

Prisoner of War

“WHAT was it like?” I am often asked. The question is as difficult to answer as it would be if put to one who has come to the end of a long ministry. I want to reply, “Do you mean at the beginning? as the war dragged on year after year? near the end, when Germany was breaking up?” I was captured in May 1940, and released in April 1945—five years, and conditions were constantly changing, our circumstances and our own state of mind and health.

Once I got over my surprise at being captured, my first thought was of my good fortune. Wounds or death had seemed inevitable, and here I was, alive and unhurt. Nor was the break with my former mode of life so complete as was that of the combatant prisoners: I was continuing my ministry under different conditions, that was all. I had shared the life of these men during the long months of waiting on the French frontier and for the few crowded days of action in Belgium and France; I had succoured the wounded and buried the dead. And now that the remnant were prisoners, I was still with them, and able to carry on my work with them and with others who soon joined us. I had no doubt that I was the only chaplain captured, for it was some days before Dunkirk, and we had no idea of the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen the B.E.F. Certainly I had lost all my kit—car, clothing, books, sermons—all but what I stood up in; but it was some days since I had seen it, and I trudged along with little sense of change or loss. On the second day officers and men were separated—that was the most grievous loss.

After some days of marching and lorry riding we halted at a temporary camp for our first Sunday. About sixty officers gathered for a service in a small room stacked with double-tier beds, on which we sat. I possessed the only Bible among us, with difficulty saved from confiscation at our daily searches. The censors were ready to pass the Bible as harmless, but gravely suspected my pencilled notes in the margin, here perhaps showing a perspicacity unusual in censors. The two hymns I had to announce from memory, reciting each verse before we sang it. In a brief address I expressed our thanksgiving for our deliverance and our sense of dependence upon God for strength to face our new life. We were very impressionable at this time, and the response to this simple service cheered me much; a fruitful ministry was opening up before me.

I did not expect it to be a long one. At every halting place

the censors told me that doctors and chaplains would be repatriated as soon as possible, under the terms of the Geneva Convention. We would be relieved by civilians who would be sent out from home as volunteers, and would be fully equipped with books, instruments, etc., which we lacked. This was a new and surprising idea to us all. However, I thought, such civilians would not have my chances. They would know nothing of these days when we were all tired, dispirited, ragged and hungry, nothing of the numb insensibility that follows days of fighting with little rest or food, nothing of the long marching, or sitting through June days and nights on half-empty petrol cans in a packed cattle-truck, clutching a few bits of possessions, and half stifled with the petrol fumes. They would find everyone settled down and occupied, in touch with their homes again, getting regular food and clothing parcels: I was in prison, visiting the hungry and thirsty, the naked, the sick and the stranger. Such vague thoughts helped me along the dreary journey.

By the time we reached the permanent Oflag, we were in very poor shape from hunger and exhaustion. Our first hot bath, for "delousing" purposes, was the acme of luxury. We then had our heads completely shorn and our photos taken—a calculated indignity which, as we learned afterwards, our camp alone suffered. These photos were kept on our identity cards, and followed us for four years, evidence that most of us were pretty villainous types, fit only for internment on some Devil's Island. I shall never judge a man from a police photograph.

We were now five chaplains, and within a month, thirty-one, with myself as senior in rank and therefore responsible to the authorities for them all. They were of all denominations, and though individually good fellows, were the most awkward team imaginable. Since we had only twelve hundred officers, and I knew of Stalags of ten thousand men without a chaplain, I had the more incentive to agitate for most of them to be sent out to Stalags. For a long time I was put off by assertions that every camp had a chaplain. The men (as I heard afterwards) were told that we had been asked to come out and had refused because we were too comfortable in the Oflag. After five months' continuous pressure, twenty-three were sent off—to another Oflag twelve miles away containing two hundred officers. It was seven months before two chaplains got to Poland, four years before we were less than seventeen in my Oflag, and for the five years two of us never got out to a men's camp. From the German point of view we were unemployed. So was St. Paul, to his captors; but I doubt if that was the opinion of his guards and fellow prisoners. I expect that my attempts to get chaplains out to camps made the authorities black-list me. After four years a security officer—a

lapsed Roman Catholic—said to me, “You will never be sent out, Mr. Miller.” “Why not?” I asked. “You are a Baptist.” “But why are Baptists discriminated against?” “You bring your people up to look after themselves, and they don’t need a chaplain.” It was a palpable pretext, but I took it as a compliment to us Baptists.

