

Forgotten mathematician Henry Lowig (1904–1995)

Henry Francis Joseph Löwig

Henry Lowig: My experiences from 14th October 1944 to 5th May 1945

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My Experiences

from 14th October 1944 to 5th May 1945

14th October 1944 I received a directive to appear at the historic Riding School (Jízdárna) at Prague Castle, Prague IV between 8 am and 10 am on the 16th of October 1944. I was to bring work clothing, three days' food supplies and food vouchers. In the heading it said "Der Oberbefehlshaber der nichtuniformierten Protektoratspolizei" [Commander of Non-uniformed Protectorate Police] and "Betrifft Arbeitseinsatz" [Subject: Labour Deployment]. It added that if I did not appear, the police would come and accompany me there.

16th October 1944 I obeyed the directive.

From 16th to 19th October 1944 I was detained at the Riding School. I slept in bed number 278. We had to use a pail behind the Riding School as a toilet. All day we saw electric trams go by. Out of the carriages, relatives and friends threw parcels meant for us. Later, all the trams that travelled past the Riding School had policemen who prevented the throwing of packages. And the Riding School windows facing the street had to remain closed.

Inside we were allowed to write postcards to our friends and relatives. These were delivered to Post Office No. 11, which was always filled with people waiting for news from their dear ones in the Riding School. Postcards that arrived were immediately stamped and the names of the addressees called out.

19th October 1944 Around 3:00 am we were marched to the Prague-Dejvice Railway Station through the following streets: Jelenní, U prašného mostu, Svatovítská and Starodružebníků. At the railway station there was a train waiting for us. It consisted of third class passenger carriages which were however not joined with the usual platforms, so we were unable to walk from one carriage to another. Earlier, our larger luggage had already been driven to the railway station. On arriving at our destination, I got my suitcase back. However, I heard that many of the other prisoners' luggage was taken to the wrong destinations and partially lost.

19th October 1944 The train started out from the Dejvická Station at 8:20 am. Many people stood at the gates of the Bubeneč Street railway crossing to wave their farewells. We then rode through Bubeneč to Libeň. The train stopped for a long time at each station. At the Libeň station a woman was still able to get on to give or tell one of us something. We also drove through

stations at Kolín, Pardubice, Ústí nad Orlicí and Mittelwalde. During the trip we were still allowed to write and mail postcards.

20th October 1944 At about 6:00 am we arrived in Klettendorf at Vratislav [Wrocław, Breslau]. (Later two more such transports of prisoners arrived at the Kletterndorf labour camp.) We were taken to a camp called RAB-Lager (Reichsautobahn-Lager) [the Reich Freeway Camp]. The houses in which we were accommodated were full of bedbugs. It is difficult to fall asleep and to sleep in such circumstances, but eventually sleep overtakes you and you get used to the bedbugs. (We disinfected the camp beds but this was hardly of any use at all because the bed bugs crouched between the wooden boards which the house was made of. I was initially in Room C and later in Room No. 9. In “nine” I no longer had to complain of bedbugs; this was probably because the weather was cooler by then).

The first labour I had to do was to work “on the irons”, that is, stacking and loading iron tracks at the Klettendorf Railway Station.

25th October 1944 The group of prisoners to which I belonged was sent to Vratislav. First we were marched to the construction firm “Arthur Klöber, Hoch-, Tiefbau, Eistenbetonbau, Breslau-Carlowitz, Büro und Lagerplatz” at 14 Carlowitz Street. Part of our group was allocated to work there. I marched on with the remainder of the group to the construction company “Fritz Hüdig, Hoch-, Tief-, Eisenbetonbau, Breslau-Hundsfeld” at 19 Sacrauer Street. That is where I was assigned to work and I worked there until the end of my stay at the Klettendorf labour camp. (Occasionally in December 1944 I worked “on the irons” and also a couple of times at “Arthur Klöber”. This came about because at Hüdig my output was low. For this reason I was in fact even called into the office where I was rebuked and told my work was good for nothing.) The work hours were from 7:00 to 17:00 with two half-hour breaks. I only had one or two Sundays off; generally we worked even on Sunday until 1:30. Later there was no differentiation between Sunday and weekday work. For two weeks I worked the nightshift from 19:00 to 5:30.

Underground bunkers were being constructed at both these construction sites. The Klöber site was an abandoned Jewish cemetery. That’s why those attached to that company were referred to as “grave diggers”. While the “grave diggers” finished the digging and got as far as laying concrete, at the Hüdig site we just kept digging. (Concrete was laid in only one small area of this site, just so it could be said that the laying of concrete had begun). The digging continued even during bitter frost when the ground was so hard that digging with a pick was almost impossible. The bunkers that we were to build were assumedly for purposes of battle because the air raid shelters that were there had been blown up.

In the morning we had to get up for roll call (those words were of course never used at the Klettendorf camp) – sometimes at 5:30, sometimes at 5:50. We would then march to the railway station where we would get into two (later

three) carriages that were waiting for us. These carriages would then be coupled to a normal train that left Klettendorf at 6:15 and arrived at Vratislav at 6:45. The stations between Klettendorf and Vratislav were: Klettendorf, Breslau-Hartlieb, Hoinstein, Breslau Central Railway Station. Evenings we would leave Vratislav at 17:28. Those assigned to night shift did not travel in separate carriages but, rather, travelled together with normal passengers.

