

ZDENĚK KONEČNÝ — FRANTIŠEK MAINUŠ

BRITISH PRISONERS-OF-WAR IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND UPPER SILESIAN TERRITORY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The present study will be devoted to a question which has so far not been dealt with in Czechoslovakian historical literature: namely, the question of the fate of the tens of thousands of British and Commonwealth soldiers who as prisoners-of-war involuntarily spent many years in camps in territory occupied by Nazi Germany. The study will deal only with Czechoslovakia and with Upper Silesia, especially with the Upper Silesian industrial basin, which is part of Poland. An even narrower territorial limitation is determined by the fact that prisoners-of-war, not excepting the British, were during the occupation placed exclusively in the border regions of Czechoslovakia, which according to the Munich agreement were joined to Nazi Germany. In the so-called "Protectorate" of Bohemia and Moravia no prisoner-of-war camps were situated, with only a few insignificant exceptions towards the end of the war. The German military and Nazi Party authorities rightly feared the reaction of the Czech population to the presence of imprisoned citizens of the various states which were at war with Germany, they feared active Czech cooperation with the prisoners and even assistance in carrying out escapes, etc. The prisoners-of-war were thus situated solely in the border regions where the majority of the inhabitants were German. The military areas into which Germany was divided were each responsible for a certain number of camps. The boundaries of these areas were not always identical with the boundaries of the civil local authorities, so that the Czechoslovak border regions, the largest part of which was formed by the so-called Sudeten districts, were under the authority of four different military areas.

The whole of Northern Moravia and the industrial part of Těšín belonged to the Eighth military area in Bratislav. The industrial region of Upper Silesia, in which the number of prisoners-of-war used as labour was particularly high, belonged to the same authority. It is for this reason that the present study is not confined to following the fate of British prisoners-of-war only on the territory of Czechoslovakia.

The first British prisoners were brought to the region in question as early as the summer months of 1940; they were taken prisoner during the fighting in France. Further transports arrived during the spring of 1941. These were British, captured in April and May in the fighting in Greece and Crete. Prisoners from Africa also arrived in camps on Czechoslovak territory, or in Upper Silesia. A few hundred British and Canadians from the Dieppe campaign were also in camps here. The last to come were British soldiers taken prisoner in Italy and during the invasion after June 1944. Besides British, there were also many citizens of the British colonies and dominions, especially Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and also Cypriots.¹

British prisoners in the territory in questions were for the most part, as far

as privates and N.C.O.s were concerned, under the authority of five central prisoner-of-war camps, the so-called Stalags. The Czechoslovak border region in Southern and Western Bohemia was administered by Stalag XIII B in Weiden in Bavaria. The industrial region of North-Western Bohemia was administered by Stalag IV C in Bystřice-u-Teplic, Northern Bohemia and Northern Moravia were administered by the Stalag in Lambinovice (Lamsdorf) and finally the Upper Silesian basin including Těšín was under the administration of the Stalag in Těšín or alternatively in the above-mentioned Lambinovice.² Officers were imprisoned in special camps known as Offlags. A large group of British officers were for example imprisoned in the Offlag in Moravská Třebová from 1940 till the end of the war. Since there took place during the war years various reorganizations in the siting of the camps, there existed at various times on Czechoslovak territory auxiliary prisoner-of-war camps which belonged to still other Stalags. For example for some time several working units (commandos) in Northern Bohemia were administered by the Stalag in Görlitz. In the same way the sites of the Offlags were also changed; for example for a short time there was an officers' camp in Vidnava and in Dlouhá Loučka.

In the central camps there was usually only a small percentage of prisoners who were responsible for running the camp in question. The majority of them—so far as privates and N.C.O.s were concerned—were living in auxiliary camps in work commandos situated in an extensive perimeter round the camp. Only the officers, who, except for the Soviet officers, were not obliged to work, usually spent the years of imprisonment in officers' camps, which usually had neither auxiliary camps nor work commandos in the surrounding countryside. The number of English prisoners fluctuated during the course of the war. To begin with, as early as summer 1940, there were only a few hundred scattered in small work commandos all over the extensive area of the Czechoslovak border region and Upper Silesia. We have no complete figures for this period, but the lists of the work commandos in some districts show that in fact the number was not very large.³

However, in the months after the attack on the Soviet Union, when Hitler's armies were continually draining off German man power, when more and more works and factories were being transferred to the Czechoslovak border regions from the bomb-damaged areas, when the so-far comparatively safe area of Upper Silesia became one of the main bases not only for the mining of anthracite coal, but also of arms production, the number of workers drawn from the ranks of prisoners-of-war of all nations, including the British, increased. There were many important factories where work commandos were formed, drawn exclusively from the ranks of British prisoners. The number of British prisoners reached its peak in 1944; by March 1st there were altogether 8,318 in the Czechoslovak border regions (not including Těšín) and in some of the most highly industrialized districts of Upper Silesia (including Těšín) at the same date there were 11,047.⁴ Roughly the same number of British prisoners remained in this area until the arrival of the Red Army, when the German military authorities transported them further to the West to escape the Soviet forces. Since the personnel of the work commandos frequently changed and many prisoners were sent from one central camp to another, many tens of thousands of British prisoners passed through the camps in Czechoslovak territory and in Upper Silesia. Some of them however remained attached to one Stalag for several years; especially in the industrial region of Upper Silesia, where the majority of British prisoners worked continuously in the anthracite mines, even for over three years.

