# **Through a Child's Eye:** My Grandfather's Memories of World War II



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## Prolog

Dear Jessie,

As you know, my birthday is October 30th, 1933. That means I was just 11 years old when the events I'm about to recount took place. Those formative years during the final days of World War II have stayed with me vividly, etched into my memory in vivid detail. The sights, sounds, and emotions of



Me, probably 12 or 13 years old

that tumultuous time have become a part of who I am. I'm grateful you've shown genuine interest in hearing my stories as a young boy navigating those harrowing days.

Looking back, I can still feel the swirl of conflicting emotions that defined our everyday lives - the gripping fear and uncertainty, but also the unbreakable bonds of family and community that sustained us. It was a period of tremendous upheaval, but one that also forged an indomitable resilience within me. The hardships we endured shaped me in profound ways, tempering my spirit and instilling a deeper appreciation for the simple joys in life. I cherish the opportunity to share these personal recollections with you, to give you a window into the experiences that molded me. Günter Franken.

## Last Days in Cologne (Köln) 1944

I would like to talk to you about the last days that my family spent in Cologne in 1944. School had ended in October 1944 and so I had a lot of free time. Little did I know how dramatically my world was about to change. The Allies had landed in Normandy, France, on D-Day and the Americans were steadily advancing towards the German border, their approach filling us with a growing sense of dread.

Aside from my mother, father and me, all of our relatives lived in villages about an hour West of Cologne. Since the Americans troops would reach Germany from that direction, different relatives of ours — the sister of my father, Aunt Trine, her husband and young son Franz Josef — decided to leave their hometown of Langerwehe. The village is close to Aachen, which is right on the border to the Netherlands and Belgium. Already, the battle was approaching. Their evacuation was organized through the organization Todt, a government construction branch. Someone drove Aunt Trine's family to my parents in Cologne. All they managed to take along from home was packed into two suitcases.

My parents lived in an apartment in Köln-Zollstock, which was considered very modern at the time. Though it was without central heating, it had a bathroom — a luxury at that time! Only the water boiler had to be heated up and then one could take a bath.

It was on a Saturday that my mother told me to inform some friends, that also lived in Köln-Zollstock, to come to our house and have a bath. So, in the afternoon I marched down to our friends, who lived about 1 km away, to tell them that everything was prepared for their bath.

On my way back a siren sounded the alarm. An air raid. One could already hear the sound of airplanes in the air. Many people were already rushing to a house nearby with a public shelter, because most of the houses in Germany didn't have a shelter in the basement. Therefore, a line of people piled up in front of it, trying to get into the house. I decided not to wait in that line.

About 300m further on, in another street there was a real bunker. I sprinted there and when I arrived, bombs had started falling already. The ground was shaking. Even the bunker building was shaking back and forth. However, the doors to the bunker had already been closed. With my fists, I hammered against the iron doors until finally, someone opened to let me in. For about 20 minutes I remained there in the ante-chamber, a small room before the actual bunker room, all by myself.

Finally, the siren sounded again. The alarm was over. I opened the door and what did I see? All the houses around the bunker were destroyed. Later I found out, that the house I initially wanted to take shelter in, had received a direct hit. The people inside were trapped and suffocated. 18 people per-ished.

I crawled over the rubble to make my way through our neighborhood. I wanted to see if my relatives were fine. I knew that my mother and my relatives would have gone to another house closer to our home, which also had a bomb shelter. As I was walking towards it, I saw that all the houses next to it had been hit, just like the shelter I had just passed. So I was very afraid that my mother and relatives might have been stuck in the basement, too. I ran around the house onto the patio where I discovered my mother, my aunt, uncle, and their son. They had just left the bomb shelter. They were alright.



1\* Cologne Deutz-Train Station with the cathedral in the background

A little while later, we walked back to our house together. We witnessed that all the houses behind us in the block had been destroyed. Our house was intact, except that the window panes were missing. We also realized that there was no water or gas anymore. Over the course of the following day we learned that all shops were closed or bombed out. Therefore, we decided to leave Cologne.

