-ranking officer in the Waffen SS, August Kuklane supervised the collection and mass cremation of corpses in Dresden after the relentless Allied firebombings that engulfed the city in flames. It could very well be him in the photo left, Kuklane once said. Among the thousands of corpses that Kuklane saw, he claimed he did not see a single one in German military uniform. Dresden was to be made an example of. This was clear from the criminal strafing of fleeing civilians by British fighter jets and the aerial attacks upon Dresden rescue workers and corpse removal teams.

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August Kuklane estimated the number of people killed in Dresden at 600,000. Right, the bodies of the innocent residents and refugees killed in the Anglo-American "Ash Wednesday" firebombing (perpetrated on one of the holiest days in the Christian calendar) were cremated on massive pyres in Dresden's Altmarkt and the city center. If a nation were to commit such an atrocity against a civilian population today, that nation's leaders would surely be branded war criminals.

On August 29, 1944, Lt. Kuklane was badly wounded in his right arm at Sinimaegedes on the Narva Front. He received first aid at a school in Rakvere and was then taken to Tallinn before being evacuated to Danzig and Berlin. Due to the severity of his wounds, he spent several months at a military hospital at Selov Markt, 70 miles east of Berlin.

While the doctors expected his recovery to take a year or more, Kuklane was back on his feet by Christmas 1944 when, he recalled, he was well enough to go to the movies with two German nurses.

He was released from the hospital in January 1945 and sent to Bavaria in the south of Germany for a month of recuperation in the care of a German family.

FIREBOMBING OF DRESDEN

Although his wounds were not yet fully healed, Kuklane traveled to Dresden searching for his parents in January 1945. Having heard that many refugees from the East had come to the Saxon capital, he thought his parents could be among the refugees. He found Dresden teeming with refugees, living wherever they could, crammed into stairwells and corridors and sleeping in the train stations and public buildings. The refugees were mostly women, children, and the elderly since the men were off fighting in the army.

A month later, while traveling by train from Ulm to Prussia on the morning of February 14, 1945, his train was halted just outside of Dresden. The day was Ash Wednesday and Dresden, the capital of Saxony, was burning after having been fire-bombed during the night by hundreds of British Lancaster bombers. The British fire-bombers had struck viciously in two separate attacks, the first at 10:14 p.m. and the second, three hours later, at 1:21 a.m.

By dawn of Ash Wednesday, after more than 1,300 British bombers had dropped thousands of tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs on the undefended Saxon capital, one of Europe's most beautiful cities had been reduced to rubble and ashes.

As a uniformed officer, *Obersturmfuehrer* (1st Lt.) Kuklane organized survivors to recover the corpses and prepare them for mass cremation. As an experienced soldier, he knew how to take cover when 311 U.S. B-17s dropped another 771 tons of bombs on the survivors and rescue workers shortly after noon on February 14. He was working in the center of the destroyed inner city about 1,000 feet from the River Elbe when the U.S. bombers returned.

Judging from the number of people he knew had been living in the destroyed inner city of Dresden, August estimated that some 600,000 people were killed during the two-day Anglo-American firebombing. He spent four days working round-the-clock recovering the bodies of the dead.

"We stacked them like bricks," he recalled. "I saw thousands and thousands of dead people but did not find a single person in uniform. They were all civilians."

Kuklane recalled the body of a heavy set woman wearing white stockings which they barely managed to place on the pile of corpses after several attempts and with great difficulty. The image of the woman's legs clad in white stockings and dangling from the top of the pile remained stuck in his memory.

Years later in America, he saw a photo of the same pile of

PHOTOS FROM THE BOOK NURNBERGER PROZESSE/NUREMBERG TRIALS BY PETER HEIGL

corpses with the woman's legs hanging from the top. This time, however, it was being used by Jewish "holocaust" propagandists claiming that these were Jewish victims of a Nazi atrocity. Kuklane, however, knew very well that these victims were the residents and refugees of Dresden, victims of the very real Anglo-American Ash Wednesday holocaust which took hundreds of thousands of innocent lives as Allied firebombs incinerated Germany's "Florence on the Elbe."

"When somebody lies so much, you can't believe the rest of the story either," August said, referring to the Jewish holocaust propaganda. "What do you believe more, their propaganda or your own eyes?"

The ground temperature in Dresden during the firebombing reached 3,600 Fahrenheit. August recalled the fate of the children. He found small bodies which had been burned so intensely that simply touching the corpses caused them to crumble into a pile of ashes.

Some of the residents of Dresden who had survived the firebombing were shot by Allied fighter aircraft that strafed the burning city. Kuklane said he saw people fleeing the city being shot by low-flying aircraft, which he identified as British.

"Dresden was the world's most beautiful city," Kuklane said. "Every house was a work of art."

DISPLACED PERSON

After the war, rumors circulated that former SS men would be sentenced to lengthy prison sentences. Soldiers were to get 10 years; sergeants, 25; and higher officers, 50 years in prison. Fearful of the occupier's revenge, Kuklane hid his Waffen SS documents and his *Solbuch*, a soldier's identification book, on a farm in Neuhammer am Kweiss in Schleswig-Holstein.