Nazi Germany used their prisoners-of-war as man power in various branches of production. International conventions on prisoners-of-war did not permit their being used as manpower in branches related to armament production. The German military authorities, in close agreement with the highest political authorities in Germany, paid little heed to these agreements, even in the case of British prisoners-of-war. In the early phases of the war the work commandos of British prisoners appeared mainly in agricultural work, and in seasonal work in sugar refineries, distilleries, soil amelioration, railroad track repairing, road work, etc. So far as they were assigned to factories, in the early stages of the war these were mostly enterprises producing consumer goods. Only in exceptional cases did obvious breaches of the convention relating to armament production take place.⁵ But in the more advanced stage of the war when the German economy was in desperate need of man power, even the British prisoners were to an increasingly great extent assigned to war industry. British prisoners for example worked in the large chemical combine for producing synthetic petrol in Litvínov, in the anthracite mines in Upper Silesia, in the metallurgical works in Těšín and Upper Silesia, in the IG Farben works in Osvětim, etc.⁶

Some of the British prisoners, especially N.C.O.s, refused to work in certain types of production, quoting the terms of the international convention. Sometimes they refused to work at all, stating that N.C.O.s have the right to decide voluntarily whether they desire to work or not. In both cases the military authorities took steps against them, towards the end of the war with the help of police authorities, especially the Gestapo and the Security Police. Cases are known in which British prisoners, refusing to work, were sent to special prisoner-of-war camps in which there was a much stricter regime and where they were to be forced to work wherever the military authorities sent them.⁷ For example in 1942 in the Stalag in Lambinovice alone there were 969 British prisoners, who refused to work.⁸ In the last years of the war they were very severely punished for this attitude. For example the guards were entitled or rather obliged to use rifle butts, even bayonets against such prisoners.⁹

As stated above, most of the prisoners from the ranks and the N.C.O.s were allotted to work in the neighbourhood of the Stalag, living in auxiliary camps. Usually only invalids were left in the central camp, which contained the camp hospital, and besides them, the prisoners who carried out the most necessary camp chores and those who had just been sent to the camp and were waiting allotment to one of the auxiliary work commandos. The British prisoners who were working were usually domiciled in the immediate neighbourhood of their work; usually in old factory buildings, or in village inns, etc. In the case of larger works where the work commando was more numerous, camp huts were set up. The character of the accommodation depended above all on the employers. Reports from the territory examined show that some of the British camps were comparatively well equipped from the hygienic point of view, the rooms could be heated and the prisoners were not too crowded. However in many camps there were deficiencies of which the prisoners frequently complained, not only to the central camp authorities but also to the diplomatic representatives who during the war represented the interests of British citizens. At first these were United States diplomatic representatives and after the entry of the USA into the war against Germany, the Swiss. For example in 1943 the main British prisoners' spokesman, Sherriff, complained to the representative of the Swiss Embassy in Berlin in the name of all the British prisoners that the living conditions in Lambinovice were utterly unsatisfactory. The camp was overcrowded and there was not nearly enough water. The German commandant,

(Naval) Captain Gylek, refused to admit the justifiability of this complaint.¹⁰

A difficult problem for the prisoners-of-war was that of food; the British were no exception, even although they had certain advantages as compared to other nationalities. The rations fixed for the British prisoners was changed in the course of the war, in the last years being decreased. The British prisoners who did not work received in 1940—1941 in the central camp roughly the same rations as the German civilian population in the category of non-workers. In 1942 the British weekly ration for non-workers was: 2250 gr. of bread, 250 gr. of meat, 206 gr. of fats, 175 gr. of sugar and the same amount of jam, a few grammes of cheese; and coffee substitute. Rations were increased for those who worked, according to the type of work. For example those doing heavy work received 3850 gr. of bread, 850 gr. of meat and 450 gr. of fats. Other foodstuffs were on the same level as in the case of prisoners who did not work.¹¹ At the very end of the war in April 1945, the British prisoners working in mines in Czechoslovak territory received, including the special ration for underground work, the following ration of food per man per day: 353 gr. of bread, 121 gr. of meat, 47 gr. of margarine, 17 gr. of sugar and 700 gr. of potatoes. Besides this they also received a negligible amount of cheese and coffee substitute.¹² We could quote many different regulations issued by the highest Nazi authorities on the quantity of rations to be issued to various nationalities, including the British. But even this glance at the quantity of foodstuffs shows that the rations were by no means high and especially lacking in fats, eggs and milk. We must also add that even the British prisoners received some foodstuffs of the lowest quality, unfit for human consumption. The meat especially was of poor quality, usually horse meat, the best of it being provided from compulsory slaughters. This fact was not only the fault of the purveyors, but also resulted from the regulations of the military and civil authorities which stated that meat was to be of the poorest quality. Further, fats were provided only in the form of margarine. Towards the end of the war bread especially grew worse in quality, being made from poor quality mixtures of flour, maize, potatoes, etc.

The above-quoted amounts of food were not however handed over directly to the prisoners, except perhaps for part of the bread and here and there an ounce or two of sausage and jam. They received their rations through the camp kitchen. Here again much depended on the way in which the employer saw to the running of the kitchen, the purchase of foodstuffs on the prisoners' rations and finally to the actual cooking of the food. The prisoners employed in various works were in the hands of the employers as far as provisioning was concerned and the military authorities were responsible only for the supply of the correct rations. The documents give evidence of considerable differences in the quality of the food prepared for the English prisoners. The menu was not very varied and especially in the last years of the war the hot food issued on most days took the form of a stew whose main ingredients were potatoes and, increasingly, swedes. Thus most of the British prisoners rightly complained of the quality of the food; especially those who were working in mines and foundries usually for more than 12 hours a day. We quote to illustrate this at least two typical complaints from letters of British prisoners. Prisoner no. 11646 John Alexander writes to his father in Glasgow that he is working in a stone quarry. The food he got would not be enough for a rabbit. He would like to see Lord Haw Haw getting his ration of potatoes boiled in their skins, and see how he would praise up the Germans then.¹³ The intelligence officer in Stalag VIII B in Lambinovice interrogated in 1940 the British prisoner Frederick Buckley, who had

written his parents that he got very little to eat and had to work very hard.¹⁴

Much of the provisions intended for the prison kitchen were "lost" among the officials of the organizations dealing with provisioning, among the guards, and elsewhere. A whole series of cases of stealing of provisions belonging to prisoners of war could be quoted from documents preserved.

