

THE GESTAPO PRISON IN ZVOLEN, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

I spent five days in a prison in Zvolen, Czechoslovakia. It was a civilian prison, but used and supervised by the Gestapo. There had been an uprising in the area during the fall of 1944 and the German strong-arms were there in force seeking revenge. The inmates were mostly natives to the area, while only a few were captured military personnel.

The building was three stories high. It was right in the middle of town, bordering one of the main streets. Each floor was identical in plan. The cells were side-by-side across the back of the building with a corridor running the length of the front. The stairs connecting the floors had barred doors at both the top and bottom. I was in a cell on the third floor, so there were six doors that had to be unlocked to get me as far as the lower corridor.

The cells were long and narrow with a single window high in the end wall. The door to the cell was solid steel with a small window about head high cut into it. In my particular cell there was a double bunk and a single cot to the right, occupied by three civilians. On the left side of the cell were two cots for Sgt. Donald Patnode, my tail gunner, and me. The Germans had already determined that neither of us could speak the local language, so they asked the three men if they could speak English. When the answer was negative, Patnode and I were shoved into the room. There was little more than walking room between the cots and the only open area was a small square just in front of the door.

The three men had been there about a week when we arrived. One was in his twenties, one was about forty, and the third was in his sixties as best I could tell. The older man had no idea why he was arrested.

We weren't together long before I trotted out my trusty high school French and found the forty-year-old fellow knew a smattering of French as well. It was a struggle, and required a lot of hand motions, but at least we could communicate.

Almost immediately after our arrival, there was a relay of taps from wall to wall down the building. I was informed that it was a message for me: "There is an American Captain on the first floor." I did not quite know how to react to this. Even if I had known how to make contact in return, I was not sure that I should. I decided to do nothing.

In the middle of the afternoon another series of taps came down the walls and the civilian trio got very excited. At this point they did not confide in us.

What food we received was made up by the Red Cross somewhere in town and brought to us by some volunteer young girls. At the evening meal, they squeezed a pot of food through the window in the door for each of us. I noticed that the girl kept her hand on the bottom of the pot as she passed the food in to the older man and that he slid his hand there to meet hers. When she had gone, he read the note she had passed to him, but left his food untouched. Patnode and I were still in the dark as to what was happening. (Later my French vocabulary began to return and communication got better.)

Our roommates were not trying to keep anything from us. They were just too excited among themselves to spend any time trying to fill us in. In the later afternoon I watched them use the technique of bouncing their voices off the blank far wall of the corridor so that they could talk directly with someone in a cell farther down the row.

As the sun got low and dusk began to arrive, we finally found out what all the turmoil was. The two younger men pulled the double bunk out closer to the front of the window and hoisted the older man on top. After a time of waiting, some figures appeared on top of a building one block away. One of the figures separated from the others and began to wave. It was the older man's wife, whom he had not seen for ten days. They were too far apart to do anything but wave and I'm sure that she might have been able to see the window, but I'm also sure that she was unable to see into it. I was deeply moved by the effort and potential risks that were taken so this old fellow could see his beloved wife. The episode was halted by darkness.

In future days I would receive two further notes from the American Captain on the first floor. One was placed under the food pot like the first one I had seen. The other one was quite different. After the young lady had passed all the food in, she looked furtively around to see if there might be a corridor guard. She then hitched up her skirt and took the note out of the waistband of her underpants. I answered neither note for fear that they might be planted by the Gestapo.

I later learned that the messages were legitimate. When we were thrown together with two more Americans from "downstairs" to be transported to the next prison, one of them was the "American Captain".

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