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PRISONER OF WAR

ONE of the odd things about being taken prisoner of war is that nobody to whom it happens ever seems to have imagined the possibility. When I was wounded in a raid behind the enemy lines in Cyrenaica in November 1941, it suddenly became obvious to me that I should have to be left behind when the others withdrew and that I must fall into the hands of the Germans. My first thought was, 'but this can't be happening to *me*.' After this first wild recoil I was able to examine my situation more calmly. I had quite expected to be killed and I was only wounded in the leg. I was flooded by a sense of relief. There was nothing more I could do and I began to feel almost serene (perhaps the morphia I had taken helped) and only slightly apprehensive about what the Germans would do to me. After three months of illness and the amputation of my damaged leg, the relief at being alive was reinforced by the joy of convalescence and, even now, after two years, I still feel it sometimes.

I spent a year in various hospitals and then was sent to a prison camp for British officers in Thuringia, central Germany. Looking back, I discover that I soon adopted a double perspective for living in captivity; looking at my life from a vantage point in the future outside prison and dealing with every actual problem of avoiding discomfort in prison only as and when it arose. For a prisoner wounded in such a way that he knows he cannot escape this way of living from day to day and hour to hour, avoids fret and worry about the immediate future. He knows—or rather trusts—that one day he will emerge again into freedom, but there is nothing he can do to bring that day any nearer. He need have no anxieties except about such questions as the amount of straw in his mattress and how to make one tin of condensed milk last a week. Once inside the barbed wire perimeter of a prison camp, most of the anxieties and responsibilities of ordinary life are left on the outside. For one thing there is no money. The Germans issue special paper currency for prisoners of war, but since there is nothing to buy it represents nothing. Some

prisoners used it to bet with, but I could never find any satisfaction in winning a sheaf of paper. This simplifies life enormously. It is just like being so rich that you never have to consider the cost of anything with, I suspect, the added advantage that you need suffer no anxiety about competing claims for your spending. Once you have lost the habit of possessiveness or acquisitiveness, or had it broken by circumstances, it is surprising how little you need. Though with some people acquisitiveness must be something more than a habit, for there are prisoners of war who never lose it. They exercise their miserly propensities by hoarding such rarities as razor blades, lavatory paper and matches. Numerous cardboard boxes full of more or less useful possessions accrete round these people. Every now and again they do produce with the air of a conjuror the very thing that is needed. The improvident avoid the strain of packing and unpacking numerous cardboard boxes (the usual form of prisoners' luggage) when moving camp. And since your baggage is searched for contraband both on departure and arrival, you usually have to pack three times for one journey.

Another great simplification of existence is that food and clothes are free. No amount of effort will secure a man more than his share of either—at least no ordinary effort and success is not admired. Supplies of both food and clothes are supplemented by rare parcels from home, but the Red Cross rules that no prisoner may have more than a certain number. The food supplied in the Red Cross parcels is wholesome though monotonous and so not particularly appetizing; not that this matters, because the quantity is such that the appetite never needs stimulating. It is seldom that you finish a meal without the sensation that you could easily begin all over again. This, I have always been told, is the sign of a healthy diet and I certainly found it so. Sometimes after a breakfast at 9 o'clock of two slices of German black bread with margarine and jam and a large mug of English tea with sugar and condensed milk, I became so hungry by one o'clock that I found it difficult to concentrate on whatever I was doing, but usually there would be a hunk of bread to gnaw. Prisoners from the campaign in France told me that in the first months before the Red Cross food began to arrive, they were so weak from hunger that it cost them a real effort and several rests to climb two flights of stairs. I am unusually greedy and

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before being captured I had been in the habit of giving a great deal of attention to food, but after about four months I could eat almost anything and I became much more interested in quantity than quality. I was only occasionally tortured by daydreams of oysters and lobster Newburg.