British prisoners-of-war of the Jewish faith had much worse conditions as regards food, and underwent in general a much harsher experience. The Nazi military authorities, in the face of all the provisions of the convention, put into practice a number of impermissible sanctions. For example they received decidedly lower rations, and did not get increases for hard labour, etc. They were also subjected to much harsher treatment, as we shall see later. According to the regulations of the "Sudeten" governor, British prisoners-of-war of Jewish faith had no right to additional rations for heavy workers. This regulation was based on the announcement of the German Minister for Food and Agriculture of September 24th, 1942.¹⁵ British Jewish prisoners were always allotted to special work commandos and sent on the heaviest work.

Parcels sent through the International Red Cross provided an important source of calories, essential for keeping up the physical strength of the British prisoners. These parcels, which arrived fairly regularly, saved tens of thousands of British prisoners from starvation and undernourishment, which could have caused many serious diseases. Parcels sent from home usually contained foodstuffs not subject to deterioration and of high caloric value, e.g. tins of meat, chocolate, sugar, etc. They also received cigarettes, medicines, items of uniform, underwear and footwear. Thanks to these parcels, which in the case of the British prisoners continued more or less regularly up to the last months of the war, their general situation with regard to food was much better than that of the French and other prisoners from the West. A large amount of the provisions and cigarettes which the British prisoners should have received, disappeared, however, among the German military personnel of the camps and among members of the secret police who, quite against all the regulations of international conventions, frequently carried out searches and interrogations in the British camps; under the pretence of searching for forbidden material, they stole valuable food and cigarettes from the prisoners' living quarters.¹⁶

In the course of handing over the gift parcels the German personnel would indulge in bullying, and, under the guise of searching for illegal objects, would cut open tins, pour out the contents of bottles, tear up cigarettes, etc. In this way part of the consignments was always completely spoilt. Many examples of this could be mentioned, and they were often the result of envy on the part of the Germans who for long had not had access to some of the foods contained in the parcels for the British.

Prisoners-of-war signified an important source of labour for the Nazi economy, which ever since 1942 had been suffering from a chronic lack of manpower. Large and small employers, both in industry and agriculture, were glad to employ the prisoners who were definitely profitable for them. The employer, to whom prisoners were allotted by the military authorities, was obliged to see to their board and lodging. The value of the British prisoners' diet per man per day was assessed at only eighty pfennigs; the expenses of lodging were also slight. The British prisoners received only a small wage, paid in so-called camp currency. British prisoners working in agriculture for example received seventy pfennigs daily. If the prisoners were on piece work, they received a few pfennigs a day more, but it was still only a fraction of what the German worker got for the same work.¹⁶ The employer was

obliged to hand over to the military authorities a certain fee for each prisoner. Of course not even this sum represented the output which the British prisoners were required to attain. This meant that they were exceedingly profitable labour for the employers, who were constantly putting in requests for them to the military authorities.¹⁸

The German employers disregarded illegally many safety regulations in the places where the prisoners worked. In spite of the fact that the British were not usually sent to the worst and most dangerous work, as was the case above all with the Soviet prisoners, nevertheless the number of work injuries continued to increase. Naturally most of these occurred in the mines and metallurgical works. Hospital case-books document the considerable percentage of injuries among the British prisoners. There occur a large number of various bruises and fractures, in some cases severe and even of a mortal character.¹⁹ Considerable discontent among the British prisoners and loathing for the German military and civil authorities was caused by the long working day, inconsiderately prolonged especially at the end of the war. A large number of the English prisoners worked under difficult conditions, especially in the mines, for twelve or more hours daily. They had only one free day per month.²⁰

In the attempt to get the utmost out of the prisoners the German employers, in agreement with the military and with their aid, used various forms of compulsion. The British prisoners were subjected to the regulation entailing division of prisoners into various groups according to output. Each group had different rations. This system, the biggest victims of which were the Soviet prisoners, who had no supplementary rations from gift parcels, affected the British prisoners too. Those who failed to fulfil the work norm by at least 60 % were deprived of the additional ration for heavy work and even had their normal rations reduced. This practice, intended to force the prisoners to a greater output, was especially widespread in the Upper-Silesian mines, and was initiated by the mineowners. It was remarkable that in this case the military authorities were opposed to the division of the prisoners into groups according to output and pointed out that physically weak prisoners not fulfilling the norm would be subject to rapid physical degeneration if they received a reduced ration. We may add that the first group consisted of prisoners fulfilling the German workers' norm by 80—100 %, the second of those fulfilling it by 60—80 %.²¹ Another method of forcing prisoners to a greater output was the use of open force on the part of the guards, or of the civilians with whom the prisoners worked and to whose authority they were subjected at the place of work. We may add further, that even in the case of British prisoners, who were certainly in a position of advantage compared to other nationalities, physical punishment was used, and not only in exceptional cases.

The hard life of the prisoners caused a considerable degree of sickness. A prisoner taking ill in the work commando or the Stalag was examined by a doctor, in most cases also a prisoner. In the case of serious illness he was sent to the sick-bay in the Stalag or auxiliary camp. Sometimes isolation wards for prisoners from the West were allotted in public hospitals. Thanks to the selfsacrifice of the doctor-prisoners and nursing personnel (also prisoners), the British prisoners received comparatively good medical attention. The lack of medicines, a chronic condition in all prisoners' hospitals in Germany, was in the case of the British to some extent relieved by medicaments supplied through the Red Cross. The most common illnesses were influenza, pneumonia, rheumatism, high blood-pressure, stomach trouble and in some cases there appeared various tropical diseases arising from earlier service in the colonies,

e.g. malaria. Cases of death were not however too frequent, although some of these were undoubtedly caused by the poor camp conditions.²² For example, between 10th December 1943, and 10th January, 1945, of the entire number of 290 deaths in the Těšín military hospital, only two were those of English prisoners; one died of diphtheria and the other of meningitis. A further nineteen seriously ill British prisoners were removed to the military hospital in Lambinovice and it is more than likely that some of them succumbed. The health of the British prisoners could not be compared in any way with the situation of the Soviet prisoners, who died by hundreds as a result of illness, undernourishment, immeasurably cruel and inhumane work and torture. In this aspect the position of the British prisoners under the conditions prevailing especially in occupied territory such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, was comparatively good.

