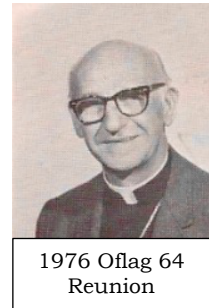


Father Stanley C. Brach **1910 – 1990**

Early Years and Ordination

Stanley C. Brach, the second of three boys, was born November 23, 1910, in Newark, New Jersey. His parents, Leon and Anna Brach, were of Polish descent. Leon had immigrated from Galicia, a region in what is now southeastern Poland and western Ukraine. Anna was born in Newark but her parents immigrated from Galicia.



Stanley was raised a Catholic but attended the Newark public schools, graduating from East Side High School in Newark in 1928. He enrolled in Seton Hall University in nearby South Orange and completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in three years.

Deciding to study for the priesthood, Stanley enrolled in Immaculate Conception Seminary, affiliated with Seton Hall but then located in Mahwah, New Jersey. He was ordained as a diocesan priest on June 11, 1938, by Thomas J. Walsh, archbishop of Newark, at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Newark, New Jersey. He was first assigned to a church in Jersey City and then became assistant pastor at Saints Peter and Paul Church, Hoboken, New Jersey, where he was working in December 1941 when the United States entered World War II.

Military Service and Capture

Father Brach volunteered to join the Army Chaplains Corps after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941. He joined the corps in March 1942 as a First Lieutenant, briefly attended training school, and was assigned to the 1st Armored Division, 1st Battalion, which was at Fort Dix, New Jersey as of April 1942. On May 11, 1942, the entire division shipped to Northern Ireland for training and then to England in October 1942 for transport to North Africa. 1LT Brach was in the part of the division that was sent to the Tunisian Campaign.

On November 26, 1942, Chaplain Brach had just completed the evacuation of a group of wounded soldiers near Mateur and was returning by jeep to 1st Armored Division headquarters with Captain Henry Wynsen, a doctor. They had Father Brach's portable altar and mass kit and the doctor's medical equipment with them. At this early stage of the Tunisian Campaign battle lines were not clearly drawn and it was difficult to tell friendly from enemy territory. The men stopped at a traffic control point, hoping to get clear

directions to headquarters, only to discover it was held by German soldiers. They were both taken prisoner.

Prison Life in Italy

Father Brach was flown from North Africa to Naples, Italy, where he was imprisoned at Prigione di Guerra (PG) 21 in Chieti, Italy. This prison camp contained about 1500 British officers, most of whom were captured at Tobruk, and a few American officers also captured in North Africa. The camp was housed in a repurposed convent, described as a grim, brick complex, surrounded by walls, with nothing to see but the sky. Father Brach was given a room of his own, which he put to good purpose. He quickly found about 125 Catholics among the British, who worked with him to transform his single room into a chapel.

“It was at Camp 21 that I learned to make things, beautiful things, out of practically nothing. There is no waste in a prisoner of war camp.” Catholic Standard Times, May 4, 1945

The men carved a plain, wooden table and made it the altar. A tabernacle was carved and assembled from scrap wood and Father Brach made a veil from one of his stoles. Pen and ink sketches served as the stations of the cross and salvaged string and twine was woven into a rug to place before the altar. Scrap paper was turned into flowers.

“That first Christmas was beautiful. Here was a group of men with absolutely nothing and many of them said it was the most beautiful Christmas they had ever spent. They had found in their despair and captivity that they were closer to God.” Catholic Standard Times, May 4, 1945

Soon the Catholic prisoners of PG 21 were occupied with a schedule of devotions that included daily mass, lectures, special devotions and choir practice. One of the men carved a monstrance and decorated it with tin from cans and pieces of glass. For Holy Week 1943 the prisoners saved up wax to make candles and polished the chapel floor with shoe polish.

Meanwhile, Father Brach grew a beard. Sometimes he said it was to give him more authority with his captors and sometimes he said it was to allow him to blend in should he decide to escape. One of those chances came in September 1943, after Italy surrendered to the Allies. A group of Italian priests visited PG 21. They had brought an extra cassock and hat. Father Brach could have walked out of the camp with them but he chose to stay. The senior British officer, following orders from Allied headquarters, had commanded everyone to stay in camp and await arrival of Allied forces. Unfortunately, German

paratroopers got there first. Later in life, Father Brach said he was glad he did not leave the camp because after the Germans took over the men needed him more than ever.

Prison Life in Oflag 64

In October 1943 the Germans evacuated PG 21. The prisoners were marched to the railyard and loaded into cattle cars. The train headed for Germany over the Brenner Pass, where it was stopped overnight by an Allied air attack. Father Brach convinced the Germans to allow the prisoners to leave the cars and take shelter, promising that no one would try to escape. Colonel C. Ross Grenning had this to say about him:

Brach couldn't speak German or Italian, but he did know some words of each. Mixing English, German, and Italian, he somehow got the guards to figure out what he was saying. He walked about wherever he pleased. The guards protested, but they didn't stop or harm him.

Whenever we were halted Brach boldly stepped off the train and saw to the needs of the lads in the boxcars. Guards poked guns into his ribs, but he ignored them or told them to shoot if they wanted to.

He had grown a little goatee while a prisoner. He said, "I might want to escape and I want to look like one of the padres in the hills with their little cloaks and skull caps."