I innocently brought down suspicion upon myself in another way. When at last hymn-books arrived, I began mentioning in my letters to my wife the numbers of the hymns I was reading in prayer times. The censors suspected a code and asked for a copy of the book. My explanation was disbelieved; my wife’s letters, and those only, were held up for comparison and testing from that time on. Their suspicions were irrefragable: if they found a code, how right to suspect me; if not, that proved how cunning I was and how good the code. Such information was put in your dossier and followed you from camp to camp.

At our permanent camp we soon arranged daily prayers, services and a course of lectures on the Bible. We had only my complete Bible and about seven New Testaments, and these were loaned out for half-hour periods. Language classes were started, lectures on Christian Ethics, and finally, with the help of the Chaplains of Peterhouse Cambridge and Eton, a programme of lectures was arranged to cover the whole day from eight till eight. Thus began what was known later as the Oflag VII. C. University. At one time lectures and classes were offered on over eighty different subjects, from Arabic to Logic, from How to Lay Down a Cellar to Pure Mathematics—anything to distract the mind from present circumstances, which at first were grim enough. The German food was always insufficient (a weakened prisoner gives less trouble and has no energy to try to escape), sometimes bad in quality, and mostly insipid. Red Cross parcels had not yet begun to arrive. The half-dozen books, mostly Penguins, were passed round till they came to pieces, and writing materials were very scarce. Our clothes were ragged and thin from wear and washing. That it was summer time was a mercy: you could sunbathe while the clothes were drying, and you need less food in warm weather. You calculated exercise in terms of the food it made you eat. Twice round the field was a slice of bread, and you wondered whether you had enough of the day’s ration to justify another round. “Give us this day our daily bread”; the old petition became new and urgent for us.

These things I became accustomed to. Much worse was the uncertainty about the course of the war. Everything, from newspapers and scraps of news to camp gossip seeped through to you from the enemy. But this only made you the most obstinately confident. We prisoners are, on the whole, modest people, but we

believe that we went on fighting from behind the barbed wire. We know that our cheerful, confident aspect told on the Germans and did more than millions spent on propaganda. Even at the blackest time—the Battle of Britain, reported to us as a complete victory for the Luftwaffe—we never doubted the final victory. I imagine that we each thought it was touch and go, but we kept our fears to ourselves. Worst of all was the overcrowding and the lack of privacy. In time, letters, and food and clothing parcels came through, but this remained a torment to most of us till the end. And this was blamable, since a little thought and trouble would have made all the difference. But hardships of this kind are more often the result of stupidity and lack of imagination, twin offspring of bureaucracy, than of a vindictive desire to inflict pain. Imagine what it means “never to be by oneself, nowhere to read or write quietly, never a comfortable chair, everlasting clattering and scraping of heavy boots on concrete floors, and talk, talk, talk all around one.” The quotation comes from a friend’s letter. I could appreciate better the imaginative insight of Browning’s “Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister,” though even monks have their own cells.

Then comes the first periodical search of your person and kit, of the miserable bits of possessions you have managed to acquire—scraps of paper on which you have written lecture notes, a brief diary, notes of letters written home. What seemed a necessary caution when I was captured now seemed an intolerable intrusion upon the one scrap of privacy left to me. My study of the Bible centred for a time around the letters of St. Paul written from prison, and I realised how little I had been “initiated into the secret for all sorts and conditions of life, for plenty and for hunger, for prosperity and for privations” (Phil. iv. 12, Moffatt).