So far this study has traced the life of the British prisoners rather from the viewpoint of their conditions of work, provisioning and health. This of course was only one aspect of their life behind the barbed wire. So that the reader may acquire a more complete picture of the life of the tens of thousands of British and Commonwealth citizens in Nazi hands, we cannot neglect a further set of elements, making up the life of each individual in that mass of people swept by the fate of war far from their homes. In Nazi Germany, where during the war there lived millions of prisoners of various nationalities, the method of treatment was not the same for all. In this matter the Nazi ideas on racial discrimination were fully revealed, affecting in practice the attitude of the Germans to the individual nations. As far as prisoners-of-war were concerned, the Nazi High Command along with State and political institutions issued dissimilar regulations regarding the treatment of the different nationalities. The attitude to the Soviet prisoners was quite inhuman and took no account of the basic human rights; this was in accord with Nazi ideology, which considered the nations of the Soviet Union to be subhuman, destined for merciless liquidation. It appeared further that the Nazis behaved much more harshly towards and dealt out rougher treatment for prisoners of the Slav nations, especially the Poles and Yugoslavs, than they did for example towards the French. Alongside racial opinions, which affected the treatment of prisoners-of-war either favourably or unfavourably, there were naturally other factors at work affecting the relation of one or the other country to Germany. While, for example, the Nazi authorities were able without difficulty to issue severe regulations about prisoners from defeated France, on the other hand their behaviour towards the British prisoners was undoubtedly affected by the fact that not only had Britain not been defeated, but also that she held a certain number of German prisoners-of-war herself, a number which increased as the years went by. The supreme military and civil Nazi commands were obliged in the latter case to preserve at least roughly the basic provisions of the international conventions on prisoners-of-war, if they wanted to avoid the danger of reprisals against German prisoners in British hands.

Especially in the early phases of the war the British prisoners were under very strict supervision on the part of the guards. The safety regulations for guards insisted on constant watching of the slightest movement of individuals or groups, both in camp and at work.²³ Every attempt at resistance, escape, disobedience, etc. entitled the guard to intervene with arms in readiness. The regulations insisted on armed intervention by the guard especially in cases of attempted escape. What was the actual practice in camp and in the work commandos? It must be stated that it depended very much on the personnel of the guard and on the commandant of the

Stalag or work commando, to what extent the orders on carrying out safety measures were put into practice. From the material preserved on Czechoslovak territory and in Upper Silesia it can be seen that it was by no means exceptional for the guard to take very drastic measures against the British prisoners, often bullying them without reason and even causing death. In June 1944 the chief British spokesman Read complained to the Stalag Commander in Těšín that Prisoner-of-war Campbell, no. 34375, had been beaten by a bayonet by the commander of the work commando; the alleged reason being, that he behaved badly.²⁴ In December 1944 a guard shot the British prisoner W. Schnelling, no. 32890, without any reason, alleging that he refused to work and "resisted."²⁵ The Commandant for prisoners-of-war of the Eighth Military Area in Vratislav was even obliged on occasion to intervene against the wilful behaviour of the guards and commanders of work commandos towards the British prisoners in their charge. As early as November 1941 he issued instructions that the guards were to keep strictly to the regulations on treatment of British prisoners. Cases had occurred when British prisoners had been shot or seriously wounded for trifling reasons. For example in one commando the guard seriously wounded a British prisoner with his rifle butt because he was physically weak and slow in lining up. Another commandant ordered the British prisoners to go out into the yard only in shirts and trousers without boots; there he beat them with his rifle butt in such a way that the majority suffered from dangerous bruises.

The German military authorities behaved in a very cruel way to the Jewish prisoners among the British. Their commandos were often the scene of bullying and not rarely even of killing. For example Prisoner-of-war Isak Zassler, no. 4733, was shot by the guard for absolutely no reason. He was ill and in the course of the heavy work in the mine he wanted to take a rest. Evidently the guard wanted to vent his hatred of the Jews on the prisoners and the unfortunate man in question fell into his hands at the moment.²⁶

Very frequently reprisals were taken against the British prisoners, either on orders issued by the Reich Supreme Command, or by the Stalag Command. The case of the British prisoners taken at the Dieppe landing attempt is well known. For many months they were held in fetters in the central prisoner-of-war camps. Along with them the N.C.O.s who refused to work were also held in fetters. In the Lambinovice camp on 28th October, 1942 there were altogether 2,338 British prisoners in chains, while some days earlier 230 of them had been transported to Offlag III C in Hohenfels.²⁷ In March 1943 by order of the High Command the Australians and airmen were to have their fetters removed. This group however refused to obey the order and their spokesmen announced that they wanted to be treated in the same way as their colleagues in the British forces from other countries. Only when the Camp Commandant intervened did they give in and cease to offer resistance when their fetters were removed. In this camp alone many hundreds of British prisoners continued to be kept in chains.²⁸

The interests of the British prisoners in relation to the authorities were watched by their chosen spokesman, who passed on complaints by way of the German authorities, at first to the United States Embassy and from the end of 1941 to the Swiss Embassy; these Embassies were entrusted with the protection of British citizens and citizens of the British colonies and dominions. The spokesman also took part in visits of inspection to the camps and handed over to the Stalag Commandant the wishes and complaints of the prisoners. Many of the complaints from the Czechoslovak border regions and from Upper Silesia related to bad treatment, bullying

by guards and civilians of German nationality with whom the prisoners came in contact. The attitude of the German civilians towards the British prisoners varied very much during the course of the war. At first the German civilians regarded the British merely with curiosity and expressions of enmity or even bullying or derision were exceptional. Only here and there were there outbursts, especially when the children, brought up by the schools to hate foreigners, made fun of the British prisoners, threw stones at them, etc. Of course in the period when the situation at the front was changing to the disadvantage of Germany, and especially after the mass allied bombing of Germany, many Germans took their hatred out on the defenceless Britons and made use of every opportunity to bully and torture them and make their life uncomfortable. Bullying of British prisoners by German civilian employees usually took place in the factories and other places of work, where most of the prisoners were consigned to the care of German auxiliary guards or of charge hands. Even although the employers had been warned by the military authorities that beating and other forms of bullying were not permitted, nevertheless a great number of reports have been preserved showing that the German civilian employees, not to be sure *en masse*, but still very frequently, beat the British prisoners on their own initiative.²⁹ Naturally much depended on the character of the individual Germans and on their political opinions.

