

On the 60th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, 92-year-old Polish immigrant and Monroe resident Zbigniew Orłowski remembered his time as a Polish officer in World War II and his days as a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp.

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Captive memories

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Second Lt. Zbigniew Orłowski could hear the bombs exploding to the north over Munich.

For almost six years, he had hoped for rescue from the barbed wire-capped walls of a German prisoner of war camp.

Finally, it came.

"That was the most beautiful day. I never forget it — the enthusiasm, the happiness," he said, 60 years after the end of World War II, sitting in his small Monroe apartment. "You know what happened with my mind when I was six year in hunger, and someone come liberated you. Because I was religious, I was thanks to God."

That day, the hell of captivity was over. ...

INVASION OF POLAND

In late August, 1939, at age 26, he had been recalled into the Polish service and sent to the countryside bordering Germany.

On Sept. 1, 1939, at 4 a.m., bombing began about six miles away.

When the German army was less than half a mile away, the Germans opened fire.

"The (German) army squeeze us," he said in a thick Polish accent. "German was so powerful, and Poland was not ready for war because we got only 20 year independence after 125 dependence from European country ... So we losing, and German have easy way. Still, we kill quite a bit."

The fighting continued for nearly 12 hours.

"By me there was one soldier — Polish soldier — and the bullet cut his stomach and all the intestine go out, and he start, 'Help me, help me.' And this intestine together with sand, he start put them back, and he start put them back and he said, 'Oh God, oh God, let me go.' And he die. Just by me."

When the day's fighting ended, a horse-drawn wagon collected the wounded from the battlefield, leaving a trail of blood behind it as the army drove along 10 miles of uneven road. By the side of the road lay fly-coated limbs and heads separated from torsos.

"The action of war was so fast, they call 'Blitzkrieg,' " he said. "There was not time to bury people."

By daylight, he hid in potato fields, while the German front advanced into Poland.

"By me, only bullet, bullet, bullet," he said. "When the German attack us, I saw that pressure from bomb, there was such a horrible pressure. The blood go from (my) mouth, from nose and from ear."

At dark, the remaining soldiers collected the dead and wounded and loaded them onto the carts.

Only Mr. Orłowski and four others from his unit remained by the fifth day of the assault. They focused their sights on Warsaw, the country's largest city, roughly 250 miles away, where they were certain the Polish army was still strong enough to fight off the Nazi advance. At the Warta River, 13 days later, they met more Polish troops thinned by the German attacks. By Sept. 25, when they reached the Vistula River, which divided them from Warsaw on the other side, they found the bridge gone.

They stopped by the river to determine how to cross. Like Mr. Orłowski, some soldiers could not swim the mile-wide river.

He recalled an unarmed German officer approached them quietly, peacefully. He told them the war was over and led them to other captured Polish officers.

"He says, 'We come liberated you.' The Germans say, 'We come liberated you,' " Mr. Orłowski explained with a chuckle. "You feel horrible when you lose independence. ... When you have job teaching, when you found lady and when you want to get married, when you are ready to start life normal, come war suddenly and destroy everything."

Yet some sense of relief settled on the Polish troops, now prisoners heading to Germany for incarceration.

"During the war, you was always in danger, danger of life. Death was just behind you. Mentally you feel, I don't care what happen to me," he said.

PRISONER OF WAR

The Germans transported about 1,000 officers to a historic castle in Ingolstadt, north of Munich in the south German region of Bavaria. For a month, the soldiers slept on straw and fought bedbugs while the Germans prepared Oflag VII-A, the prisoner-of-war camp in Murnau, Germany, that would house, by the end of the war, about 5,000 Polish officers and more than 45 high-ranking Polish generals by 1945.

In barracks not originally intended for human habitation, the Germans piled bunks three high, again giving the soldiers straw for their bedding.

"The bedbugs eat you," Mr. Orłowski said. "They by thousand, when I put on mattress, I was covered."