As to clothes, most of us, whatever our previous habits, came to regard them as only necessary coverings. There were a few persistent dandies who regularly appeared in uniforms with glittering buttons and lustrous shoes and who wore hats. They were regarded as harmless eccentrics. Not that the rest of us were very squalid, for there was an unexpressed feeling that it would be a very bad show not to shave punctually every day in spite of the fact that razor blades were extremely scarce (one blade had to do for six weeks or two months) and we had hot water only once a fortnight. Most prisoners just continued to wear a suit of battledress until it wore out and then applied to the English camp store for a new one, which they were given after a sort of means test.

By far the most unpleasant discomfort of a prison camp is the total lack of privacy. I shared a bed-sitting room about 20 feet square with fifteen other prisoners. We slept in double-decker beds which were ranged round the walls to leave space for two tables and some twelve kitchen chairs. I never grew accustomed to the gravelly hardness of these beds, which had loose wooden boards where springs should have been and on top a palliasse meagrely stuffed with straw. The longest period I was alone in this room was eighteen minutes. There was a small room used as a library where I used to go and read in the mornings; if you did not get there early enough there was no room to sit down. Even here the silence was broken by people coming to change their books at midday. To become adapted to this lack of solitude it was necessary to develop a kind of reptilian insensitiveness—like crocodiles in their tank at the Zoo, which walk over each other without either appearing to notice the other. When sixteen people live in the same room together for a year or more the evasions and other polite subterfuges of ordinary life naturally become impossible. Every word you speak to one of the fifteen is probably in the hearing of the other fourteen or some of them, so you cannot assume different personalities with different people. Nor can you hope to dissemble with success your opinion

on any subject. The only hope for comfortable relationships in these circumstances is candour softened by imaginative understanding. Although every person in the room more or less knows the opinion of every other person on any subject there is plenty of discussion which, however, rather easily becomes abusive argument. Prisoners are thrown together more by the random play of chance than by any stringently selective principle, and so their views are extremely diverse. I was surprised that so many of them were agreed that politics were a dirty racket and all politicians hypocrites on the make. Apart from occasional acrimony, good temper in argument is usual because it is unnecessary in that sort of existence.

Living permanently surrounded by so many people with whom they are on terms of schoolboy superficial intimacy, I imagine that all prisoners at times feel intensely lonely and sick for home. Even the most insensitive have their days of black depression. It is the result perhaps, of the sterility of an existence entirely deprived of the company of women and children (though I once heard an unashamed lecher declare that he missed dogs more than women). An exclusively male community seems to me to lack emotional drive and spontaneity. Many prisoners do become very firm friends, more usually because of shared experience than common tastes, but this kind of relationship seems more comforting than stimulating. It is accurately described by the phrase 'it is so nice to be with someone you don't have to talk to unless you feel like it.'

In a tightly confined society which is compacted by the common aim of presenting a united front to the Germans, the derelictions of the individual are all on the social plane. Prisoners have found that the best, indeed only way to treat the Germans is by an uncompromising insistence upon their rights under the Geneva Convention and by instant and persistent complaint to the Protecting Power (the Swiss who periodically visit the camp) if these rights are infringed. In my experience most Germans are constantly trying to put the relationship on another footing. The attitude and conduct of one type implies: 'You are the prisoners of the Herrenvolk and we shall treat you as we think proper without any of this nonsense about international agreements. We are knightly and magnanimous, not Bolsheviks, so we will not shoot you unless you do something to annoy us.'

Another type is constantly trying to insinuate a transaction into the relationship. He will say, in effect: 'Look here, you and I are sensible fellows and we neither of us want trouble and unpleasantness. I will let you do or have whatever it may be if you will just give me your word as an officer that you will not try to escape.' The concessions offered are commonly far short of the prisoners' rights laid down in the Geneva Convention. Every form of insidious tactic is used in the attempt to supplant the Convention as the basis of the relationship between prisoners and German camp authorities. The commandant of a hospital where I was for a time one day declared that one Red Cross parcel of food a fortnight per prisoner was quite enough and that he did not propose to adhere to the rule of one parcel a week per prisoner laid down by the International Red Cross. He refused to allow the food store to be opened. The senior English doctor pointed out that the German commandant could not decide such things. His reply was: 'On the contrary; I command this hospital and I intend to see that English prisoners are not better fed than German civilians.' After a good deal of argument he proposed compromise. The English doctor remained inflexible and filed a complaint. After about a month, during which the prisoners were on short rations, he must have received orders from the German War Office, at the instances of the Swiss, to adhere to the agreed rate, for he announced with a great show of magnanimity that he had decided to issue one parcel a week to every prisoner. This arrogance has its useful side; commandants cannot abide the thought of their subordinates stooping to swindle the English. Two German quartermasters caught stealing rations meant for British prisoners received the dreaded punishment of being sent to the Eastern front.