We were under the authority of the so-called Todt Organisation. At first we were allowed evening outings out of the camp between 18:00 and 22:00. (For example, sometimes at the end of the work day I would part from my work group in Vratislav and make my way back to the camp on my own by electric tram and bus. If I remember correctly, I had to take tram No. 12, 20 or 22 to the end of the line at “Südpark” and from there take the bus). Furthermore, while we were directed to hand our letters over to the camp management who were meant to censor them, nobody took any notice. Instead, everybody mailed their own letters. This changed when the Prague SD [security service] took control of the camp in November 1944. From 18th November 1944, all independent outings were forbidden, each person could send and receive only one letter per week containing a maximum of 30 words, and send and receive only one parcel per month. However the rules about parcels were not followed to the letter even then. It was even possible to mail letters through a black market (of course we were threatened with transport to a worse concentration camp should a black market letter be discovered). It was harder for us to get hold of incoming letters because that required having an intermediary outside the camp. Anyone who until then may have been under the misapprehension that they were labourers knew without a doubt from 18th November 1944 that they were prisoners.

The treatment of inmates who were incapacitated also changed. Back at the historic Riding School, some of those called to “Arbeitseinsatz” had been allowed to go home as “incapable of work”. At Klettendorf our Dr Mikeš succeeded in getting the official Todt Organisation doctor to designate 20 amongst us as “incapable of work”, but they were not allowed to go home. Instead they were sent to camp Hagibor in Prague. The above-mentioned Dr Mikeš, who himself was designated as incapable of work, later told me that from Hagibor he was moved on to yet other camps.

After 12th January 1945, the Eastern Front quickly began to get closer to Vratislav. We saw a lot of Germans with large amounts of baggage at the train station. They must have been fleeing before the Red Army. On 20th January 1945 we saw the first convoy of refugees driving through the streets of Vratislav. From that day on, we could no longer travel back to Klettendorf by train because the train schedule was no longer reliable. Instead we had to go on foot. Work at the construction sites was then halted. (In the following days anyone who used Vratislav trams rode for free, because the conductors, mostly women, fled the town).

23rd January 1945 I once again rode into Vratislav with a group of about 20 prisoners. We were driven somewhere behind Odra, where we saw occupied

machine gun posts. We loaded some furniture into a truck. In the evening we each returned separately to the camp.

20th January 1945 Eighteen prisoners, taking advantage of the confusion, escaped from the Klettendorf camp. (Addition.)

24th January 1945 The Klettendorf camp was evacuated. We marched along pulling our baggage behind us on sleds thrown together from old wardrobes (armoires). The orderly ranks in which we marched out of the camp soon disintegrated. Along the way about half the prisoners from Klettendorf ran away. I must add that we started out at about 22:00 in the evening. We marched all night and all the following day. From 25 to 26 of January we overnights in a town not far from Svidnice (It was called Stephanshain, if I remember correctly).

26th January 1945 In the early afternoon we arrived in Svidnice. During the journey we were given nothing to eat by the transport leaders. At hostels there was nothing but coffee. At last in Svidnice we were sent to a schoolhouse where we were each given a piece of bread by the NSV [National Socialist People's Welfare Organization]. Towards evening we left Svidnice and walked on fairly quickly to our appointed destination, the village of Gräditz. There we were put up in an old mill, which had previously served as a Jewish concentration camp (as had the Klettendorf camp). Aside from ourselves, Ukrainians and gypsies, both men and women, were also lodged there.

During the first days of our stay at the Gräditz camp we were practically given full freedom of movement. The management of the camp even somehow let us know that families of those who fled would not be harmed. (Those who escaped during the march from Klettendorf to Gräditz or from Gräditz itself, were later interned at Hagibor in Prague, except those who knew to hide from the Germans. A fellow prisoner who had been in hospital during the evacuation of the Klettendorf camp, told me that he had been sent directly home from Vratislav and that from then until the end of the war nobody bothered him anymore. Of course he was not from Prague, but rather, if I remember correctly, from Roudnice nad Labem). I also made ready to escape, but I gave that idea away. We were once again registered and outings from the camp were strictly forbidden. The back gates, which had until then been open, were locked. Later we were transported by rail in groups of 20, and later 50, to a camp in Bystřice u Benešova.

13th February 1945 My group left Gräditz. We marched to nearby Faulbrück, the closest village with a railway station. There we learned that civilian trains were no longer running (because of the proximity of the battle front) and army trains did not stop there. So, after several hours wait, we left Faulbrück again and marched on to Reichenbach. There we were able to get onto a train. Of course until Kamenec we had to be satisfied with travelling in animal wagons. From Kamenec we continued on through Kladsko, Mezilesi and Hradec Kralové to Prague.

14th February 1945 At noon we finally crossed the Czechoslovak border. When we were between Hanušovice and Hradec Kralové, we heard news of an air raid in Prague. We arrived in Prague just before midnight. Before arriving, we succeeded in bribing the OT officials accompanying us to allow us to go home for two days. That is how I came to spend 15 and 16 February 1945 at home.

