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Letter from France

Phillip L. Melville

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LETTER FROM FRANCE *

MANY THINGS happened since you left, and since I assume that you are interested, I am going to tell you a little bit about what happened to me.

In November, 1943, I entered the Bricq factory as assistant engineer and in January, 1944, I became secret agent, making a liaison with two groups of the underground army. So, during the day I worked at Bricq and at night for the underground. But on May the fifth I was arrested by thirty militiamen who came to pick me up, and my brother as well, early at dawn. After a brief questioning we were taken to the barracks of the militia at Limoges, where we were imprisoned for five weeks, while those gentlemen tried, by means as various as persuasive, to make us talk.

Since they did not find us talkative enough, we learned on July 9 that we were to be taken that evening to the State Prison to be executed. We escaped at three o'clock in the afternoon—in full daylight! The city had been in a state of siege since the morning. A Panzer division of 12,000 S. S. had entered the city the previous night; we certainly selected a fine day. While jumping over the wall, Gerard sprained his ankle and could walk only with my assistance. Naturally, we had to proceed slowly. We were being hunted, and we had no identification papers.

By luck we succeeded in reaching the home of a major in the F. F. I. where we expected to hide, but his wife told us that the major himself was hiding in his own back yard, as the Gestapo was looking for him. So we went on to another place, where we remained for a fortnight, leaving on June 19 to try to reach the Maquis.

The track having been blown up, we had to stay overnight at

*Phillip L. Melville, who fled France and came to New Mexico about 1941, received this letter early last fall from his cousin, Jean ———, now twenty-two years of age. The letter as translated by Mr. Melville, now on the research staff at Purdue University, is otherwise unedited. Jean's brother Gerard is now twenty years old.

Brives. While we were resting, two ruffians, guns in hand, came into our room and ordered us to follow them to the Kommandatur. They questioned us—imagine our extreme anxiety since our lives depended on a single wrong word—but failed to detect our false identity. We were incarcerated in a camp, and a few days later we left with dozens of other “picked-up” Frenchmen as “free” workers.

The trip lasted seventeen days, during which time we were not even allowed to step out of the box-car. We traveled through Bordeaux, Toulouse, Marseille, Lyon, Metz, Coblenz, Stuttgart, Munich, and Salzburg, and arrived on August 7 at Graz. There for six months I had a relatively easy life. Gerard worked in a garage, and I helped a professor in a research laboratory as chemical engineer. But on December 10 we were arrested for activities with Yugoslav Partisans. During the inquiry our false identity was discovered, and on the eighteenth the nightmare started.

I want to tell you about this monstrous creation of the German Spirit called the concentration camp. It is not a pretty picture I shall paint, but a true one. The camp of which I was an inmate, Flossen-burg, was called by the Germans themselves the German Siberia. This camp was in Bavaria near the Czechoslovakian border. One gets there by a road that climbs for kilometers and kilometers over a sinister terrain of black pines and rocks and ravines. Above the gate is the diabolically cynical inscription: “Arbeit macht frei.”

As soon as I was inside the gates, I found myself in a huge courtyard and assailed by a strange odor. I learned later that it came from the crematory, where night and day bodies were being burned.

When I arrived in early winter there was about one meter of snow and the temperature was about -25° . We were taken down to the showers. We were shaven, and all our clothes and personal belongings confiscated. Then very generously we were presented with a pair of ragged trousers, a buttonless shirt, and wooden shoes. An S. S. inspected our teeth. All newcomers who had gold teeth were taken aside and the gold teeth extracted at once. When we went back to the courtyard, I contemplated the forbidding surroundings. All around was the camp, composed of about fifty wooden shacks on the slope of the mountain. The camp was ringed by a triple fence with barbed and electric wires. Every twenty meters was a tower with a machine gun and a floodlight. Beyond were the black pines, the rocks, and the ravines.

We were taken to one of those shacks—which I am going from now on to call a block—where we were to be quarantined for a few days before being sent to work outside the camp in a labor Kommando. Our block was a tower of Babel: we found there French, Belgian, Dutch, Russian, Czech, Serb, Italian, and Polish—men from all the nations subjected to Nazi rule at the time.

As soon as we arrived, a man who looked like a gangster and who never lost his cynical smile, gave us the following little talk which interpreters translated into five languages.