It is easy to see that compromise with the German authorities is fatal and inflexibility essential. The lowest thing a prisoner can do in the opinion of his fellows is to betray the united front of inflexibility for his own comfort and advantage. All forms of selfishness are instantly detected and loudly denounced. Prisoners develop a hawk eye for 'rackets', but appeasement is the deadliest crime. The British have one enormous advantage over prisoners of other nationalities. They expect to be well treated. In spite of wartime propaganda about devilish Huns

they are genuinely astonished and indignant if they are not cared for as honoured guests. This applies particularly to private soldiers. Their standards of food, sanitation and comfort are so high and their astonishment and disgust when expected to put up with lower standards so unfeigned and unrancorous that the Germans, unwilling to admit that their own standards are lower, are shamed into making improvements. It is quite impossible for the Germans to put across any *Herrenvolk* stuff in the face of the innocent arrogance of British soldiers, who are impenetrable to the idea of German superiority and simply think it uproariously funny. This baffles the Germans. In spite of persistent efforts to propagand British troops through the medium of a weekly newspaper called *The Camp*, I do not believe they have made any impression at all. *The Camp* has the usual three main lines of attack. First, the Germans are winning the war (the weekly summary of the war news is so flagrantly absurd that it defeats its end): the British should get together with the Germans, because, if the Allied Powers win, Russia will be supreme in Europe and the United States will appropriate the Empire (variations on this theme are plugged weekly in an article 'the German Point of View' which is very 'sane and moderate' in tone): the honest English working man is being exploited by capitalist Jews. These views are sandwiched between articles on such subjects as German motor-bicycle engines and German football; English football and racing results and chronicles of camp sports and concerts and other contributions written by the prisoners themselves. I suspect that hardly anybody who reads the paper reads 'the German Point of View'. If propaganda exerts its influence on the subconscious level of the mind, I suppose *The Camp* must have some influence though I have never seen the slightest sign that it has.

I believe almost every prisoner would agree that the attitude of the Germans towards the war and towards us has altered considerably since 1940. I am told by those who were captured in that year that after the fall of France the Germans were boasting that the war would be decided in their favour in a few months and that they treated English prisoners atrociously. When I was captured in November 1941 they were still full of confidence. Indeed they had grounds for confidence then. During the time I was in hospital in Athens we failed to destroy Rommel's forces

in North Africa; we lost Singapore and the Russians were retreating. I had an exasperating conversation with a Stuka pilot who had broken his arm. He was full of bounce and rather condescending. He thought it foolish of us to have made war on Germany, and it was a pity they were going to have to hurt us. My argument about violated agreements failed to convince him because he would have it that the occupation of Prague had preceded the Munich Agreement. I was exasperated, too, by the German women who visited the wards and brought cigarettes and picture papers to the German troops in the Athens hospital. They fussed about mournfully in their shabby, ill-fitting black clothes. After sympathizing over my amputated leg, one of these crows gloomily said to me one day: 'I am sure you did not want this war any more than we did, but what can people like you and I do? It's the governments that decide these things, isn't it?' No amount of talk could have shown her her mistake. It is sad to reflect that so many good, kind old and middle-aged women will have to suffer for their cow-like submission to German men. But I have no doubt that they would have thought Hitler perfectly splendid if he had won the war and that they would have been the first to applaud in foolish wonder. In Athens where these women were living, some 500 Greeks were at that time dying of starvation daily.