Life as prisoners was by no means easy for the British, and not only because of physical trials and insufficiencies. Camp life was very monotonous. From early morning to late at night most of the prisoners were engaged in heavy work and little spare time was left them. As far as any time did remain, the British prisoners found the greatest variety of ways of spending it. Thanks to gift parcels from home the British prisoners had various games, musical instruments, sports equipment and even books at their disposal, which was very important for preserving their mental alertness. On free days they organized sports events such as football matches, gave musical performances, etc. The presents of books from home were examined by a special censorship in the Stalags and all books which from the point of view of the German Reich were dangerous and might interfere with the "education" of the British prisoners were confiscated. Thus most of the books which did reach the prisoners were of a religious character, or popular scientific, especially dealing with natural science, etc. The prisoners were forbidden in principle to receive periodicals and newspapers. Cases did occur when some of the parcels from home contained newspapers as wrapping paper. Any such attempts to inform the British prisoners about political events were dealt with by the camp censorship, which was part of the security department, by the confiscation of the whole parcel. As a result of the constantly increasing pressure of work towards the end of the war the social life in the camps was reduced to a minimum. The prisoners' spare time was hardly enough for them to see to the most essential personal matters, such as repair and cleaning of clothes, writing personal letters, etc.

A significant factor which was of unusual importance for the psychological and even the physical state of the prisoners was communication with their homes and families. The British prisoners were in contact with their native land by letter for practically the whole of the war. Only during the last months of Nazi German collapse, when prisoners were frequently transported to territory still unoccupied by the allies, the post from home for the most part did not reach them. Written communication with home, family, friends was one of the few bright sides of life behind the barbed wire. No wonder that most of the prisoners longed for the arrival of the

post and every delay, which was often deliberate, roused them to great indignation. The letters which they wrote home were also a kind of sedative for these nervously irritated and exhausted people. In the prisoners' letters which have been preserved entire or at least partly in copies in the archives of the camp authorities, we can often see the reflection on the one hand of conditions of imprisonment and on the other of conditions in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, where the relatives and friends of the prisoners were living. The German security authorities were aware of the importance of the prisoners' correspondence and kept a close track on it. In every Stalag there was a large censorship group which not only controlled the correspondence from the political and security aspect but also used it for coming to conclusions useful to military Intelligence. Although the writers of the letters had certainly been warned as to what they might or might not write, and that the letters would be censored before being sent to Germany, nevertheless German Intelligence acquired a considerable amount of important information in this way.³⁰

It is interesting to note the mood of the British prisoners according to German sources. Throughout the whole course of the war from 1940 when the first British soldiers fell into German hands, the vast majority firmly believed in victory over Germany. This was the case even in the years of the brilliant German victories in the West, in Africa and on the Eastern front. The attack of Germany on the Soviet Union and the entry of the USA into the war naturally made these hopes more concrete. The majority however wrongly supposed that the war would finish in a very short time. Thus with every further month many of them showed an increasing indifference, explicable by the long duration of their imprisonment. Generally moods of irritation increased with ill effects on mutual tolerance. The prisoners often blamed their own government for paying too little heed to their fate, they complained of the slow advance of the allied troops, especially in Italy. As far as we can judge from the sources as to the attitude of the British prisoners to the Soviet Union, then we must first of all admit that the vast majority were naturally influenced by official British propaganda which for years had painted the Soviet Union in the blackest colours. However the British prisoners followed very closely the development of events on the Eastern front. The territory of Czechoslovakia and Western Poland could be seen from as early as the second half of 1944 as a sphere that would be reached by the Red Army and the British prisoners believed that they would fall into its hands, provided of course that the German command would not transfer them further West. It cannot be said what were their feelings as the certainty increased that they would be liberated by Soviet troops. German propaganda naturally endeavoured to show the Red Army to be a horde of barbarians, composed of convicts, perpetrating various offences and crimes against both the civilian population and prisoners-of-war. Thus many Britons awaited the arrival of the Soviet troops in some doubt, but nevertheless with the hope and expectation of freedom. Even though the Soviet soldier was for them an unknown factor, nevertheless in advance they generally honoured him for his courage. The British prisoners all had the opportunity of seeing the Soviet prisoners-of-war in common camps or at work. These people had been brought by the cruelty of the Nazi regime into a condition very little resembling that of human beings. On the one hand they aroused sympathy, which in countless cases showed itself among the British prisoners who offered them help in the form of food, cigarettes, medicines, etc. On the other hand the remarkable stubbornness of the Soviet prisoners in enduring the worst trials, their capacity of preserving human dignity and the honour of a soldier, aroused the sincere admiration

of the British. Although the relationship of the two groups of prisoners was rendered very difficult by security measures which forbade contact between Soviet and British prisoners even at places of work, not to mention the difficulty of making themselves understood to each other, nevertheless very often mutual friendly relations sprang up. This is testified to for example very clearly by the transfer of the British doctor Major Woolley from the camp in Těšín. The reason was his contacts with Soviet prisoners, whom he had helped by supplying them with medicaments. He also had contacts with Soviet doctors, his colleagues in imprisonment. When he was transported, a container with a letter of thanks for the help given during the long period of internment was confiscated from the Soviet prisoners.³¹

The invasion was a great inspiration for the British prisoners. They began to believe that the war would really end within a few days. Their hopes were not however fulfilled as quickly as they expected and after the news of the bombing of England by the V 1 and V 2 bombs many of them again succumbed to a mood of more or less indifference, from which they were not aroused until the middle of January, 1945, when the great Soviet offensive entailed their transportation to the West, most of them to Western Bohemia, or even further.

