

This is an excerpt from a book by Reid Ellsworth, a B-17 navigator shot down over Italy. After several weeks of being helped and hidden by Italians, he was finally captured by the Germans and ultimately held at Oflag 64. The story of his time in the camp can be found in the POW Stories Archive under "Camp Life"

FINAL ESCAPE

On January 20, 1945, the Germans sent word to be disseminated around the camp that we were all to prepare to leave the camp at any time, either the night or day. We already knew that the Russians had crossed the Vistula River and were moving rapidly westward, and we were sure that this movement on the part of the Germans was to prevent the Russians from freeing us, and that probably it was hoped that American prisoners could be used as bargaining chips when Germany finally capitulated.

We therefore gathered up whatever we felt that we could take with us whether it was food or clothing, and prepared it in whatever way we could so that we could take it with us. Some fellows made sleds of sorts out of bed slats. I took a blanket and wrapped as much as I could in a blanket and fastened it in a knot and slung it around my shoulders as a rather large bundle. We were marched out of the camp on the morning of January 21, however being told that we would probably have rail transportation later. We marched through the day and in the early evening passed along the edge of the city of Exin. At that point, the road made a ninety-degree turn. The German personnel along the line of march at that turn of the road were a bunch of bitter-looking men. We were of the opinion that they were SS troops placed there specifically for the purpose of preventing any of us from trying to make a break into the residential area.

We marched on until well after dark at which time we turned off the road through some other roadways back to a large residence or mansion. This was probably one hundred and fifty yards from the main road and protected from view by a wooded area. It consisted of a two-story building with a large quadrangle of outer buildings plus a brick residential building that housed probably three slave-labor families. The outlying buildings of the

quadrangle consisted of an open-faced shed which covered numerous bales of straw by a pile of logs well stacked. At the far end of the quadrangle was a building with a wheat-grinding mill and also a barn that housed a number of cattle or horses under ordinary circumstances. To the other side of the quadrangle were buildings that housed some sheep and pigs. We were told to all find such places to sleep as we could for the night not knowing what the next day held.

The next morning the German guards aroused us and told us to get in marching formation, but some of us had managed to conceal ourselves and were able to remain behind. We did not know how close the Russian troops were but apparently the Germans did, and knew that they could not afford the time to hunt up individual persons who might have concealed themselves. Accordingly, they marched off with the largest part of the personnel which had left our camp the preceding morning. Those of us who remained behind stayed concealed throughout that day, not choosing to expose ourselves for anyone to know that we were there. During the day, a Russian tank column rolled through. We did not know, at the beginning, whether it was German or Russian. Accordingly, an American officer of Polish extraction went back some distance from the road and contacted a Polish family and asked them to determine whether the column was German or Russian. This was done, and when it was determined that it was Russian, then an effort was made to establish contact with the commander of the column. Contact was made and word received that a Russian officer would then make official contact with our group. By then, we had also occupied the mansion.

Among those of us who had remained behind was a full Colonel who in my estimation was a very poor leader. I often wondered how he obtained the rank of Colonel. He realized that he was the one with whom contact would be made. Accordingly, he set himself up at a table covered by an American flag and sat stiffly not knowing when the Russian officer would appear. I noted

that this Colonel seemed unnerved almost to the extent of being ill, I presumed in fear.

Contact was made, and we were told that trucks would be sent back for us three days later which would take us back to Moscow, from which we would be flown back to America. Also an officer, supposedly a Lieutenant, and two enlisted men, were left with us as liaison, supposedly. Days went on well beyond the three-day period and we were beginning to wonder if there was any intent at all to come back to help us move to where we could be returned to our own people.

The mansion was neither new nor elegant. As near as we could learn, it originally had been the home of a Polish Baron. When the Germans overran Poland, the German Baron, a Lieutenant Colonel in the German army, was put there and was sort of a military commander of that area. By the time we arrived, of course the Germans had departed, knowing how near the Russian columns were although we did not.

There were probably twenty or thirty of us who had remained behind the men the day when the majority of the column were marched away by the Germans. The American Colonel who I have just spoken of I believe was captured in the Battle of the Bulge. I do not see him as a combat officer, but there were situations where headquarters were surrounded and prisoners taken. I presume that it was in one of these occurrences that this particular Colonel became a prisoner.

