

KONA COFFEE NEWS

Issue #5

What's happening on the farm and beyond

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This time we'd like to share a fascinating, yet hardly known bit of coffee's history and stray from Kona's sunny coast. So we'll take you back to the fifties of last century in the German-Belgian foggy country side...

Brown Gold

Hidden in hearses, double floored baby strollers, left over armored Nazi vehicles, modified Porsches, even in undergarments - roasted coffee beans were once smuggled into post war Germany in ways which would put any contemporary Colombian drug lord to shame.

The corner where Germany borders Belgium and the Netherlands was a lawless region after WW2. Here, the possession of coffee meant more than having Deutschmarks or dollars. Hitler's Westwall had fallen and many villages were still bombed out from the Battle of the Bulge. However, unexploded mines wouldn't stop the German lads in their endeavor to supply their morally and physically beaten countrymen with cheap caffeine.



Smugglers crossing tank barricades and mine fields at the Belgian-German border.

After all, the newly formed German Republic had slapped a huge tax on roasted coffee to rebuild the infrastructure. Something even Hitler hadn't dared to do—but then again he had wanted his people to conquer the world. Thankfully, that plan didn't quite work so well, caffeinated Aryans or not! But how were those still living in the region supposed to carry on without coffee?!

In 1949 a whole village in this impoverished strip of land got arrested for smuggling coffee. Their priest held public prayers for them to be released. Sometimes hordes of children were seen running past a couple of overwhelmed custom officials, screaming and laughing and carrying bags full of the brown gold. Broken American Sherman tanks were repaired to mow down border posts. Porsches, able to go up to 120mph on the Autobahn, were fitted with hydraulic steel brooms to sweep nails off the pavement at roadblocks. Yes, the pursuing cops were lucky to have an old VW beetle! Increasingly, Cadillacs and Buicks were bought from the American G.I.s stationed in the vicinity. Tail-finned cruisers had more horsepower, and plenty of nooks and crannies to hide coffee beans. Mostly they were left alone by the German cops anyway: thought to be driven by an occupying American officer, who was pretty much above the German law in those days.

The smugglers had the perfect training grounds right there in the country side of the Eifel: The Nürburgring, Germany's famous car race track was sleeping deep in the woods, unscathed by American bombing raids. Here, unemployed and willing, Germany's fastest drivers were trained in evasive maneuvers and hi-speed escapes. Just to "go get some coffee", although from Antwerp or Brussels.



Armored coffee truck got stuck in muck.

A typical police report mentioned i.e. a fake ambulance with 3,000 pounds of coffee ending in a ditch after a successful chase. It's cover blown at a custom stop by a German Shepard dog trained to find roasted coffee. A deaf and blind auntie guided across the border by a 5 year old child, her backpack chock full of coffee. Or a mourning party's coffin not only containing a body, but freshly roasted batches of Arabica beans as well.

Cigarettes, chocolate, nylon stockings, liquor - nothing could match the profit margin of the daily fix of caffeine. In the brief period from 1946-53, German customs officers confiscated more than 223 tons (450,000 LBS) of coffee in the area. And this was despite being outgunned, out-witted & out-driven. How much more had made it across, one wonders. A single pound of coffee could then be sold for today's equivalent of about \$750.

Veterans with missing limbs stuffed coffee in their hollow prosthesis; trained family pooches on covert missions appeared as 'strays' wandering through the Ardennes forest with a bag of 'Full City' roast strapped to their bellies. A bicyclist wobbling along the country road: her legs disproportionately thickened as a result of wearing nylons filled with coffee beans. Car tires 'inflated' with French roasted beans from Belgium, smelling delicious to any tailgater. Tunnels were meticulously planned, engineered, dug, discovered, destroyed and rebuilt.



Busted with coffee beans hidden in her nylons!

Yes, people died over coffee in that blood drenched corner of the world. Within 6 years, some 53 smugglers and 2 custom agents were killed. Hundreds of injuries occurred on both sides. Some were innocent; some were women, some teenagers, and some elderly. Children caught smuggling three times or more were put into orphanages. Border guards were known to shoot carrier pigeons that were often used for airborne contraband missions on sight.

Yet the church in the totally destroyed hamlet of Schmidt was rebuilt mostly by money earned from contraband beans. Still being known as "St. Mocca," the priest included in his sermons all the efforts of his daring parishioners. Most people living in these corners of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands endured centuries of ever-shifting borders and alliances. Speaking a mix of languages and a unique dialect, they are used to smuggling people persecuted by governments, and always looked out for the next profitable tax difference on goodies.



Rebuilt after the war with the profits of smuggled coffee, the church in the hamlet of Schmidt is still called "St. Mocca".

Then, nearly overnight, 1953 the German government reduced their outlandish coffee import tax to the current level of approx \$1.50 per pound. A Prussian king had established this coffee tax in 1781 out of his pure dislike of coffee. And every consecutive German government (incl. the Kaisers, the facists, the commies, the socialists, the liberals, the Christian democrats, occupying Americans, French or Brits) were not interested in changing it.

At least after these smuggling years the German rulers know now that raising the coffee tax is not an option either!

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Hawaii is not a state of mind, but a state of grace.

Paul Theroux

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