The ebbing of German confidence in the result of the war was quite obvious after Stalingrad (for which they had a day of national mourning) and Tunisia and was often reflected in their attitude towards prisoners. Guards became more accommodating and some even frankly conciliatory. I heard one guard say to a prisoner: 'You won't forget how good I've always been to you English?' If they had an unpopular task to perform such as making all prisoners get up in the middle of the night for a search, they would often excuse themselves by saying: 'We are sorry, but we are only doing our duty by carrying out orders.' Since obliteration-bombing began, the civilians whom prisoners meet travelling in trains from one prison camp to another are perhaps a shade less ready to start conversations. It was while travelling that I had the unforgettable experience of seeing a man literally foaming at the mouth with rage. He was a railway guard who had to hold up a train for a party of prisoners and their luggage. He shouted, he bellowed and flecks

of froth flew from his lips; he was pale and shaking. He must have been boiling up against his life for a long time. When he began to shout, the blank incomprehension and mild concern on the faces of the prisoners infuriated him still more. I do not believe I have ever seen a man so angry. To pretend not to understand is the most effective answer to a shouting German unless they are in a shooting mood.

Prisoners of other nationalities (except Americans) probably have a harder time than the British. For one thing they get far less food. The Russians, for example, are underfed and many are worked to death. They are generally treated as a commodity much less valuable than cattle. I saw many who were doing hard manual labour up till a fortnight before their death from tuberculosis of the lungs. Wherever it is possible, British prisoners give them extra food and some cigarettes. Most of those I saw seemed bewildered and childlike; at the first sign of friendliness they broke into happy smiles. In 1942, most of the French prisoners I saw seemed depressed, sloppy and surly and they displayed numerous photographs of Pétain in their sleeping quarters. But in the last year their spirits have risen and now they usually wave and shout friendly greetings to passing British prisoners. I met a French major, aged 53 and the father of twelve children, who had broken his arm trying to escape from his guards by jumping out of a train travelling at about 25 miles an hour.

German women do not always take advantage of the legal protection afforded by the Reich (which, by the way, is often referred to by British soldiers as 'the Third and Last') against the amorous advances of working prisoners. In spite of notices prominently displayed in working camps warning prisoners that they are liable to ten years' imprisonment for speaking to a German woman without special permission. I met a Frenchman who had faked an illness to get into hospital to escape the attentions of a mother and her daughter at the farm where he worked. He explained that he had had an instant success with the daughter, but her mother had discovered the affair and, anxious to supplant her daughter, was blackmailing him by threatening to denounce him to the police. An English soldier told me that he had seen a woman being led through the main street of her village with a placard round her neck announcing: 'I have been the whore of

a prisoner while my husband was fighting at the Eastern front.' I cannot vouch for the exact wording, but that was certainly the sense of it.

Conditions in an officer's prison camp form the perfect background for reading and writing. Being deprived of many outlets for action and freed from the mental and sensual distractions of normal life, the mind seems to need some load to grapple with if it is not to race like an engine with a slipping clutch. Particular books are hard to get and I found I could easily read and enjoy such formidably unreadable works as the life of Herbert Spencer in two volumes with a score of appendices. I found my mind worked more clearly and connectedly than ever before. For people whose only form of expression is action, the narrow confinement and monotony is a torment. We calculated that one unquiet spirit had walked at least 10,000 miles and worn out six pairs of boots since his capture simply by pacing round and round the compound—a gravel space some fifty yards square. Many prisoners learnt to play some musical instrument; one man constructed a model galleon out of toothbrush handles; quite a few played bridge or poker every evening of their lives; theatricals occupied quite a lot of the time of others; many learnt languages and worked for examinations.