The soldiers were given a kitchen — though food mostly consisted of barley — and a small room to use as a church.

"One thing that was in my mind, survive and return to Poland," he said. "They predicted two year, four year, six year, some people 10 year."

"I pray only that God let me pass this horrible time for me."

At 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., the Germans counted their Polish captives.

"The process of counting was very long. Sometimes was rain. Sometimes was cold. We have already not good shoes, not good dress. And sometimes we shaking when waiting," he said. "This standing was sometimes two, three hour on cold, on rain, on snow."

Escape was rare, Mr. Orłowski said. There were only a handful of attempts.

"One day, one man go through the wire — there was six line of wire — and one day on my eye, this man go under wire," he said. "What they do, our friend they performing fighting that this German... was watching us. He's involved with the fighting and, in the meantime, (our friend) go under wire and fly away."

The Polish officers attempted to cover for the missing soldier in the count, with one soldier sneaking down the line to be counted twice. But the escaped man was eventually caught and beaten. Mr. Orłowski said the conditions at Oflag VII-A were not enough to prompt his escape.

"To me, if I go to Poland, I be arrested," he said. "Here (in the camp), International Red Cross have mercy on us."

So he stayed, obeying the rules to the best of his ability.

In fact, the German officers told the Polish POWs they had "only one law: Be alive. That's all," Mr. Orłowski barked, imitating the German officer who had said it 66 years ago. "If we do something wrong, we lose this freedom in the camp."

'MANY TRAGEDY HAPPEN'

Instead, Mr. Orłowski said, many chose suicide — about 100 by his recollection.

"Many tragedy happen," he said, his voice wavering. "I was in restroom, and I saw next to me somebody sit down and I see on the floor blood. And I was just get up and see and he cut his veins by Gillette (razor) ... By Gillette, cut veins and blood was (on the ground), and later he collapse."

Those who chose to live and wait for liberation starved. By some accounts, about 100 more would die from malnutrition and disease. Evening meals consisted of barley, water and a bit of salt. In the winter, the Germans provided herbs for tea and, occasionally, small pieces of liver or sausage.

After a year, the POWs were allowed contact with their families. Mr. Orłowski wrote home begging for bread. When it arrived after nearly a month, it was rotten, just like much of the food provided to the POWs. He wrote again, asking for dried bread, which soon arrived.

"When I have piece of bread, dry in my mouth, I'm feeling so happy that I have something to eat."

Mr. Orłowski's small, normally 150-pound frame shrank to just 95 pounds.

"I was like skeleton, walking skeleton," he said.

At night, the POWs would listen to radios smuggled into the camps and bought off German soldiers with cigarettes.

"First we expect French ... they liberated us. So we learn a few words in French. 'Je suis lieutenant polonais.' 'I am Polish lieutenant,'" he said. In mid-1940, news of France's fall to Germany reached the POWs.

The radio sustained the POWs while they awaited a new liberator.

Early in 1942, hope was revived when American troops landed in Great Britain.

"We know all what was going on front and how German losing. And later German come to our camp and talk to us, and we talk about what we hear about German army losing so much, and they were suspicious and they start search. And they come to my barrack," he said. "There was just, they just couldn't understand that we know everything ... We have newspaper, the German give us. All lies. All lies."

Mr. Orłowski and his fellow soldiers simply had to wait.

ART AMIDST MISERY

After some time, life in the camp began to organize.

Many of the Polish officers had been professors, artists and scientists before the war. The highly educated officers organized classes in art and literature, promising the "pupils" degrees when freedom allowed them to return to Poland.

Mr. Orłowski took courses toward a master's degree in art, his makeshift professors assuring him the Polish universities would honor his work after his return from Germany. The Polish officers offered their talents of art for paintings and woodcarvings, even a forming a choir, in which Mr. Orłowski sang, and theater. Mr. Orłowski helped fashion dresses out of paper scraps for the camp production of Giuseppe Verdi's opera "La Traviata."

"The theater was for us big help, the miserable day, day after day the same," he said, tearfully.