All the British prisoners hated everything German and this cannot be wondered at. Although in comparison with the Soviet prisoners for example they had much better living conditions, still even they were subjected to various harsh aspects of the prisoner's life. They had to work hard, were at the mercy of the guards and of the German civilians, who could order them about as they liked. Many of them observed the infringements and crimes committed against the Soviet and other prisoners and even against the Czech and Polish civilians; all this aroused feelings of dislike towards everything German. They made no secret of their contempt for the Germans, and made fun of their arrogance as "supermen". They were proud of their native land and highly irritated the German military and civil authorities by expressing this pride.

Just as in the case of other nationalities, the German authorities endeavoured to use their propaganda to influence the British prisoners, aiming to win them for the idea of the so-called "New Europe". They therefore sent the necessary pamphlets and other printed matter to the camps. However these attempts to affect the outlook of the prisoners had no particular success. Nor was success met with in the attempts to find trustees among the British prisoners who would inform the authorities about what was going on among them and carry out the ideas of German propaganda. The very highest Nazi authorities themselves were obliged to admit that the majority of British prisoners firmly believed in the final victory of Britain and had not the slightest intention of cooperating with the Germans. This conclusion was reached by the Germans as early as 1941 and throughout the whole course of the war they were unable to revise it.³²

In the camps and at the places of work, firmly-knit groups of prisoners were formed, which only rarely and with great difficulty could be penetrated by the German military authorities. The common fate and common longing for freedom were too strong for the Nazi authorities to overcome the profound feeling of comradeship among the prisoners and thus acquire the possibility of controlling the life of the camps, which remained more or less a mystery to the German authorities. Preparations for escape, collective protest against over-cruel guards, the method of organizing sabotage at work, etc.—all these were matters about which the Nazi authorities

required to be informed, in order to avoid many unpleasant incidents. They therefore tried to recruit among the prisoners agents for their Intelligence Branches, who were then planted among the groups of prisoners. Little information has been preserved about the activity of these agents, certain indications however point at least to their actual existence.³³ On the other hand we also know that among the British prisoners there existed an organization known as Talbot House, whose task was to work against German propaganda in the camps. To what extent the activity of this organization affected the camps on Czechoslovakian and Upper Silesian territory is difficult to ascertain, in view of the utter insufficiency of known sources to date.³⁴

The German military authorities ensured the security of the prison camps by means of very careful security regulations, whose main aim was to prevent escapes. But not even the most careful watch and the most severe punishment for recaptured escapees could decrease the longing of people, living behind barbed wire, to reach freedom. Escapes on the part of the British prisoners were very frequent. Officers and other ranks took part, but most frequently privates. The motives for escape were varied. Officers took every opportunity to escape among other reasons because it was their military duty to escape from the hands of the enemy at the slightest opportunity. This was not however the only motive of the British officer-prisoners. Like the privates and N.C.O.s, the officers too had many further reasons which drove them into risky escape attempts. Many prisoners tried to escape because they could no longer bear the bad camp conditions and the hard work. No small part was played in decisions to escape by homesickness and longing to see their families. An important and frequent motive of escape was in the case of many British prisoners the desire to be free again to take up arms against the enemy.

During the course of the war the number of escapes was not always at the same level. In the early stages the percentage of British prisoners who endeavoured to escape was much smaller than towards the end of the war. There were several reasons for this. At the beginning the German military authorities entrusted with guarding the prisoners had sufficient forces to reduce escapes to a minimum. But as the years went on, and the German armies met with one failure after another, the number of guards was reduced and they were replaced by old men, so that escapes became comparatively easier. Similarly the cooperation of the German civilians in guarding the prisoners, especially British prisoners, was not so successful or active towards the end of the war as it had been earlier. The escaped prisoners too had now considerable hope of finding a safe refuge from the police and Gestapo. As the end of the war drew near another factor in the increase of escapes was the psychological state of the prisoners, who felt confident in the approaching defeat of Germany and furthermore had observed that in the German rear there were better conditions for slipping through the police network and even finding a refuge among the local inhabitants of one of the occupied countries.

Sometimes the escapes were very adventurous. Often the prisoners prepared them patiently over a long period, for example they dug tunnels under the living quarters, acquired maps, compasses, civilian clothes and documents—frequently with the help of the Czech or Polish population. There were cases of mass escapes, escapes of small groups, and of individuals. A considerable amount of daring was necessary since the risk was great. Cases where the guards discovered the preparations for escape were not the exception, and punishment followed. Usually the offenders were deprived for a certain time of all advantages, such as walks or Red Cross

parcels; punishments followed: imprisonment in the camp gaol, or transfer to a prison-camp or to an offenders' commando. Some British prisoners were shot by the guard while trying to escape, according to the regulations of the High Command.

Even after getting away from the camp the escapees were by no means out of danger. On the contrary, the worst sector of their journey was just beginning. The British prisoners from camps in Czechoslovakia and Upper Silesia usually attempted to reach the "Protectorate" territory in Bohemia or Moravia where they had the hope of help from the Czech population. The greatest danger for the escapees was the German civil population, thanks to whom a large part of the escaping prisoners of all nationalities in the Czechoslovak border regions were recaptured. In the last years of the war, to be sure, their zeal somewhat slackened, but nevertheless right down to the collapse of Germany the majority of those who escaped from Nazi camps, including the British prisoners, fell into the hands of the security authorities, thanks to the cooperation of the local German population. The frequent financial rewards paid to German civilians for cooperation in recapturing prisoners-of-war are a convincing proof of this. In the extensive raids carried out to track down escaped prisoners, very frequent especially from 1942 to 1945, or in the hunts after suspected persons, not only were those arrested frequently tortured, but even killed. The reports usually allege that the arrested person resisted. We also have proof that cases of such killing of escaping British prisoners also occurred.