You are here in a concentration camp. These are the rules:

1. Any inmate who attempts to escape and who is caught will be hanged.
2. Any inmate who tears his blanket will be a saboteur and will be hanged.
3. Any inmate who is seen smoking in the block will be considered as trying to set it on fire and will be hanged.
4. Any inmate who steals bread from the block master or from any other authority will be hanged.
5. Any inmate who refuses to work or who destroys tools will be hanged.
6. Any inmate who steals will receive fifty blows with the gummi.

The gummi is an important instrument in concentration camps. It is a rubber stick several centimeters wide. Ten blows will kill a man.

After this welcoming speech, which the block master delivered without losing his smile, each got a piece of material on which was written a number and which each was to sew on his shirt. From then on we lost all personality, to become merely anonymous numbers.

It was about six at night and quite dark. We went outside for roll call, a nightly ceremony at which the S. S. counted the inmates to make sure that none were missing. Roll call was an indescribable nightmare. We lined up in rows of five. For several hundred men talking six or seven languages it takes time, and blows of the gummi were raining all over the place. Almost naked, our feet in the snow, standing at attention in the cold night, we had to wait for the S. S. to get started. Many were stricken by pneumonia and others could stand no longer because of frozen feet. And some of the calls lasted for hours.

The food included at noon a fairly thick soup made with horse-

chestnut flour, which became sour in two hours and which killed with dysentery thousands of inmates; and at five o'clock we got 250 grams of bread with sometimes a piece of margarine or sausage . . . and that was all for the day.

The organization of the camp was certainly one of the most diabolical things the human brain has ever conceived. Among the political prisoners were a few Germans who were incarcerated for theft, murder, etc. To these murderers and gangsters the S. S. entrusted the direction of the camp and the supervision of the work. They distributed the bread and the soup and had the gummi, and consequently ruled like tyrants. Use your imagination—a gangster and a German combined in one person!

The most machiavellian ideas were in the brains of those sadists, to whom human life (of others) meant less than minus nothing. For example, if after distributing the soup, the block master announced that some was left, we, almost insane with hunger, would rush to try to get some more; thereupon the poor fellows who rushed to the kettle would be killed by blows from the gummi. Two days after I came I saw a friend of mine fall with his skull broken and his brains splashed around.

After a few days in camp I left for what is known as a labor Kommando. Of the fifty who left, twenty-one came back alive five weeks later. In this Kommando (near Nuremburg) we had to unload cars of electrical material for the Luftwaffe. Men weakened by disease and hunger had to carry rolls of 150 pounds of copper wiring. Those unable to lift the rolls received blow after blow with the gummi—not only by the S. S. or the gangster “straw bosses,” but also by soldiers of the Luftwaffe itself. Near us was a camp of one hundred women doing the same work under the same conditions.

The place where we slept was so badly protected that we slept on the frozen ground in the snow. Perhaps because we were underfed, our hands and feet froze more easily. In spite of the atrocious suffering, we had to go on working for the Greater Reich.

On Sunday afternoons there was supposed to be no unloading, but the airmen of the Luftwaffe, lacking distractions, made us “perform” for them. It was the most humiliating, the worst suffering of all.

After five weeks, those still alive were taken back to Flossenburg. We made the fourteen-hour journey standing in a truck, in the wind and the snow, with no food of course. Upon reaching the camp we

found that something had changed. Thousands of prisoners stood in front of the blocks. It was February, when the Soviets were advancing fast and the Nazis had had to evacuate the camps of Poland, Silesia, and East Prussia. Thousands of inmates arrived from Birkeno, Auschwitz, Grothausen, etc. The camp built for 15,000 *misérables* now contained forty thousand.

Then the S. S. started extermination on a large scale—and a good job they made of it. We were overcome by a thick smoke which made breathing difficult. The smoke came from the pyres where stacks of bodies were being burnt, since the crematories were not large enough. Soon the pyres themselves were not large enough, and the S. S. made us dig graves into which were thrown the bodies, dead or alive, of thousands of human beings, which were then covered with quicklime and sand.

Various means of exterminating us were used. For instance, the “dance of the dead”: in the middle of the night we had to get up and run for hours, naked, around the block. Or we had to stand at attention for hours. Sometimes after roll call we went into the block to take off our clothes, then walked two hundred meters through the snow to the showers. Here we were locked in, and so crowded that we could not sit down. The steam was turned on and we breathed only with the greatest difficulty. We had to stand there twelve hours when we were released. Dozens fell dead as we crossed the courtyard, and of course thousands died of pneumonia.