#### Evacuation

The city management had organized evacuation sites in the center of Germany for those inhabitants, who wanted to leave the city. Our decision was made. We left Köln-Zollstock. On Monday, October 31, 1944, we started walked for about 4 or 5 miles to the advised train station in Köln-Ehrenfeld. There we joined a group of people who wanted to leave their homes too. Mainly, women and children were standing there waiting. It took us about three days to travel the 400km from Cologne to Klostermansfeld, Saxony-Anhalt. It's in the South of a mountainous area called the Harz. Its highest mountain is called the Brocken. From there, we were transported to a little village named Biesenrode.

Only farmers lived in Biesenrode. Some had volunteered to give us an accommodation. Our new home would now be on a little farm. We had a small room, an old wardrobe for our clothes and suitcases plus a wide bed. My aunt, my uncle and their son Franz-Josef lived in the neighboring house. The house was quite big, but their room was even smaller than ours. Once upon a time it had been used for smoking the meat of slaughtered swines.

Shortly before Christmas, my uncle Adi and I traveled to Cologne once again to retrieve some more of our belongings, mainly clothes. On our way, the train had to stop quite often due to airplane attacks on the train. Every time we were attacked, we had to leave the compartment of our train and run for shelter. When the danger was over the engine gave a signal to reboard. Then we jumped into the compartment again.

In Biesenrode all roads were unpaved. Therefore they were muddy when it rained. But in winter they were smooth because the ground had been flattened before the frost came. Some farmers in Biesenrode also had Russian young men or girls helping them with their daily work. They had to replace the German men which were at war.

After winter was over, I remember a rainy day in late March or April 1945. Early in the morning our elderly landlady — she was 65 — knocked at the door and said "There's an American soldier here. He's looking for German soldiers in the house. Could you please open the door." My mother opened the door to our bedroom and there stood the American soldier wearing a rain poncho with his rifle pointing at us. He looked around but then he said "No soldiers here." Then he went to the window and looked into the garden. "No soldiers there either." He apologized for waking us up and left the house.

It was the first time I experienced seeing an American. I had no idea what Americans would look like. Before, I had always seen only German soldiers in movies but never an American soldier and never in person. This man looked just as any person I knew. Funny!

My aunt and her family had changed accommodations since our initial arrival in Biesenrode. They were now living in the middle of the tiny village. The house was positioned on the slope of a little hill. Their room was on the first floor above a little shop. The house belonged to an older lady. Here one could buy everything one needed for daily life. One afternoon, I was standing at the window of my aunt's room and was looking at the surrounding fields. All of a sudden, I spotted the arrival of the American troops. They were driving down the dusty country roads in their jeeps and eventually stopped right in front of the house where my aunt lived. Since the aforementioned house had a strategic position, an American officer wanted to live in the room where my aunt just had moved in.

Close to the house was the railroad station. So the Gottschalk family decided to move to the railroad station. It would be a very spartan accommodation, as they could only sleep on the benches positioned around the walls. Nothing else was there, except for the little cooking stove that they had brought along.

Luckily, before the Gottschalks left their former room, the American officer asked them if they could iron and wash his clothes. Aunt Trine agreed and from now on the American officer provided us with all kinds of food. A wonderful deal, as food was very scarce.

The Americans put up tents, tables and benches just below the shop on the little square. Here they cooked every day. After the meals all the leftovers were taken to a nearby field and thrown into a freshly made hole into the meadow, some gasoline was poured on top of the leftovers because the soldiers had to burn everything. As soon as they had left we boys rushed over there to fetch out what was still edible. Extra food we had not seen for a long time.

These Americans left after one week but beforehand the soldiers had to go through their belongings. They outlined them on the ground of the market square. I went there to watch and discovered a postcard of my grandparents house — they ran and lived in the post office — in Koblenz-Horchheim. I asked the soldier if he could give it to me, because it was the house of my grandparents. He did. I kept this postcard for many many years.

The first group of Americans left and another one came. This one was not so open minded. I think the first American group were the ones that had landed in France on D-Day. Their soldiers had been very friendly.

Shortly after the second American group had left, the Russians appeared. Their soldiers were poorly dressed. As they came into the village they immediately entered the farm houses in order to confiscate the chickens, eggs and other things that were eatable.

### During evacuation

As soon as the Americans had left Biesenrode the Gottschalks (our relatives) moved back to their former apartment. From their first floor, one had a splendid view over the village. One could also see the Russians, who were running back and forth along the streets. We tried not to get in contact with them though, mainly because of the rumor that they liked young girls or ladies.