Our services were at first held in a long garage where we also had our lectures. It held about eight hundred at a squeeze, for there were no seats. An altar at one end had been made by some Poles who had been in this camp before us, and behind it was a painting by one of them, representing the Crucifixion, a crude daub, but a work of devotion, and a triumph over difficulties. We were limited to communion services and one preaching service a Sunday, and since only two churches were recognised, Protestant and Catholic, we protestants had to worship together. We had Anglican and Free Church services alternately, and preached in turn. Sermons had to be written out in full (a useful discipline for some preachers) and submitted for censoring; and one of the censors was present at the service, just in case. . . .

One morning service was rudely interrupted. We had chosen for the opening hymn, “Glorious things of thee are spoken,” to the tune Austria. But this tune was the former Austrian

National Anthem, and we were on the Austrian border. As the first notes sounded forth from several hundred voices there was a rush of guards and security staff from all quarters of the building. They were convinced that a riot or mutiny was beginning, and it was some time before I could convince the chief security officer that we were singing a genuine hymn. Perhaps this experience made them shy; for when in June 1941 the Germans invaded Russia and we chose the hymn "God the All-Terrible" to the tune Russia, it provoked no stir or comment.

Later we bought a grand piano, hymn-books began to arrive, and we moved into a disused room which had formerly been a chapel. Our barracks was a former palace of the Archbishop of Salzburg and in this chapel perhaps Mozart had played while he was in the archiepiscopal service. One of the chaplains was a cathedral precentor and ex-chorister of King's College, Cambridge. He trained some singers, and for three Sunday evenings during our first Christmastide we had a service of nine lessons and carols on the King's College model, with readers chosen from various ranks, from brigadier to private. The chapel, holding five hundred (we now had benches to sit on) was packed each night. Few of us will forget this Christmas, and we had a similar carol service for each of our five Christmases. We were already preparing for Easter. We managed to get one German copy of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. A selection from it was made, lasting about $1\frac{1}{4}$ hours in performance. The text was translated (the Authorised Version was a good translation of St. Matthew's text, but the many chorales had to be put into English verse), the music transposed for male voices, orchestral and choral parts written out, and the thing put into rehearsal. Instrumental and vocal noises could be heard coming from all sorts of odd corners, until even music-lovers became restive. When, after five months' hard work, it was performed, with the whole congregation standing to join in the chorales, the effect was tremendous. I have never heard a more powerful sermon.

By Easter it was clear that the repatriation clauses (and many others) of the Convention were a dead letter, even for the seriously wounded, and that all alike were prisoners for the rest of the war. I had sent for books and planned a long course of study. Food parcels, clothes and bedding from home ensured that we could engage in normal activity—previously we had spent long hours in bed to conserve warmth and energy. Then, in September, some days after my books arrived, forty of us were sent off suddenly and unexpectedly to Rouen on that abortive repatriation scheme, leaving, of course, our books, and most of our clothes and things, for the use of the unfortunate majority who had to stay behind.

At Rouen we waited for nearly three months on the race-course, our hopes of getting home dwindling daily. Food parcels and letters came in time, but the fuel ration remained inadequate. To supplement it we broke up and burnt the racecourse starting-gate; but before we could consume the grandstand we were moved to Poland, arriving there on Christmas Eve, in the depth of a Polish winter. The cheerful courage of the blind and limbless men throughout this experience shamed those of us who were fit and whole out of any indulgence in self-pity. I thus spent three months with some thirteen hundred men, an experience I greatly valued. Much of our time went in arranging and taking lectures and classes with them to occupy their minds. Both here and in the Oflag I proved the fascination to laymen of a simple account of how the Pentateuch was put together from J E D and P, and the Synoptic Gospels from Oral Tradition, Q M and L. Perhaps I ought to add: provided the details have not to be reproduced for examination purposes.