During the day those who did not work had to remain standing outside, and at night they did not even get a board to sleep on. They got only half food rations.

An epidemic of typhus broke out, but the hospital had no serum and no medicine. Men died like flies. Fleas infested the camp and, unable to sleep at night, we scratched until we bled. The odor of blood excited the S. S. dogs, which jumped upon us to get pieces of flesh.

One day we were all called to the courtyard to witness the hanging of six inmates. The victims, stripped to the waist, climbed the stools and passed their heads through the loops. The verdict was read aloud and translated into five languages. One of the men, a Russian, cried: “Courage, Comrades, Death to the Nazis!” Even after all that we had been through it was hard to restrain the tears. The commanding

officer, a colonel of the S. S., kicked the stools—and that was all. The bodies swung from the ropes for several days.

Among all that ignominy, as a proof of German hypocrisy, a huge Christmas tree stood lighted during the holidays. I, of course, was reminded of home and happy times there, and my anguish was multiplied. The hypocrisy of those monsters of cruelty and barbarians! How many times were we taken to the hospital for fake check-ups! They never took care of the sick and wounded, but they kept a record for the Greater Reich of the hygiene and good care they took of the prisoners. While the S. S. men were putting on that show, the blocks of workers became blocks of sick men. At the showers all the horrors due to privation and mistreatment appeared: bones breaking through the skin, swollen stomachs, yellow skin, sores, scars—infection everywhere. The men who did not die quickly enough were pulled out and sprinkled with ice-cold water.

The dignity of death disappeared. Naked bodies were pulled on the ground, then stacked in cars and taken to the pyres or ovens. On February 20, six thousand prisoners were taken and I among them, to an airport thirty kilometers away. The airport was covered with snow, and for twelve hours every day we had to tramp over the snow so that planes could land.

One night the block master started using the gummi when we did not respond to roll call fast enough to suit him. I caught one blow that broke my skull, and I passed out. The other prisoners like a mad flock stampeded in all directions and I was badly trampled. By luck a Frenchman saw me and dragged me away. But after call he had to leave me, and I remained in a coma for thirty-six hours. When I woke up I was on a car taking bodies to the oven. I cannot put into words what I felt. . . .

On March 10 a Kommando of 400 prisoners was formed and we were sent to southern Bavaria. When we were liberated two months later, on the third of May, 123 of the 400 were alive, and eighty of them were dying. During the four-day trip we got no food or beverage. We were packed 120 in a car and could not move around. When we arrived, four were dead and seven were insane in my car.

The next day we started to work on an airport five kilometers away. Building a concrete runway, we worked with pick and shovel fourteen hours a day with practically no food. Every night on the way back men collapsed by the roadside. They were taken to the

camp, where they were killed with a few blows of the gummi, or left to die of starvation since they no longer worked for their daily food.

I was delivered by Patton's Army on May 3, when I was near death, having had no food whatever for seven days. I was sent to an American field hospital, where I was nursed—and spoiled—in a way that my life was saved. I shall never forget what the Americans did for me for eight days, which were the most beautiful of my life. Then I joined the French First Army as an interpreter of the Bretagne Regiment. I left Ratisbonn on May 17 and landed three hours later in my beloved Paris.

But all the suffering due to the cold, illness, exhaustion, ill treatments, all the mental anguish, the humiliation of being beaten by the Germans without having a chance to answer, all was dominated by one supreme torture: hunger. In camp or in the Kommando, day or night, we thought, we dreamed of but one thing: food, food, food! Such hunger killed all sense of dignity, all softer human feelings. Man became an animal again. There was no more comradeship, no more honesty, no more *esprit de corps*: one had to eat—anything to quiet this crawling, gnawing torture that never left us. We ate potato peelings, most of the time spoiled, picked up along the road; pieces of cattle beet; grass. We even licked for hours bones left by the dogs of the S. S., since these beasts got every day large pieces of meat while we were allowed to look at the sight.

So the Germans by means of those concentration camps destroyed in a few years several million human beings. In these enfernos they had a chance to give a free hand to their sadistic imagination and ugly hypocrisy. Whether in Buchenwald or Dachau or Auschwitz or Flossen-
senburg or among the women at Ravensbruck or Birkeno, everywhere it was the same story. And all the prisoners who got out will tell you the same thing: we shall never forget! You who were lucky to stay in France or to join the fight for liberty, you too, I am begging you, for the sake of peace in Europe and in the world, you, too, do not forget.