On the whole I would say that captivity had a beneficial effect upon all but the most unteachable. Nobody has a job which occupies his whole energy; nobody can say: 'I've finished my work and now I will go to the cinema, pay 2s. 4d. and be entertained, or I will put on my slippers and read a detective story or turn on the radio.' Prison life is not divided into thought-tight compartments of work and play. If prisoners want entertainment they must work for it themselves. Most of them therefore find some activity which is neither completely one thing nor the other, but both at once. Their mental energy thus becomes spread over their whole waking life and it is virtually impossible in prison surroundings not to be led by this shift of perspective to some consideration of the bases on which your life and the lives of others rest. They learn to question these bases and to overhaul and sometimes to revise the values by which they have lived their lives. Those who do this seem to become more aware and more understanding. The trouble is that imprisonment goes on too long. I fancy that many people would benefit by a year

of enforced inactivity and freedom from small anxieties and distractions to examine the pre-suppositions and aims of their conduct and that of others. But unless these people are practised mystics, the lack of novelty in time breeds a dreadful staleness. There are some unfortunate men who were captured in the first weeks of the war and many who have been in prison camps since the summer of 1940, who are still there.

Returning to England is an overwhelming experience for one who has been a prisoner of war. It is a distinct shock to find that the world outside is no longer hostile but anxious to be kind and helpful. Solitude and freedom to go and come and see whom you will are intoxicating. It is a form of convalescence in which all impressions are more vivid and the exercise of every faculty and appetite more deeply enjoyable. Returned prisoners are not the best people to ask about the changes in life at home, for they are concerned to recognize and greet all that has remained unchanged and familiar. The great contrast for prisoners is between England and Germany, where every civilian looks gloomy and hag-ridden. Even before the war they looked a bit like this, but I believe they have now lost confidence in the future and, though all that I was able to see of Germany convinced me that they are far from collapse, their morale is noticeably lower than at the end of 1941 when I was captured.

I think that perhaps the best way in which it is possible to help prisoners of war is for their relatives to write to them regularly. It is most depressing to feel that your absence makes no difference. It is encouraging to be told occasionally that you are being missed. To receive a letter always lessens the feeling of being a forgotten, useless exile; it strengthens the ties with the life you would like to be sharing. I found that it was not so much the big events that I was glad to hear about as details about personalities. Many prisoners are, however, passionately curious about post-war planning, and a copy of the Beveridge Report was a best-seller in the Camp. The best sort of books to send to a prisoner are books on his special subject, books of permanent serious interest and a sprinkling of contemporary novels.

Captain Campbell was taken prisoner on the Commando raid which tried to capture Rommel's Headquarters. The Commanding Officer, Colonel Keyes, V.C., was killed; Captain Campbell was severely wounded and taken prisoner.

A. KOESTLER

THE INTELLIGENTSIA

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'INTELLIGENTSIA' is one of those terms difficult to define, but easy to associate. It is logically blurred but emotionally vivid, surrounded with a halo, or rather several halos which overlap and vary according to period and place. One may list as examples the romantic salon; the professional middle classes; terroristic organizations of students and aristocracy in the second half of nineteenth-century Russia; patriotic University Corps in post-Napoleonic Germany; the Bohemians of Montmartre, and so on. There are also evocative geographical names like Bloomsbury, Montparnasse, and Cagnes; and certain typical attitudes to life including clothing, hair-fashion, drink and food. The aura of the intelligentsia changes all the time; its temporary representatives are subdivided into classes and groups, and even its limits are blurred by a host of camp followers and hangers-on: members of the aristocracy, maecenases, tarts, fools, admirers and Earnest Young Men. Hence we won't get far with impressionistic judgements, and had better look up the Oxford dictionary for a solid definition.

There we find:

'Intelligentzia, -sia, The part of a nation (esp. the Russian) that aspires to independent thinking.'

Thus the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 3rd edition, 1934.

By 1936, in the climate of the pink decade and the popular front, the definition has undergone a significant change:

'The class consisting of the educated portion of the population regarded as capable of forming public opinion.'
(The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 2nd edition, 1936).

This second version has since obviously been proved too optimistic, and we had better fall back on the first which is excellent. Historically, it is indeed the 'aspiration to independent thinking' which provides the only valid group-characteristic of the intelligentsia.

But how does it happen that an 'aspiration towards independent thinking' arises in a part of a nation? In our class-ridden world this is obviously not a matter of a spontaneous association