FINALLY, LIBERATION

In 1945, almost six years after Mr. Orłowski was taken prisoner, American and British bombs began falling on Munich, 50 miles north of the camp. By then, organized life in the camp slowed, and most of the POWs could only lie in bed, too weak to do much else.

"Mostly last couple of months, we was lying like half-dead," he said. "Any energy or mental energy was this direction (of coming liberation) that save me."

As the Allied forces closed in, five high-ranking German officers were sent to the camp with orders to exterminate the thousands of prisoners housed there.

"There was one danger in our mind, that 5,000 officer and 49 general, (the Germans would) liquidate," he said, his Polish accent thickening as his voice rose. Mr. Orłowski said that as the Allied forces reached the gates of the camp, one German soldier raised a white flag to surrender, but the five German officers shot the surrendering soldier, turning their guns toward the Allied forces outside the gates. From the windows of the barracks, Mr. Orłowski and his fellow POWs cheered as the American soldiers shot and killed the five German officers and unlocked the gates, liberating the camp.

On April 12, 1945, the gates were opened, and although the nearly 5,000 freed-POWs were ordered to continue to live at the camp so the Allied forces could ensure the Polish officers and generals were healthy enough and mentally capable of returning to the outside world after six years of captivity, they were allowed to see the outside of the walls for the first time since 1939.

"And I never forget this moment, and I left this camp, even don't look back. On this grass I walking, and there was such a beautiful day and grass was green and sunshine. And I says, 'Oh god, I'm free.' And I fall down on my back and I make my pray, thanks go to God that after five years I was liberated," he said, his voice thick with memory, tears running down his cheeks. "I'm free. I'm free."

Looking for peace

After liberation, Zbigniew Orlowski begins a new life that eventually leads to the U.S.

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Six years.

Six years of starvation. Six years of imprisonment. Six years waiting for liberation.

Polish 2nd Lt. Zbigniew Orlowski had spent six years in the German prisoner-of-war camp with more than 5,000 other officers and generals of the Polish army.

But when Allied forces opened the gates of Oflag VIIA, the POW camp in Murnau in southern Germany, on April 12, 1945, Mr. Orlowski and many other POWs were left homeless.

For several months, he and his fellow POWs remained at Oflag VIIA while American soldiers determined if the soldiers were competent and healthy enough to return to the outside world.

When they were allowed to leave the camp permanently, some of Mr. Orlowski's friends and fellow officers chose to return to Poland, to wives and children separated from them by war in 1939. For Mr. Orlowski and many others, however, returning to Poland was not an option.

"You don't know what to do." His thickly accented voice rises with remembered panic. "Poland was invade by communist. Door to Poland was closed."

At age 32, he'd not only lost his homeland, but also much of his family.

While Mr. Orlowski was in captivity, his family had been torn apart in Poland. His father, a church organist, and his mother had waited out much of World War II in a single room far away from their home in Radziejow, in central Poland. Two of his younger brothers were arrested, one of whom was beaten to near death.

"They beat him so much that my mother said his back was like hamburger," he remembered. "When he was almost dying they send, they bring him to my parents and he was so skinny and ... he live only two, three days and he die."

His third brother was killed during the war. His younger sister was sent to a Nazi labor camp and returned to Poland after liberation, where she died during childbirth, her body still weak from the war.

"Of six, I am the only one left," he said, quietly.

His fiance, a fellow teacher before the war, was killed during the war in a concentration camp, a story the 92-year-old bachelor now repeats in a quick emotionless voice.

"We intend to get married in ... 1940. In 1939, come war and destroyed everything. I got only one letter from her: 'We are living in very dangerous conditions,'" he said. "Second letter, somebody wrote me that she was captured by (the Nazis) and executed."

He looked toward America, where he heard many Polish had immigrated. He corresponded with relatives in Toledo, Ohio, hoping he could soon see the land of opportunities.