If we follow the documents preserved on the escapes of British prisoners and reports of their re-arrest, we must conclude that the majority of the escapees fell once more into the hands of the Nazi authorities within a comparatively small circumference round the place of escape. Only a small percentage succeeded in hiding for a longer time and in reaching as far as some hundreds of kilometres from the place of escape. Only a small handful succeeded in hiding in one of the occupied countries or in crossing the front line, and these cases occurred towards the end of the war.³⁵

Nevertheless the escapes of prisoners were very troublesome for the Nazi authorities, since they lost valuable labour power and, besides, the escaped prisoners meant a real danger for the Nazi rear. It took many efforts on the part of the police to reduce the number of escaping prisoners to at least an acceptable level; and in this they were successful really only at the beginning of the war.

Escaped British prisoners-of-war do not appear so frequently in the ranks of partisan units on Czechoslovak territory as is the case with the Soviet prisoners. Nevertheless at some spots they actively fought alongside citizens of other countries against the common fascist enemy. Their ignorance of the language and thus the limited extent to which they could communicate with the Czech or Polish civilians was one of the reasons why British prisoners only exceptionally joined the local partisan groups. The further fact that the escaped British prisoner was almost certain, if he were caught, to be returned after punishment to his "own" Stalag, also prevented the majority of them from making the dangerous choice of joining the partisans.

In the Czechoslovak border regions several hundred thousand Czechs had their homes and further tens of thousands of Czechs had been sent there from the "Protectorate" to do forced labour. The British prisoners often came into contact with these Czechs, who looked on them as allied soldiers with the same aim as themselves--the defeat of fascist Germany. Thus the Czech population from the

beginning expressed a warm sympathy which showed itself in various forms of help. The documentary evidence shows that Czechs handed over radio reports to the British prisoners giving the latest political events. A considerable number of the escapes were prepared and carried out with the active help of Czechs, who gave the escapees any necessary kind of material help and tried to find a safe hiding-place for them.³⁶

At the time of the transference of the prisoner-of-war camps in the face of the advancing Red Army, the Czech population saved many British prisoners, who were at their last gasp, by giving them food and even by hiding them if they escaped from the transport. It must be remarked that punishments for helping or contacting prisoners were very severe and at the best they meant a lengthy stay in prison for those affected. Usually however the Gestapo sent such Czechs to concentration camp and cases of execution were not exceptional. The slight possibility of communication was the main bar to closer contact with the British prisoners. Only a few Czechs knew English and most of the English prisoners did not even know German. Nevertheless a bond of friendship was set up between the Czechs and the British prisoners, whose motive was their common fate and their common hope in victory over Germany.

The situation in Upper Silesia was similar. There again the Polish population saw the British prisoners as fellow-sufferers and as representatives of a state fighting for Polish freedom. From source material from this territory a similar picture can also be seen, showing sympathy for the British prisoners and the attempt to help them where necessary. Not even the cruellest punishments succeeded in interrupting or destroying the friendly relations of the Poles towards the British prisoners.³⁷

This study has endeavoured to describe on the basis of hitherto unknown archival documents the life of the British prisoners-of-war, sent by the Nazis to work in industrial enterprises on the territory of occupied Czechoslovakia (the border regions) and Poland (Upper Silesia). It has been shown that the British prisoners were in no way protected by the Nazis. On the contrary, in spite of a certain favoured position among the prisoners of other nationalities, the British in Nazi hands endured plenty of physical and mental suffering, bullying, beating, hunger, and in a number of cases the Nazis did not hesitate to use firearms. Many of the British prisoners paid for the idiosyncracies of the Nazi guards and various other persons in authority with their lives. The present study itself is a proof of the incorrectness of the Nazi allegation that no British prisoners in their hands were ever killed. The fact that the British prisoners-of-war had a better position in comparison with prisoners of other nationalities—most clearly seen in comparison with the Soviet prisoners—referred mainly to the standard of diet, since it was considerably supplemented by the regular parcels sent through the International Red Cross. Further regulations of the supreme Nazi authorities on the position of British prisoners were also milder, but they were often disregarded by the lower authorities or by the employers themselves, the guards or the commandants of commandos and camps, in the sense that they were treated more harshly. In conclusion we must also stress that the anti-Nazi activity of the British prisoners was also considerable. In spite of language difficulties both in Czechoslovakia and in Poland, the local population helped the British prisoners and thus contributed to sealing Czechoslovak-British and Polish-British friendship.