17th February 1945 At 6:30 in the morning I presented at Wilson Railway Station to continue the trip to Bystřice u Benešova. The train left Prague at about 8:00 and arrived at Bystřice at about noon. There the OT officials handed us over to the SS. Several of the officials had accompanied us during our earlier transport and were now attached to Tvoršovice labour camp. There we were locked in threelfold: the camp barbed wire fence, the castle wall and the SS corridor around the boundaries. I add that in Bystřice our citizenship papers as well as any money over 50 crowns were taken from us, which had never happened at Klettendorf. At Tvoršovice I was assigned to the firm Victor Beneš to build tracks for the transport of SS munitions stores.

6th April 1945 The Tvoršovice camp was abolished and all its inhabitants were transferred to the Bystřice camp where we were allocated to house No. 6. Only a few of the prisoners from the Tvoršovice camp continued to work on the railway line. After 6th April I went to work on the line only once or at the most twice. After that I went to dig and build anti-Panzer trenches at Jírovice u Benešova. At that time, prisoners began to escape wholesale from the camp. The SS started a night watch around the buildings, writing down the names of everyone who went out to relieve themselves. My work group was from then on accompanied when outside of the camp. In spite of this, prisoners continued to escape.

2nd May 1945 The director of the camp at last announced that the camp was closing. In spite of this we continued to work on the fortifications on 3rd and 4th of May.

4th May 1945 Prisoners who came from Moravia were transported out of Bystřice u Benešova.

5th May 1945 All Czech prisoners from outside of Prague were transported out. Of course those who wanted to go via Prague did not get there. The last transport was to be on Sunday 6th May 1945. This was to include me. Instead, on the afternoon of 5th May, we received the news that revolution had broken out in Prague and that all trains had been halted. For that reason the SS decided to release all remaining prisoners immediately. This happened at about 7:00 in the evening. Whereas those who were transported before us still had to sign a statement that they had been treated well at the camp, no such statement was required of those of us who remained.

Edmonton, 4th May 1989

I wrote the above description of my experiences from 14th October 1944 to 5th May 1945 sometime in 1945, 1946 or 1947. I now append these two footnotes.

Footnote No. 1

When I was released from the camp on 5th May 1945, I could not immediately go to Prague because the trains were not running. I did however find an inn where I stayed and spent most of my time until 10th May. An official of the local municipality provided me with food vouchers. He told me that he had to force open a cupboard to get these for me because he did not have the key handy. I paid for my meals at the inn; the innkeeper did not demand any food vouchers.

At the same inn I came into contact with other former prisoners of the camp. The innkeeper could not accommodate us all in the normal way. I personally had to sleep on a dining room table. (I think, but I am not sure, that the innkeeper was Mr Český about whom I later read. Mr Český received letters for prisoners, marked with a special secret symbol. He handed these letters to prisoners who were sometimes sent into town for community work by the camp management. This way prisoners were able to receive uncensored letters.) I went for walks to Bystřice. On the 8th May I even walked all the way to Benešov, about 4 kilometres away, where I ate at a local restaurant using my food vouchers. Then I returned to Bystřice.

In Benešov, I still had to show my identification to the SS. (My citizenship papers had been returned to me when I was released from the camp.) But the next day, that is on 9th May 1945, I saw a contingent of Russian soldiers arriving in Bystřice. Around that time people began to fly Czechoslovak flags that were not to be seen throughout the war. It is well known that Czechoslovakia celebrated the 9th May 1945 as the day the red Army arrived in Prague.

On the morning of 10th May I heard that the trains were running again. Of greater importance to me, I heard that the trains were running “all the way to Prague”. So I went to the railway station, bought a ticket and took the train to Prague. In Prague I found the electric trams were not running. For that reason I walked carrying my suitcase to Břevnov, my permanent place of residence. On the way I had to show my identification papers several times (I had already had to do this on getting off the train at the Wilson Railway Station).

When I finally arrived at building No. 1479, I could not get into my apartment. I did not have a key and it turned out the key (which my mother had) was held by the Břevnov National Committee. Shortly before my arrival, my mother had been arrested by police and taken to the Břevnov convent. The policeman had seen that she had a “Kennkarte” [German identity card].

Footnote No. 2

The places (towns) of Mittelwalde (Mezilesí), Klettendorf, Vratislav, Carlowitz, Hundsfeld, Hartlieb, Heinstein and Stephanshain, Svidnice, Gräditz, Faulbrück, Reichenbach, Kamenec, and Kladsko belonged to Germany until the end of the Second World War. Now they are in Poland.

The Mezilesí railway station used to be on the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Vratislav was called Breslau in German; now it has the Polish name Wrocław. Svidnice was called Schweidnitz in German and its Polish name is Swidnica. Kladsko was called Glatz and is Kłodzko in Polish.

SD is an abbreviation of the word "Sicherheitsdienst". Hagibor, unless I am mistaken, used to be a sports centre for Prague Jews. Later it was an internment camp.

Tvoršovice is a village near Bystřice u Benešova.