The Russian officer who was left with us and who we thought was a Lieutenant eventually turned out to be a Lieutenant Colonel who we later were informed was a KGB officer. The KGB was a Russian organization of secret police and as such even spied on their own people and tried to get information that would justify them in wiping out any opposition to the Communist government.

I have spoken previously of John Kader, our master tunneler, with

whom I had intended traveling with to Hungary at the end of the escape tunnel project. He and Roy Chappel and one or two others became a cooking crew at the baron's mansion. Among other things, they slaughtered a sheep and with what vegetable products could be discovered made some excellent stew which we enjoyed while we were there. They continued in this capacity for a period of time. During the next few days, a number of other prisoners escaped from the march and came back and joined us there. Among these was Dr. Gruenberg, who had talked with me during my insanity project. At that time, I had given some consideration to the possibility of continuing in a permanent military career but thought that perhaps if word got back that I had become mentally incompetent that would be a negative in remaining in the military service. Accordingly, I talked to a Major Merle Meacham, who was a member of the security and escape committee staff. I mentioned my concern to him and asked if he would make an announcement to those who had gathered at this point indicating that my insanity project had been an approved escape project. He agreed to do this, and made the announcement among the men. Dr. Gruenberg, upon hearing this announcement, said, "I'll be damned. The only thing that would have gotten you out of the camp faster would have been a sloppy suicide attempt." I informed him that such plans had been in process and that I was satisfied that it had not actually had to work out in that manner.

As the days passed by, and the Russian officer made no apparent effort to do anything for us, our cook crew decided that they would leave on their own and travel back farther eastward to a more likely gathering spot. Accordingly, they prepared a notice and posted it on the bulletin board saying that at a certain hour of the next day they would leave and that those who wanted to remain would have to make their own arrangements for their meals.

After this notice was posted, the Colonel decided that perhaps he

needed to do something to maintain some degree of prestige and self-respect. Accordingly, he then notified us all that as of the same hour previously shown by our cooks, we would all depart and an effort would be made to get food to carry with us, and also to get rail transportation if available by which to transfer or move us back to Warsaw. As near as I know, the Colonel did delegate to someone the responsibility of trying to obtain bread for us and perhaps cheese or dried meat that we could use as we traveled eastward. I believe that I carried perhaps forty or fifty pounds of bread wrapped in the blanket which was slung over my shoulder.

We got on the train at this little town and then traveled to Poznan which was relatively close by. There we stayed until evening and then got on a train that traveled in a southerly direction. There was another rail line which crossed traveling from the west to the east. That south rail line was wide gauge. (That means the distance between parallel rails was greater than that between the rails of a narrow gauge line.) The east-west line was narrow gauge. We were told to remain in the railroad cars when the train stopped at the southern-most point of our travels and that we would be told at what time to leave. We stayed in the cars until perhaps 2:00 in the morning at which time the train began traveling back to the north. In the meantime, we had gone to sleep and were returned to Poznan.

Later in that day, we again got on a train and traveled back over the same area down to where the train stopped near the narrow gauge east-west line. We got off from the train and walked perhaps two miles to the west to where there was a small railroad station. It was cold weather, but the station was heated and we remained there for a time. We learned from the station master that no schedule could really be anticipated for the arrival of other trains. A train might come today or tomorrow or the next day.

As evening approached, some Polish officers who had escaped from the prison camps where they had been held also arrived at the railroad

station. They decided that they could be helpful to us and accordingly made arrangements to find a place for us to stay for the night. There were four of us Americans who at this point were traveling together. One of them was Dick Manton of North Tonowanda, New York, who had been in the temporary camp in Italy and in the same barracks as I during all of the time as a prisoner. Also, another fellow was an officer whose name was DeLorma Hinckley. The name of the fourth fellow I do not recall. Dick had studied some German in school and I had really studied quite a bit by trying to read German newspapers while we were at the prison camp. Accordingly, each of us took the responsibility of being the "interpreter" for one of the other two fellows with us. Dick and DeLorma went with one officer and I and the other went with another officer.