After Christmas, new refugees, mostly farmers, arrived almost every day. These people came from Eastern Germany close to Poland. For transportation they normally used carts, pulled by horses. Fierce battles were taking place, between German and Russian troops, where these refugees originated from. The German troops was desperately trying to stop the advance of the Russian army.

Meanwhile, for us, the village boys, the arrival of the newcomers and their horses meant an exciting change in our boring village lives. The arrival implied that the horses had to be taken care of. Near Biesenrode there were a lot of lush meadowlands along the river "Wipper". Very often we boys led the horses there. We liked to ride them — especially without a saddle. On a very hot day in May, I overindulged riding the horse only wearing my swimming trunks. The result was a sore bottom with blisters. It was very painful walking around.

Another free time job was going to the nearby forests. There, we collected mushrooms, mainly chanterelles. They were easy to detect because of their yellow colour. Late in April, when we were roaming through the forest, we discovered a German convoy of armoured vehicles, which had been hidden. All vehicles had been abandoned, no soldier could be found. What a surprise for us and at the same time a great adventure. We checked the cars and found a lot of interesting army equipment, but we left everything untouched. Later it dawned on me. That that was probably why the American soldier, which had come to our house, was looking for German soldiers.

Temperatures in April were already very mild. More or less, every afternoon, we boys went for a swim in the river Wipper. For us boys that was a great time. Very often we jumped from the Wipper railroad bridge into the water below. Sometimes our swim was interrupted by American soldiers, who came along there throwing grenades into the river. A deadly joke for the fish. But for them, it was easy now to collect the dead fish for an extra evening meal.

#### The decision

Within the group of refugees from Cologne the communication was very good. After the Russians had entered the village it got even better. We heard that some people from Cologne had already left the town of Klostermansfeld in the direction of Cologne. That seemed to be a splendid idea. We found out that if we would pay a small amount of German Reichsmark to the organisers of the Cologne treck it would also be possible for us to join them. My mother and Aunt Trine decided to participate in the next group.

There were three men from Cologne that had bought some horses and wagons from the Pomeranian and Silesian refugees and offered their service now — taking Cologne citizens home. We belonged to the next group. The fee was 50 Reichsmark per person.

A couple days later about 105 people met in Klostermansfeld. Everybody carried their little suitcase with their belongings. We paid our fee, placed our suitcases onto a wagon and started the long and enduring march back to Cologne. Only the luggage would be transported on the waggons. Everybody had to walk next to the carts. We used only small roads leading through villages. We avoided the larger or big cities, since many former foreign forced labour workers squatted in the deserted barracks of the German army. Therefore we feared for our belongings. In the afternoons we would stop in order to find a place where we could sleep. Normally it would be in a barn. We got used to sleeping in the hay and straw. The second night my mother told the farmer's wife about my still existing sore butt problem. My sore bottom was hurting terribly. The farmer's wife found a way to help me after she had seen my rear. She handed a piece of bacon rind over to my mother and told her to treat my wound with it during the next days. She was right. Finally the blisters disappeared and I could walk without pain now.

After a couple of days we approached the British / Russian border. Our biggest obstacle was to get out of the Russian zone. We had to abandon our luggage, that we had placed onto the carts earlier. One afternoon, after sundown, we had to walk to a nearby farmhouse which had a huge barn where many refugees were already waiting in order to cross the border illegally. It was raining. It might have been the best weather for crossing the zone border marking the different occupied zones of Germany. That night some Russians entered the barn using their flashlights and picking out some individuals. We covered our faces, so they could not determine what kind of persons we were.

Later in the night, someone suddenly told us to leave the barn. We then had to walk through the fields, when abruptly, shots could be heard. Everybody

threw themselves to the ground and started crawling along the ploughed furrow. Nobody got hit by the bullets, which were flying over our heads. Finally, one of our leaders appeared in the dark in front of us and told us to get up. We had entered British territory. After our leaders had bribed the Russians with some bottles of brandy and had shown them some falsified documents, we could pass.

I can't remember all the places we passed during our march. But finally, we reached the last hills of the *Bergische Land* near *Bensberg*. In the distance, we could see the lowlands and the remaining city of *Cologne*. We could spot the cathedral of *Cologne* sticking out of the ruins of the destroyed city. Everybody felt relieved and some people even cried of joy, when they realized that they had finally reached home.