NOTES

- ¹ For example in the Upper Silesian area one entire work commando was composed of Cypriots. In other commandos there were numbers of Australians and New Zealanders. Military Historical Archive, Prague (further M.H.A.), Stalag Těšín, 19A, kr. 12, inv. č. 168.
- ² Ibid., List of prisoner-of-war camps on German territory.
- ³ State Archive, Opava, Landrát Krnov, Ho 604/1 č. 721. List of prisoners' work commandos of 30. 6. 1941. Or State Archive, Liberec, Landrát Jablonné v Podještědí, Pol. X 154/6/5. Report of Labour Exchange in Česká Lípa of 3. 3. 1941.
- ⁴ State Central Archive, Prague, S-110-233, F 29/4. Report to K. H. Frank on numbers of prisoners-of-war of 1. 4. 1944. M.H.A., Prague, Stalag Těšín, 19A, kr. 5, fasc. 101. Numbers of prisoners-of-war in area of Stalag VIII B in Těšín.
- ⁵ M.H.A., Prague, 19A, kr. 9, inv. č. 134. e.g. in August 1941 the British refused to work in the Vereinigte Deutsche Nickelwerke in Labedy, because the factory produced ammunition. This case was dealt with by the Gestapo in Hlívce.
- ⁶ Ibid., 19C, kr. 7, fasc. 37 s. List of work commandos.
- ⁷ Ibid., 19A, kr. 10, no. 158. Communication of High Command of 12. 12. 1941. Up to 1941 such prisoners were sent to the Fallingeboitel or Nienburg Stalag, later each camp had its own offenders' commando.
- ⁸ Ibid., kr. 15. Communication of Commandant for prisoners-of-war, area VIII, Vratislav, 10. 2. 1942.
- ⁹ Ibid. Vratislav 30. 6. 1943. Soviet prisoners for refusing to work were often shot dead on the spot.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 19A, kr. 12, inv. č. 168. Complaint of British spokesman of 27. 8. 1943 and decision of Camp Commandant of 2. 9. 1943.
- ¹¹ District Archives in Kadaň, Stalag XIII B, sign. 00089. Order of High Command, Berlin 14. 10. 1942.
- ¹² Works Archive of Rytyně Mines, national enterprise, Žacléř, c. 1796.
- ¹³ M.H.A., 19A, kr. 13, inv. č. 171. Reports of morale of British prisoners for December 1944.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., kr. 9, inv. č. 134, Labedy, 16. 9. 1940.
- ¹⁵ State Archive, Litoměřice, Landrát Ústí n/L, Ko-061/10.
- ¹⁶ M.H.A., 19A, kr. 7, fasc. 127. Extracts from letters of British prisoners for 1944.
- ¹⁷ State Archive, Třebon, Nové Hradky, VII C 7. Report of Stalag XVII B, Gneixendorf 15. 9. 1941.
- ¹⁸ State Archive, Opava, Landrát Krnov, Ho 604/1, č. 723. Report of Labour Exchange in Opava, 4. 5. 1941.
- ¹⁹ M.H.A., 19C, kr. 7, fasc. 44. Military Hospital Record Book of British prisoners from 10. 12. 1943 to 10. 1. 1945.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 19A, kr. 12, fasc. 168. Report of Camp Command Headquarters of 8. 1. 45.
- ²¹ Ibid., 19B, kr. 17, fasc. CLXXV. Reports on rationing of prisoners according to work output.
- ²² Ibid., 19C, kr. 7, fasc. 46. Hospital Record Book of British prisoners.
- ²³ State Archive, Litoměřice, Landrát Chomutov, Gend. II B 1—4, Circular on guarding prisoners-of-war of 1940.
- ²⁴ M.H.A., 19A, kr. 12, č. 168. Těšín, 1. 6. 1944.
- ²⁵ Ibid. Report from Stalag in Těšín of 2. 12. 1944.
- ²⁶ Ibid., kr. 12, č. 168. Report from Stalag Lamsdorf of 8. 3. 1943.
- ²⁷ Ibid., fasc. 166. High Command, Berlin, 28. 10. 1942.
- ²⁸ Ibid., fasc. 168. Report of Stalag Command in Lambinovice of 3. 3. 1943
- ²⁹ Ibid., e.g. Report of Landesschützenbatallion 398, of 10. 5. 1943, which deals with several cases of bullying British prisoners.
- ³⁰ Ibid. A considerable number of reports and copies of correspondence intended for the British prisoners, and some evaluations. Besides personal news from relatives and friends there is to be found in the letters valuable information about the situation in England, Australia, New Zealand, about the concentration of troops in Britain before the invasion, about the bombing of England by V 1 and V 2, etc.
- ³¹ Ibid., 19A, kr. 15, fasc. 184. Report from Stalag of 2. 8. 1944.
- ³² State Archive, Potsdam, Reichsministry for Propaganda, fasc. 778. Copy of letter of Dr. Min-kowský of 8. 6. 1941.
- ³³ M.H.A., 19A, kr. 15, fasc. 193. One of the agents of the Intelligence Branch at the Stalag in Těšín was Prisoner-of-war no. 27367. He got 60 marks as a reward for his work.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 19A, kr. 10, fasc. 156. Report of High Command, Berlin, 12. 5. 1943.
- ³⁵ Ibid., kr. 4, fasc. 24. Book of escapes from the Lambinovice Stalag of 1941—1943.

³⁶ State Archive, Opava. Landrát Opava, W-101/8—1210. State Archive, Litoměřice, Landrát Chomutov, Gend. II B-4. M.H.A., 19A, kr. 7, č. 124, etc.

³⁷ M.H.A., 19A, kr. 7, č. 124. ibid., 19C, kr. 13, č. 75—84. Book of interrogations of recaptured British prisoners for 1944.

ANGLIČTÍ VÁLEČNÍ ZAJATCI NA ÚZEMÍ ČESKOSLOVENSKA A HORNÍHO SLEZSKA ZA DRUHÉ SVĚTOVÉ VÁLKY

Studie se pokusila vylíčit s použitím dosud neznámých archívních dokumentů život anglických válečných zajatců, nasazených nacisty v průmyslových podnicích na území okupovaného Československa (v pohraničních oblastech) a Polska (Horního Slezska). Ukázalo se, že celkově angličtí váleční zajatci nebyli nacisty nikterak chráněni. Naopak, přes jisté privilegovanější postavení mezi válečnými zajatci jiných národností, zakusili Angličané v nacistickém zajetí dostatek fyzických a duševních útrap, šikanování, bití, hladu, ba nacisté se v řadě případů nezastavili ani před použitím zbraní; mnozí angličtí zajatci doplatili na rozmary nacistických strážných a různých jiných nadřazených osob životem. Studie samotná je důkazem neopodstatněnosti nacistických tvrzení, že Angličané nebyli v jejich zajetí nikdy vražděni.

Skutečnost, že angličtí váleční zajatci měli lepší postavení ve srovnání se zajatci jiných národů — nejmarkantněji se to projevilo v porovnání se sovětskými zajatci — se dotýkala především hodnotnějšího stravování, poněvadž bylo podstatnou měrou doplňováno pravidelnými zásilkami balíčků prostřednictvím Mezinárodního červeného kříže. Ostatní nařízení nacistických nejvyšších orgánů o postavení anglických válečných zajatců byla rovněž umírněnější, ovšem bývala dosti často nižšími složkami nebo samotnými zaměstnavateli, strážnými či veliteli komand překračována, a to ve smyslu horšího zacházení s nimi. Třeba závěrem rovněž zdůraznit, že aktivní protinacistická činnost anglických zajatců byla značně silná. Přes jazykové obtíže docházelo jak v Československu, tak v Polsku k podpoře Angličanů z řad místního obyvatelstva a tím současně k vytváření československo-anglického a polsko-anglického přátelství.