We were taken to a private home where there was a man and his wife and two young people. We knew not which was the son or daughter of the couple. We only knew that the young woman, perhaps twenty-three years old, and the young man perhaps nineteen years old, were cousins. During the evening we tried to converse somewhat. The Polish people were limited in their German but from a Polish approach while I was limited in my German but from an American approach. Our efforts to communicate were sometimes very interesting and even amusing. We were able to make each other understand some things, however. As the evening passed, it became time to go to sleep and my companion and I were placed on a pallet made of straw or some such matter on one side of the room.

As we lay down, a knock came at the door, and the same Polish officer who had brought us to this place came and apparently asked that all four of us younger people accompany him. We were walked together to a home perhaps a mile away where we were taken into a house. At this house, the living room was perhaps fifteen by twenty-five feet in measurements. The only furniture in that room, as near as I can remember, was chairs around

the walls. Besides the five of us, the young Polish pair, and the Polish officer and my companion and I, there may have been one other Polish officer. There were also perhaps five or six or seven Polish girls or young ladies ranging in the age from perhaps twenty to twenty-four or twenty-five.

One of the Polish young ladies had a harmonica which she was able to play very well. She played Polish dance music to which we were able to dance. I would guess that all of the music which she played consisted of polkas. The evening was very interesting and I personally enjoyed it very much. The music, by its nature and rhythm, seemed to signal that at certain points the dancers would all stomp which I did along with the rest. I decided to call them stomp polkas.

During our transit from the Baron's mansion back to Warsaw as we visited with some of the Russian soldiers also going eastward, we were able to do a bit of interesting trading. For example, we often traded such things as insignia and even uniform items. By the time I had arrived at Odessa, I had acquired a complete Russian uniform including cap and boots. All of these were brought back to the United States with me, but unfortunately were lost in transit probably somewhere between Santa Monica, California to which they had been sent and a depot for misplaced and lost luggage at Kansas City. I was informed that I would be welcome to come and search for the barracks bag in which these items were included, but that the area consisted of acres and acres of warehouse buildings and probably hundreds of thousands of lost barracks bags.

The American who was with me was a very long-faced, sober sort of a fellow who didn't seem to know how to smile. As the evening went on, I would try to joke with him and heckle him or do something or everything to get him to act like he was enjoying it. I eventually told him that these people were trying to entertain us and the least that we could and should do was try to indicate that we appreciated it. Anyway, it was a satisfactory evening for

me. I suppose that we were there perhaps an hour or an hour and a half and then we returned back to where we had been earlier and went to sleep.

From there we got on an east-bound train the next day. Already on the train were some of the other American officers who had ridden with us earlier. Among others also, there were some displaced people who had originated from various countries but who had been made slave labor of the Germans. Also among these were Russian slave laborers and even some Russian military personnel.

At one stop along the way, we got off from the train and walked along to chat with others in some of the other railroad cars, including those whom I have just mentioned. In one of these I believe were four Russian air force pilots. I do not know whether their planes had been shot down or just what. As these Russians were traveling eastward, we were able to talk with them a little bit about some of their thoughts. Likewise we talked with some of the female passengers who had been German slave labor. I remember specifically a young lady who I believe was able to speak some German with us. She let us know that she did not know what would happen to her upon her arrival back to her home in Russia. She had some fears and indicated that probably no one who had been outside of Russia dared to feel safe in returning to their own country. A strange thing about these people is that they do not seem to place the same value on human life, including their own, that people in Western Europe and in America place on life. Their attitude was that they just would go back home and whatever happens just happens. It was quite informative to us to realize the fears that the Russian people have of their own people and their own government in their own towns, particularly under Communist control. They did not seem to realize that life could or should be any different.

When we got back to Warsaw, we were taken through part of what had been the residential portion of the city. It had been virtually leveled. That is,

the buildings had been destroyed. We had been given to understand by some of the Polish residents of the area that earlier the Germans would go through a neighborhood and mark on the front of the house the words "Dom Polski". That was notice to those who would follow that that home should be destroyed. We were then taken out to a suburb of Warsaw, Rembertov. This was the home of the former Polish military academy which would be comparable to West Point in America.