2\* Cologne Cathedral which stayed to a great extent unharmed and was used as a navigational marking point

Our trek ended at an old Prussian fortress near Cologne on the Eastern bank of the *Rhine*. We had walked almost 400 km within about 4 weeks. Now nurses of the Red Cross took care of us. They checked mainly for lice. After two days of a sort of quarantine, we could finally leave that place.

Next, we stopped in Cologne-Deutz. All bridges crossing the river had been destroyed and they were impassable even for pedestrians. Therefore, nearby British troops had constructed a pontoon bridge across the river. We crossed this bridge in order to get to our apartment in Cologne-Zollstock. To our surprise another family had occupied it and was living there now. They refused to move out. So we had to look for another accommodation.

#### First days after our arrival in Köln-Zollstock

Because our former apartment was occupied, we had to look for another accommodation. Maybe old friends could help us. This idea worked.

Our friends, the Pfeifers, lived in a compound in *Zollstock*. Fortunately, it hadn't been destroyed. They were so kind to help us. On the Eastern front, Mr.

Pfeifer had been killed in action fighting the Russians. Like my father he had been a policeman. Because of this we had a close relationship. His widow now worked as a mail carrier. Their only son Dieter was as old as me.

Their house in the *Poligstrasse* was located near the *Polig* factory. A company that was known for building funiculars all over the world. Next to the factory there was the big hump yard of the Cologne railroads. One morning we boys left for *Luxemburgerstrasse*, where there was kind of a train station in this industrial zone. The trains headed towards Bonn started from here and went along the foothills of the Cologne lowlands. Hundreds of people were waiting to catch a lift. Everyone carried a rucksack or a bag. My friend Dieter only said: "These people are going to go hoarding."

After waiting for some time, we finally managed to get a lift to one of the next villages. Here we aimed for the farmhouses.There we might be given something for a daily meal. At least that's what we thought. Begging for food was something I wasn't familiar with.

After a couple of unsuccessful hours, we returned to Cologne. In order to obtain more eatable things, we had to have something to trade in, like towels, bed sheets, or cigarettes. That's what the farmers were looking for. Money wasn't of any interest to them.



 $3^{\star}\!:$  Aerial view of destroyed Cologne. In the background one can make out the foothills of the "Vorgebirge"

Some days later my father showed up. He had been in his home village *Langerwehe*. It's near the city of Aachen and Düren. He had helped Uncle Adi as a mason to rebuild farmhouses, which had been damaged during the battles between the German and the American troops in the area. A famous battle in the area was *Huertgenwald*. Even to this day, people are still not allowed to enter this area, because of possible explosions, due to old ammunition and bombs remaining in the ground.

After a short period as a prisoner of war in Denmark my father had been released in *Flensburg*, which is in Northern Germany, close to the Danish border. From there he went straight to his hometown, *Langerwehe*, because he didn't know where we were. In *Langerwehe* he had met our relatives, the Gottschalks. They had informed him that we had already returned from *Biesenrode*. He immediately tried to find and contact us in Cologne.

Now that my family was reunited, we had to look for a bigger accommodation. In one of the newer houses in *Zollstock* a friendly woman offered us a small room in her apartment. It measured only 14m<sup>2</sup>, room enough to put up a couch, a table, a little electric stove and some chairs. In the evening we put out two mattresses on the floor for my parents to sleep on. I slept on the couch. We didn't have much space, but we were happy to have found at least an accommodation and we could look out to the little park in the courtyard.

We lived in this one-room-apartment for 4 years — until I was 16 years old. The building was close to the house we had lived in before. So we were able to contact all our friends easily.

Already in November 1945, my father could start in his former profession with the police. Cologne was now under the British administration and they wanted to have a marching band for official events. Because my father played the French horn he applied for the job. All the years before, he had already been a member of the police marching band.

My mother was also lucky to find work at a small shop near *Barbarossa Platz* where fabrics were sold. Previous to the war, she had worked at one of the biggest fabric shops in Cologne *"Seidenhaus Schmitz".* Now the building didn't exist any longer. It had been destroyed.