Since the Republic of Estonia had fallen into the hands of the Soviets, he and some 2,000 Estonian Waffen SS soldiers residing in Germany had no place to go. As displaced persons (DPs), they camped in the woods near Ukleisee in Schleswig-Holstein from May to September 1945.

"I could have just walked away but being a disciplined person, used to law and order, I turned myself in to the English army," August said. Hunger was the worst enemy after the war and many people simply starved to death. He was a voluntary British prisoner-of-war at Borghorst in Schleswig-Holstein until February 1946.

He remembers that even as prisoners of war, the Estonian men enjoyed good relations with the English. The Britons knew that these young men were not Germans and were ready to release them had someone not said, "Look under their arms."

All SS men bore tattoos under their arms, where each man had his blood type tattooed. Sure enough, the Englishmen found that the Estonians were tattooed and heeded the warning: "Don't let them go; they are the most dangerous group," as August recalled during our last interview in January 2006.

After this unlucky turn of the events, the Estonian Waffen SS prisoners were sent to Belgium to another British prison camp, which was "not a very good place to be," August said. In the old barracks at Zedelgham, they barely survived on a starvation diet.

Local people, out of sympathy, would come by the camp's fence and toss bread to the prisoners. There was a rule that as former officers, the prisoners could not be forced to work. In order to keep them busy, the prisoners were made to fill a railway car with dirt and then empty it, over and over.

NUREMBERG TRIALS

After being released from the prison in Belgium, August was able to contact his Uncle Elmar, who had been a captain in the Waffen SS. Elmar took August to a DP camp in Wiesbaden, Germany. To hide his identity, August went by the name Agu, a shortening of August. Within 10 days he found a job as a carpenter where he worked for seven months. Finding a job was never difficult for August.

In 1946 his DP camp was moved to Kassel, where he was drafted into the U.S. occupation force and given a black uniform. After two months, he was called to headquarters for an interview and offered a job as a military guard in Nuremberg.

Nuremberg

Upon viewing these photos, August Kuklane identified them as such: (left to right) An Estonian guard looks into the cell of a prisoner during the Nuremberg trials. The Estonians' uniforms were black, with white belts and light blue helmets. Center, a view of Wing No. 1 of the Nuremberg prison showing the Estonian prison guards who have all been asked to turn their backs to the camera in this posed photograph. Kuklane speculated they were asked to shield their faces so no one would recognize the Estonians as former Waffen SS soldiers. An American officer poses with another guard in the foreground. Left, an Estonian guard is shown on patrol at the prison at Nuremberg. The Estonians served as guards until the day executions were scheduled. They were then replaced with Allied guards.

The American officer asked Kuklane, "Captain, do you want to have your bars back?"

August, hoping to hide his military past, pretended he did not understand. "I have done nothing wrong," he said.

"We know more about you than you think," the American replied.

The fact that he had been a lieutenant in the Waffen SS was apparently known to the Americans and Kuklane was made a captain in the U.S. army. Instead of golden bars, he was given red bars on a black U.S. uniform.

Capt. Kuklane was relocated to Fuerth, the town adjacent to Nuremberg, where the war crimes trial for the captured Nazi leaders was to be held.

PACKING & CRATING

In Fuerth-Nuremberg Kuklane worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Military Police because he spoke four languages: German, English, Russian and Estonian.

In Nuremberg, there happened to be an Estonian lady in her early 30s, a Miss Tanner, who was personnel chief for the U.S. occupation forces. "She chose all Estonian boys as guards," August said.

"Miss Tanner made the connection and the Americans trusted her," he said. Officially the Estonians were volunteers, displaced persons like many others after the war. Miss Tanner knew that the Estonian boys had Waffen SS backgrounds, but the Americans did not seem to care. They needed them for their military training and their language skills. When they were hired, one of the commanders had been heard saying, "Why not the best?"

With about 1,000 other young Estonians, August belonged to the 4221 Company serving under the U.S. occupation authority. About 90% of these men were former Waffen SS, he said.

The Estonian prison guards at Nuremberg wore black uniforms with white belts and light blue helmets. August recalled the names of some of them: Johannes Sommer, Konstantin Reiman, Viktor Vinkman, Harri Vaerder, Ferdinand Rikka, and Harri Must.

August told the story how during the Independence Day parade on July 4, 1946, a U.S. general had watched the 4221 Company marching and said excitedly, "Man, aren't they marching well!"

"They are all former SS," a Polish general standing beside him scoffed. The American general responded: "I don't care what they are. They are wonderful."

"It was rather common that the Estonian soldiers spoke fluent German and English. They were literate, unlike the Polish soldiers, and had excellent military training," August said about the 240-260 Estonians who worked as guards in six-hour shifts during the Nuremberg Trials from 1946 to 1949. These Estonians lived in the former *Reichspartei* barracks.

"We were treated very well by the Americans," August said. Other Estonian soldiers, who served as guards at U.S. warehouses and other American facilities lived in the barracks behind the former Nazi Rally Ground.