Because of his brashness, he could have gotten away many times, but he didn't take advantage of any chances to escape. By staying, he succeeded in keeping the guards off my neck and helped to restore order on the train. Not as Briefed, C. Ross Greening, p 99

After one night at Stalag VII A near Moosburg, Germany, Father Brach was loaded back on the train with a group of United States ground force officers, headed for Oflag 64, in Szubin, Poland, arriving on October 19, 1943.

At Oflag 64 Father Brach began his ministry again, creating the equipment and space to conduct Catholic services from scratch. First, he used his room but then was allowed use of an attic. As at PG 21, the men created a new altar table, tabernacle, and decorations for the services. He had brought the hand-carved monstrance and a few prayer books with him from Italy. Soon a schedule of devotions similar to that at PG 21 was established. Prior to his first service, the Nazis wanted to censor his sermons. Father Brach refused, firmly, pointing out that he was preaching something that had been taught for 1000 years. His message to the men was simple: that strength was in

prayer. Most of his time was spent “helping Kriegies over the bumps” (*The Item*, August 1944, page 2) and extending his ministry to counsel men of all beliefs. In September 1944 Father Charles F. Glennon arrived at Oflag 64 and now two masses per day were celebrated.

On January 21, 1945, Father Brach expected to march out with the other prisoners but he was told to stay behind and take care of the sick and wounded, together with a few doctors and orderlies. He was given the keys to the camp by the departing German command staff, which he kept and brought back to the United States with him. Wright Bryan, a wounded war correspondent in the Oflag 64 hospital at that time, reported that the prisoners promptly painted Red Crosses on sheets and hung them from the sides of the hospital. January 21 was a Sunday, so Father Brach said mass in the hospital and urged the men to be confident that this time they would be freed. All day the road was clogged with refugees. On Monday, January 22 the road was empty. At mid-morning a reconnaissance group of Russians arrived but did not stay. On Tuesday, January 23 the main Russian force arrived, equipped with lend-lease trucks and jeeps that were very familiar to the American prisoners. Oflag 64 was officially liberated.



Actual Oflag 64 gate keys

Liberation and Return Home



Right to Left: General Kotikow with Burgeson, Brach, and Bolten

The sick, the wounded, and several hundred escapees from the Long March, accompanied by Father Brach, were evacuated through Warsaw to Rembertow where a refugee processing center was established. Next stop was Odessa, Ukraine, via boxcar; to Port Said, Egypt via British ship; and finally, to Naples, Italy via ship and back to United States controlled territory.

In Naples Father Brach’s journey diverged from that of the usual Kriegy. He was carrying with him a fund of donations contributed by his Oflag 64 congregation accompanied by a hand lettered scroll, which he wished to deliver personally to the Vatican. He was allowed to go to Rome from Naples, arrived at the Vatican, explained his errand and was shown to a reception area. To his surprise and delight, he was then presented to the Pope and allowed to personally deliver his donations and scroll to Pius XII. According to an interview in May 1945 he then flew from Rome to North Africa,

essentially retracing his steps from 1942, and from Africa back to the United States by ship, winding up back at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

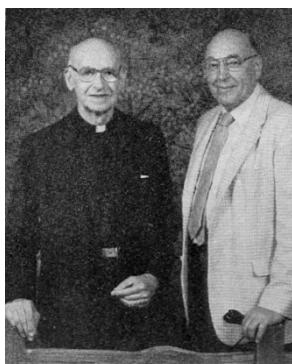
Military Service After Liberation

Once back home, Father Brach received a 30-day leave instead of the customary 60 due to the great need for chaplains in the Pacific Theater. He had been promoted to Captain while in Oflag 64. By fall 1945 he was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In November 1946 his mother visited him at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, near San Antonio. In April 1947 he was serving at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. On September 18, 1947, the United States Air Force was created as a separate branch of the military and Father Brach became an Air Force Chaplain. In January 1948 he was stationed on Guam and had been promoted to Major. He then served at Kelly Air Force Base and Lackland Air Force Base, both outside of San Antonio, Texas. By 1955 increasing health problems caused Father Brach to retire from military service.

Return to Civilian Life

Father Brach chose to stay in Texas. By April 1955 he was serving as Deacon at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in McAllen, Texas. In January 1956 he was appointed pastor of Saint John of the Cross Church in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he served until April 1962. His next appointment was pastor of St. Jude Church in Pharr, Texas, near McAllen, Texas, in the Rio Grande River valley. In late fall 1967 he left Pharr for Brownsville, Texas, to become director of both the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and of the Holy Childhood Association for the diocese.

In 1964 a book titled Von Ryan's Express, by David Westheimer, was published. It was later made into a movie. The author confirmed in his column in the "Houston Post", in July 1984, that Army Chaplain Stanley Brach was the model for "the brave, kind, wise and compassionate" Father Costanzo in the novel.



Father Brach and Sid Thal - Las Vegas 1984

In October 1982, Father Brach attended the Oflag 64 reunion in Miami Beach, Florida, and was interviewed by Michael Browning of the Miami Herald. By now he was living in San Antonio, Texas, having retired from active service in the Catholic church in 1974, and was helping out in his local parish church. He marveled again at the ingenuity and creativity of his fellow prisoners. He had attended many of the Oflag 64 reunions, often conducting the memorial service that was a feature of each reunion. Prior to his death, most likely at the 1988 reunion, he was honored as the "FIRST and ONLY

GUEST OF HONOR” at a reunion. (*Father Stanley C. Brach, biography prepared for the reunion*)

By December 1988 Father Brach had moved to the Audie Murphy Memorial Veterans Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, where he spent his last years. He died on January 16, 1990, aged 79. He was buried in Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, San Antonio, Texas.

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