All schools in Cologne started again in October 1945. My former high school (Gymnasium) in the center of town had been bombed. But in *Cologne-Nippes* the school management was able to find a place in another school building. It had been damaged in the bombardments, but at least we could start schooling there. Two boys' schools in one building worked out by alternating the sessions of each school. Classes started either in the morning or in the afternoon. At that time, parents still had to pay tuition. It was 25 Reichsmark monthly then.

We beginners were placed on the main floor of the school. It had a big advantage for us pupils. The debris of the rooms above us had just been shoveled out the windows and reached up to the windows of our classroom. When school ended some pupils like me just used the windows as a shortcut to the nearby streetcar stop by jumping out of them. The window frames contained no glass. The glass had been replaced by so-called artificial glass, which consisted of cellophane with wire mesh. The classrooms were furnished with rather old benches and chairs. Under our tables, we had placed bricks. When it rained and water dripped from the ceiling we put our feet on these stones.

Shortly before the obligatory recess at ten o'clock a huge pot with soup (*die Schulspeise* = the school meal) was brought into the classroom. Biskuit soup was everyone's favored dish. All students liked that moment and everybody went up to the front then with a little container to get his share of it. The soup was sponsored by CARE, an international organisation. Sometimes I took leftovers home for my parents.

The first months after the war, streetcars didn't run their normal full length route. Therefore, I normally had to walk some stretches of our daily way to school from Zollstock to Nippes with my friends. This was about 8 km. The streets had to be cleared of the debris of the bombed houses. The work was done normally by women (so called *"Trümmerfrauen"* = debris women) or older men.

The debris was loaded on small dump carts (sometimes up to 20), which were pulled by an engine. Often the little trains drove along our way to school. Then we speculated for a free ride jumping on one of these little wagons. The engine driver for sure didn't like our attitude and very often a helper chased us off.



4\*: destroyed Sankt Pius church in neighbourhood Zollstock



5\*: neighbourhood church Sankt Pius bevor the war

Between *Zollstock* and the neighbouring suburb *Raderthal* was a huge recreational area with an extended lawn. Food was very scarce in those early days after the war. Therefore the city government decided to split up the area into little parcels for gardening vegetables etc.. This idea didn't fall on deaf ears. Many people mainly from Zollstock acquired a little garden this way. Here they could plant many vegetables for their daily needs. My father had a little garden of his own nearby, which provided us with all kinds of vegetables.

Later, the little gardens had to be given up, because in the meantime enough vegetables could be bought again in little shops.

# Hard Times

*Köln-Zollstock* is one of the newer suburbs in the southern part of Cologne. Its name derives from a former tax station. When the farmers from outside the city limit, which was interrupted by the bishop's territory around the city walls, brought their produce from the fields in the *Vorgebirge* (the foothills East of the river) into the city, they had to pay taxes.

There are two main roads from the centre of the city to this part of town: *Vorgebirgstrasse* and *Höninger Weg* from which the *Kalscheurer Weg* later splits off. The newer part of *Zollstock* has no factories, but it is famous for its cemetery (Südfriedhof) at the end of *Höninger Weg*. In *Zollstock*, there lived mainly people, who worked in offices, shops, or administrative companies. The newer part of the suburb was started in the late 1920s. Its centre is a big park combined with a new school building. Between *Kalscheuer Weg* and further westward towards the railroad tracks there were only little gardens, waste land and opencast gravels mining holes which turned into little lakes.

Since school only started in autumn 1945 I had a lot of free time to roam around. Food and materials for heating were very scarce at that time. One day I walked along the *Vorgebigsstrasse* heading South crossing the Militärringstrasse (a circular military road leading around the city of Cologne), *Grüngürtel* (parks) and *Kalscheurer Weiher* (pond), until I reached the fields of the neighboring village *Rondorf*.

On a field, I was lucky to find a lot of wheat ears, which I picked up and stored in my rucksack. Thereafter I marched back, carried the grains to the nearby bakery and traded it in for a loaf of corn bread. The excursion to those fields I repeated several times. Sometimes I found potatoes.

Walking at that time was very common. Normally, it took me the whole afternoon to accomplish the job. For some time, I worked for a bakery at the intersection *Gottesweg* and *Höninger Weg*, cleaning off the debris of the destroyed house. My daily work was always honoured with a loaf of bread.