"Only I must wait. They have law — displaced person, they call — mostly laborer," he said. "We from prisoner of war, they says that come time that law change and you be accepted (into the United States)."

He remained in Murnau in the German Alps of Bavaria for some time, hiking through the Alps on short camping trips, and visiting Munich and Dachau, the Nazi concentration camp just north of Munich. The camp was still covered in blood months after liberation, when bodies began rising to the surface of the shallow mass graves.

"When I was in the (prisoner of war camp) and I hear anything about torture and crematorium and about disaster for people, I in my mind made, that all people around the world seeing this horrible treatment by German, there would be end of war. There would be peaceful," he said. "And the peaceful didn't come."

In his own life, peace remained elusive.

"I like to be like I was born," he explained of the memories he learned to keep hidden. "For many year, I never want talk about prisoner of war, about war, about nothing, I want to live again. Long, long time, I never mention about prisoner of war."

After two years, he left Germany to join a unit of the Polish army in Italy — a two-month experience he used to visit museums and art.

Then he moved to London, England, to wait for a visa to the U.S. He spent his weeks working in an ice cream parlor, and his weekends searching for art.

"Because my hobby was art, London was just this what I was dream. A lot art. A lot of museum. A lot of palaces. A lot of beautiful things."

After four years, his visa was approved, and he moved to Toledo to live with his aunt.

"From prisoner of war, I feel like animal," he said. "Freedom. Opportunity. Big opportunity. If you work, you start living here and be like a human being. You buy house. You buy car ... and start life, perfect life. Government have not tell me 'You do that.' You come here to our country, you have brain. Do what you want.' "

Before World War II, Mr. Orlowski had taught elementary school in Poland and tutored a young aristocratic boy privately. In the prisoner of war camp, he continued his education by taking art history lessons from fellow officers and prisoners who assured him he would receive his master's degree when he returned to Poland.

When he arrived in Toledo in 1951, he lived with his aunt, though he left after only one year when his aunt began raising his rent and ordering him to perform chores around the house.

He soon realized he would not find a permanent job again as a teacher, nor would he see the fruits of his POW "master's" course work.

"First my job was washing dishing, in a restaurant close (to) downtown," he said. "I make two big jar of onion, I washing dishes, I scrub the floor, I washing dishes. All for 90 cents."

He eventually settled into the heavily Polish Lagrange St. section of North Toledo, and took a job as a short cook at a friend's restaurant, and later at University of Toledo as a janitor, where he watched his wages slowly rise \$2 a month.

"No complain," he insists. "Better I go and do these jobs than beg somebody for piece of bread."

In 1956, he gained citizenship to the United States, giving him a new homeland.

Eventually, an opportunity to teach did present itself.

"When I come to United States, one lady, some lady, she found out I was school teacher and she said, 'In Bedford here, we organize Polish classes. And would you like teach them?'"

Once a month for two hours, Mr. Orlowski was again the head of a classroom at Bedford Community Education in Temperance.

But life in the United States was not easy.

"I have a few moments very, very critical to me, and they bring me to tear," he said. "Why you come over here, you take job from our children? Why don't you go to old country? There was many time and there was still hanging on me that people don't accept me when I come over here. ... Of course when we come, and when I got job washing dishes for 90 cents, I took it ..."

"So (I) live between many, many nationality. Easier life and more understanding people are here. So I am not surprised that so many people, like from Mexico, or everybody want to come, want to come here," he said. "Everybody want come to United States."

In February, 2002, he moved to Monroe because he no longer felt safe in Toledo. In the safety and comfort of his small apartment at the Monroe Center in the Mable Kehres Apartments, Mr. Orlowski — now called Joe — displays the hundreds of pieces of original art and replicas he's collected over the years. On his balcony, he grows a small garden of pansies and other flowers.

His life of art, flowers and church at St. Michael Catholic Church on Sundays is quiet, but, finally, it is the peace he's been waiting for since 1939.

"When I come to United States, I said I start my life here," he said. "Just make me peaceful life in United States."