In Nuremberg, Kuklane was in charge of the U.S. military's department of packing and crating where he supervised the moving of the household property of U.S. personnel and others involved in the Nuremberg Trials. During the trials he oversaw the packing and crating of the court documents, which are held today in 17 steel cases in The Hague in Holland.

Kuklane described how U.S. occupation forces confiscated the property of wealthy German families. "The Americans took hundreds of houses in well-to-do areas like Erlenstegen," he said. "The Americans made their own law. They took everything."

The wealthy German families who were evicted from their homes were given only two hours to evacuate. The Germans could take with them only what belongings they could carry. As head of the packing and crating department, August worked under a Gen. Martin, and had 40 people working under him.

When the Americans who had lived in the German homes returned to the U.S. or moved on, Kuklane and his men were called to pack and crate "their" belongings, which often included the property of the German family in whose house they had lived.

"Sometimes I was able to save millions since I could decide

what stayed and what went," August said. "Whenever possible, I tried to save as much as I could for the Germans. But often the houses were totally cleaned out, leaving only the four walls behind."

During the Nuremberg Trials, August remained chief of the packing and crating department at the Nuremberg Military Post, which was located in Fuerth. He had 17 or 18 men working under him, including a few Latvians. They packed the documents from the Nuremberg Trials into 47 large crates (30" x 30" x 48") to be shipped to The Hague.

Since August was a captain in the U.S. Army, he was able to keep his private quarters in the *Reichspartei* barracks until 1949. He frequently took leftover food and white bread to give to the starving German children who were always waiting for him on the streets. "I was a very popular guy," August said with a broad smile.

The Estonian guards of the prisoners at Nuremberg were only replaced by American soldiers the night before the executions were carried out in the prison gymnasium behind the courthouse on October 16, 1946.

Kuklane said those sentenced to death at Nuremberg were hanged without a neck-breaking drop and that the executions were extremely brutal and slow. The quickest execution took 18 minutes, he said, while the slowest, that of former Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, took 24 minutes.

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Asked about the torturous execution of the prisoners at Nuremberg, Dr. Klaus Kastner, author of several books on the Nuremberg Trials, told THE BARNES REVIEW: "This story is probably true. They were more strangled than hanged. This is evident from the red, green, and yellow colors in their faces and is confirmed by the two German witnesses of the executions."

There are no known photos of the executions. The bodies of the deceased were taken to Munich, where they were cremated under false names. Their ashes were dumped into a tributary of the Isar River at Koventzbach, four miles south of Munich, Kastner said.

THE FAMILY'S FATE

On March 25, 1949, the members of the Kuklane family who remained in Estonia were deported in one of the brutal Soviet mass deportations. The so-called "kulak" class of land owners was seen as a major obstacle to the communist plan of collectivization and had to be removed. This plan resulted in the mass confiscation of private land and property.

The Kuklane family was separated for years to come. Every member of the family was sent to a different prison or forced labor camp. August's brothers were sent to slave labor camps in Siberia: Valter to Vorkuta; Viktor to Karaganda; and Hugo to Kemerovo. His elderly and invalid mother was sent to a slave labor camp by the frigid Arctic Ocean while his father languished in a camp for invalids near Narva.

Amazingly, all the Kuklane family members survived the slave labor camps and returned to Vooru in 1956, except for August who, as a veteran of a Baltic Waffen SS Unit of the German army, was unable to return to Soviet-occupied Estonia.

In early 1957, August, who now lived in America, learned through the Red Cross that his parents were still alive.

Shortly after returning from the prison camps, however, his mother and father died. The Kuklane home had been totally dismantled by the communists, who had left only a small barn in which the family had dried their grain. The walls and parts of the family home had been taken apart and used to build the "House of the Red Army" in the nearby provincial capital of Vooru.

AMERICA

Having purchased a $42 ticket on a U.S. troop ship, August arrived in New York on the *General Muir* on December 15, 1950. He arrived in America with only 7 cents in his pocket, which a friendly German sailor had given him. A farmer from Pennsylvania named Fischer had sponsored him to come to America.

The farmer happened to own farm equipment very similar to that which the Kuklane family had owned on their farm in Estonia. Mr. Fisher was very surprised to see that August knew how to operate and maintain his Swedish thresher and could even repair it. Fischer had oil wells on his property run by Deering motors, which August was also familiar with, so he wound up maintaining Fischer's oil rigs for $1 a day.

Kuklane eventually started his own construction company and settled in rural Maryland outside Baltimore where he built his own home.

August is survived by his wife Renate (née Rottker) of Berlin-Tempelhof. August and Renate met and married in America and have four children and many grandchildren. He is also survived by his two brothers, Valter and Hugo, who live in Voorumaa, Estonia.

Having witnessed so much history, Kuklane remained a "history nut" all his life. He was an avid reader and longtime subscriber of THE BARNES REVIEW. He was also a distributor of *The Spotlight* (a populist weekly newspaper, now defunct) and *American Free Press.*

Every time we would visit August and Renate, we would raise our glasses to his favorite toast, "As young as we are today, we shall never meet again." ❖

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