If the weather was favorable, I often went barefoot. Thereby I could go easy on the shoes that my father had given me a year ago. One day, I found some unused old car tyres in a bombed garage. Immediately I carved some pieces from them in order to make myself a pair of sandals These were just fantastic shoes, so that I wore them every day now. Sometimes I found plates and cups within the rubble of the destroyed houses. These were very useful items to take home. In a basement of a bombed villa I even discovered an old bike. Some parts were missing, but what a wonderful discovery! I took it home. It took me some weeks to find the missing parts for it. But carrying the findings around was kind of tiring. So why not have a little cart? I found all the necessary materials for it in the bombed houses. In a short time, I finally owned my new cart.

Houses didn't have any heating. Therefore people relied on wood or coal to warm up the rooms on cooler days. They used the kitchen stoves not only for cooking, but also for heating. It really looked funny when walking down the street, because one could see stovepipes sticking out of the artificial glass windows, very often. In the newer houses the kitchens were always rather big. But still, the kitchen was the warmest room in the apartment. Since I had a little cart, it was easy for me to transport the wood and coal, that I had found on my strolls. My parents and the Inden family enjoyed my findings.

I also owned a chicken for some time. On the lawn behind the apartment it could roam around in a makeshift open cage. Every evening I took it inside so it would not get stolen. The chicken provided us with an egg every other day. I was able to keep it for 3 years. Then I gave it away. I had grown quite attached to it and was not able to butcher it.

## The freezing cold winter of 1946/47

Near *Cologne-Zollstock,* where we lived, was the important railroad yard (*Eifeltor*). Here a lot of trains were stationed with wagons loaded with coal or briquettes to be sent to England or France, as part of the reparations payment. The area was secured by a concrete wall which had some holes from being bombed during the war. Every day a lot of people came here to get materials for their stoves.

As a boy, I was rather agile. Therefore, I normally had to climb onto a wagon and throw pieces of coal or briquettes down for some of the people waiting below and for myself. After climbing down the wagon I picked up the briquettes, loaded them into my little cart and took them home. This action was called *fringsen*. The word derives from the Archbishop and Cardinal of Cologne. His name was Josef Frings. In his famous sermon during this extremely cold winter he legitimized this action and justified, because he was of the belief that people should not freeze to death, if they couldn't acquire coal through work or begging. Very often our *"coal stealing*" was interrupted by the police guarding the area though. As soon as we heard someone of the lookout whistling and shouting *"Police"* everybody scattered and hid themselves in one of the nearby gardens. Even though it was so cold, I never had cold feet thanks to the sandals I had made myself and the woolen socks my father had given me.

Normally, I carried a little axe with me to be able to get wood out of the ruins, if possible. Because the ceilings of most houses contained wood as part of the construction. This wood was very dry and therefore perfect for starting a fire in a stove for cooking.



My friend Elmar Müller and I after 88 years of friendship.

There are many more stories to be told, but what is memorable until today, is the importance of the church in social life. I was an altar servant boy in the neighbourhood church of Saint Pius.

Saint Pius church also implemented a youth group which my friend Elmar Müller and I were part of. Our friendship started in 1937, when my parents and I had moved from Bonner Strasse in Köln-Marienburg to Köln-Zollstock. Our youth group consisting of several boys and a parallel group of girls, has had regular contact from that time on until today.

Life in Germany was of course, a little different to other Western countries. For one there were reparation payments. For example in the form of dismantling whole factories and transporting them to the victorious countries. This meant that food and daily necessities were scarce, and food stamps were the norm if you didn't bargain on the black market. These conditions in the aftermath of the horrendous World War II lasted until the currency reform in 1948 from Reichsmark to D-Mark.

But through it all, we persevered, and I look back on those formative years with a mix of hardship and resilience. These experiences shaped me in profound ways, instilling a deep appreciation for the simple pleasures in life and the unbreakable strength of family and community. I'm grateful to have weathered those difficult times and to have built a good life in the decades since. But the memories of those years, and the lifelong friendships forged, will always hold a special place in my heart.



My family and I in 2025.

Picture credits:

- 1\*: courtesy of the US Army 7th Photo-group
- 2\*: courtesy of War history.org
- 3\*: courtesy of the US Army 7th Photo-group
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- 5\*: Parish Community St. Pius, Köln Zollstock, Parish archive, Eduard Noack