After six months I was back in an Oflag again, and began the long process of building up a library and a stock of clothes and bedding once more. Pastoral work, play-acting, running a choir and lectures took most of my time. Is it paradoxical to say that a prisoner has little time? It is nevertheless true. A certain regularity of life is necessary for carrying through any continuous piece of work. But our life was notably irregular. A prisoner's day was constantly being broken up by various duties—room-chores, drawing meals and hot water for drinks, drawing parcels or mess stores, changing bed-straw, washing clothes when hot water is suddenly made available. A parade for counting us, a pay parade, a parcel issue might be called at any time, and any one of them involve endless waiting in queues until the Germans arrived and your turn came. Lights out was early, about ten o'clock, and late work impossible. Add to that the crowded rooms and the constant noise, and it is understandable that I did about half of what I reckoned to do and took twice as long to do it.

The most rewarding thing I did was a course of lectures on Philosophy which extended over two years, treating the subject historically. We never got beyond the mediaeval period, but the lectures, especially those on Greek Philosophy, aroused surprising interest. I made contact with men I could never have touched in any other way. Like true Englishmen, they expected you to talk sense about a subject that you were the merest dabbler in before they would listen to you upon what you claimed to be your own subject. I am allowed to quote from an article in *Everybody's Weekly*, by Count de Salis, a Roman Catholic, repatriated in 1943:

"Some episodes in the struggle to combat the most insidious

forms of apathy and boredom deserve to be described. Thanks to a padre, we were able to attend a most excellent course of lectures on philosophy. I must confess that I was surprised by the attendance; some ten per cent. of the camp took an interest in what can be so dry a subject. As the lectures went on, the attendance did not fall off. I remember a slight interruption on my pointing out to a most distinguished law lecturer that he had probably never before seen a man in a kilt attending a class on Aristotle!"

The comment is, of course, undeserved, but it serves to show the response that any attempt to help one's companions received. The team-work throughout among lecturers, musicians, actors, etc., was a constant joy and inspiration.

Besides this I was able to do some tutorial work among the men and chaplains. A few started Hebrew, and the Hebrew script, found on the next search, gave the German censors a sleepless night or two. For six months I had theological charge of an Anglican ordinand; but I doubt if the damage will be permanent.

One example of the German's peculiar sense of humour is worth quoting. They kept fierce Alsatians as watch dogs. A notice was posted up in English: "Prisoners are forbidden to feed the dogs: the dogs have also received instructions not to accept food from prisoners." One unforgotten day a dog forgot his instructions, licked the face of an escaping prisoner, and bit the guard.

The last six months brought a return to the early conditions. Red Cross parcels became scarce, and ceased just before Christmas; electric lighting was cut down to a mere glimmer; and the camp was heated only an hour or two each day. And over us hung the shadow of impending events. The more thoughtful of us were in no doubt as to the intentions of the Supreme Head of all P.O.W.s, Herr Himmler, and expected to be sent to Bavaria and kept as hostages. Fortunately the Allied advance and the German collapse was too rapid for the success of such plans. An attempt was made just before Easter to march us away from the advancing American forces, but in vain. The tanks travelled only a mile or two more a day than we did, but it was enough; and after nearly three weeks of marching we were overtaken and released.

I am thankful to have kept fully occupied and in good health all the time; it is in hospital that one sees the real tragedy of prison life. Whether the returned prisoner has gained much from his experience is difficult to say. There is no value in experience as such, in simply living through something. The alchemy which distils from experience its latent value is a highly

personal one. And it all went on too long for most long-term prisoners. As someone has said, "experience is a good teacher, but her fees are high," and a point can be reached when the cost is more than the benefits received:

'Tis the most difficult of tasks to *keep*
Heights which the soul is competent to gain.

But I would not seem to complain. I had a most fruitful ministry, limited only by my own limitations; and I came out alive and whole. In 1944 I talked to a German woman whose son had been killed, and whose son-in-law had been a year as P.O.W. in America. She asked when I had been captured, and on hearing that it was four years before, she exclaimed, "How terrible," and then added, "aber Sie leben noch" (but you are still alive). Many there are who suffered greatly, the wounded and maimed; and many to whom fell what seemed to us the hardest lot of all—death in captivity. They "received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

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