The military academy had a number of sizable buildings, but at this time at least had virtually nothing by way of either conveniences or comfort. I recall very little or nothing by way of furniture. We merely found space on the floor for sleeping. As escaped prisoners and displaced personnel from the various countries gathered there, the floors of each of the rooms and even all of the hallways were crowded with bodies at night sleeping virtually body to body.

There was a great deal of diarrhea or dysentery and whenever a person needed to go outside to evacuate, it was almost impossible to get out without stepping on a number of people in passing. Nothing was thought of it by those stepped on, and the one doing the stepping merely tried to be courteous by saying in whatever language was normal that he was sorry, and asked to be excused for it.

While in a manner of speaking we were escapees at this time, we were not really free to do many things that we would like to have done perhaps. At night, the Russians seemed intent on keeping us convinced that they were in control and would not hesitate to shoot any of us if we did something that they did not like. During the night, therefore, quite frequently we would hear gunshots fired. I will speak of this type of thing more later.

The Americans were by far better organizers than the Russians and undertook the responsibility of trying to find food for all personnel who gathered there. I do not know what sources were available for food stuffs

but attempts were made to set up a schedule so that everyone would have fair treatment so far as feeding was concerned. For an example, on one occasion we were schedule to have breakfast at 10:00 one morning and another meal at 6:00 in the evening. By way of actual operation, however, our 10:00 am meal was given to us at 2:00 the next morning. In no way should anyone be critical of the Americans for this inaccuracy of scheduling, because the influx of new arrivals every day was such that it was impossible to really plan for and maintain a schedule that would be followed.

While at Rembertov, another American and I, probably Dick Manton, walked from the military academy into the town of Rembertov and talked with a number of Polish residents. We were told, for example, that during the occupation by the Germans on any given morning a person might walk down the street and find someone dangling at the end of a rope from a second-story balcony. Or someone might be suspended by a rope from the cross arms of a power pole. On one occasion an individual pointed out a red brick building perhaps half a mile or so away and told us that during preceding periods, the German soldiers would come around to homes and tell people that they were being given an opportunity to get a shower and get cleaned up and be deloused. They were taken to this red building and closed in and gassed. We were not told specifically but believe that there was also a crematorium as part of it. Anyway, it was known that the people who were taken down to that building never returned to their homes.

In due time the Russians provided rail transportation for us down to Odessa on the Black Sea. We went to the area that is known as the Ukraine, which is also described as the bread basket of Europe. The railroad cars were like the forty and eight cars except they were divided into upper and lower decks. The locomotive that pulled the train was a steam locomotive, but wood was the fuel used instead of coal and oil as is used in the United States. We would stop here and there to reload with wood. At the first stop some of

our American officers would get off and proceed into the nearby village and attempt to trade extra shoes or trousers or blankets or anything conceivable that could be traded to get additional food. I think this only occurred at the very first stop and thereafter when we stopped at another place for refueling, the Russian train commander let it be known that no one was to leave to go more than fifty meters away from the train. So at this point, we were significantly still treated as prisoners, but by the Russians rather than the Germans.

When we got down to Odessa, we were unloaded from the train and marched by armed guard to what had previously been the Italian Embassy. The area around the embassy was walled. The building was a two-story building. I do not recall if it had any furniture in it. If it did, it was very limited and rather bare. Some provision was made for feeding us, though I do not remember specifically concerning that. We could walk around the inside of the walled compound but all around the outside were these armed Russian soldiers. We didn't ask them but I suspect if any of our people tried to get over the wall and walk away, the Russians would probably order that they stop, and if they didn't stop, a Russian soldier would probably shoot to kill. We do not know that for a fact, but overall that was the type of impression that we had from the manner in which we were being treated at that point.

I do not wish to give the impression that everything the Russians did was adverse to our interests. On one evening while we were there, the Russians did make arrangements to take us to what perhaps was an opera hall, where we were entertained by a Russian ballet, and a number of other numbers which we did actually enjoy. To finish off the contact with the Russians, we were finally marched again under armed guard down to the docks where we were loaded into a British ship, the first one in and out of the Black Sea.