

At Lamsdorf Camp my head was shaven (I was so weak and had dizzy spells).

Blechhammer Working Party was made up of 800 men – we were in the middle of the forest, set to work clearing trees and digging foundations. Our daily rations were a bowl of soup, two potatoes and sauerkraut cabbage; three to five men shared one loaf of sometimes mouldy bread and a pat of butter. We did not see civilians for months, until foreign forced labour camps were built.

It was an extremely bitter winter that year, with much snow. There were over 200 cases of frost bite and carbuncles, particularly with those men that could not work. Ray Maine even had icicles hanging from his nose on one occasion. We had to work in conditions of up to 20 degrees (C) below zero and in two hours of rain.

One very cold late afternoon, upon returning to the Camp Lager from work, a chap named Stinchcombe asked his mate whether he would like the hot drink which he had heated on the stove. “What is it?” he enquired, to which Stinchcombe replied “Drink it, it will do you good”. After he had taken a swallow he again asked what it was, to be told that it was “Mouse broth”. Evidently, Stinchcombe had caught and boiled a mouse! Immediately his mate went outside the hut and tried to be sick! Surprising what some chaps did!

When unloading railway waggons containing potatoes, the favourite trick was to steal some of them and conceal them by threading them onto a length of wire dangling down inside a trouser leg – which made you walk like a “bow-legged” cowboy!!

Here in BLECHHAMMER we worked from dawn to dusk digging sandy soil and being shouted at by a big Bavarian b*****d.

In our camp we had a Medical Officer, Lt Cribb (age 21) and two excellent long serving regular soldiers RSM Jack Hobbs and CSM Aberfield, both of the “Glorious Gloucesters”. At Christmas we had one or two days off work, and they requested the German Camp Commandant, Prince von Hohenlohe, whether we could have a double ration of food on Christmas day (so for one day we would not suffer hunger) and not have any food the following day. Personally I was pleased that the Germans did not agree with this idea!

Sometimes the water pipes were completely frozen so I stripped off and washed in the snow – because it was essential to try to keep clean and destroy the lice and bugs daily.

New Year’s morning ‘41 we were knocked out of bed at 5 am – to parade in the snow. Someone had broken into the food store in the camp. We paraded outside and were threatened until the culprits owned up, we would remain there “until black in the face” – four to five hours in total. The “Bavarian b*****d” was in charge of the working party, we were digging all day.

One day there was a request for four engineers, so I volunteered and went to work in a small “engineers’ shop” on the site with Polish and German civilians. I was employed as a Blacksmith’s striker – swinging a 14lb hammer!

Previously there had been a fire which destroyed most of the wooden building near the main gate, controlled by Brownshirts, which had been the civilian canteen and (believe it or not) the Fire Brigade Station. So often when the civilian engineers had a midday break I took an empty cement bag, watched the guard carefully marching up and down, and when he faced away from where I was hiding I ran and jumped down the shute into the Canteen Cellar which still had potatoes stored there. I loaded the sack three-quarters full and scrambled out again, when the guard was marching facing in the opposite direction. The other chaps on the main working party carried fire wood in their sacks back to camp – but mine contained potatoes!!

One or two Polish fellows working in the Engineer’s “shop” at weekends frequently travelled from BLECHHAMMER by train to their homes and a chap named Mills from the KRRs and myself were planning to escape with ‘Buster’ who had previously worked on the Polish Railway and make our way into Russia. Of course it would have been dangerous and I was rather weak through hunger. However, the news one day that Germany and Russia were at war destroyed those plans – perhaps it was better we didn’t attempt this rather wild idea!

One day I simply couldn’t face going to work, so I reported on the Dentist Parade where five of us were told to sit on stools by a German Army Medical Lance Corporal, grasp the stool legs and then he enquired which tooth we needed extracted. Without losing time he proceeded to remove the teeth 1-2-3-4-5, as in turn we were girked-up from the stools. One way of removing teeth, I guess!

It did not create much surprise when it was announced that one man had died, although he had been better fed than everyone else, having been employed in the camp kitchen. A couple of days later, early morning (around 6 am), when the Working Parties were leaving camp to march to the Working Site, I was asked to remain inside the main gate by RSM Jack Hobbs. He then continued to select about 30 men in total, mostly Welsh Guardsmen all taller than myself. He explained that the Germans had given permission for us to form a Burial Parade Party to march to the local village cemetery and although we came from different regiments he was determined to “whip us into shape” and show the Germans a first class military “turn-out”. We had to borrow uniforms (if necessary) for the day to look our best – and I was quite proud to have been chosen from 800 men.

About early March 1941 there was great excitement in the Camp by the first arrival of Red Cross Parcels and we shared one parcel between five men. How could we cut a cake of soap into five sections – so I offered my cigarette ration to the others – and took possession of this wonderful gift. Have you ever thought of going months without a toothbrush and paste or soap?? It gave me certain

satisfaction to learn that the world outside this vast forest knew that we existed and were still alive.

During the middle of March we all had a Medical Inspection – it was simply a parade to learn who had plenty of flesh covering their body and looked fairly strong and healthy. Then on April 1st with five other chaps under German guard escort, I asked were we going to a Coal Mining Camp, and was told that they didn't know. Sure enough the wheels in the coal-mine towers appeared – and it was too late to risk being shot by jumping the train. We had arrived at KNUROW to join a Working Party of about 250 men who were employed on three shifts working at the mine, situated only about 100 metres from the camp.

I hated the very thought of it!! For months I didn't see the light of day – because we went down the pit before the majority of the miners and came back up after the civilian workers. The following winter it was nothing to ascend from the hot bowels of the earth 400 or 600 metres below, and under guard control, stand around in the snow waiting for the last chaps on the morning shift to come to the surface.

The coal seam was fortunately 6-7 feet high without the danger of gas, so we used carbine open-flame lamps. Teams worked in threes excavating tunnels – a miner, an assistant timber man and a man to shovel all the coal onto the conveyor.

We had to walk nearly a mile to our workplace, but at the end of the shift, for part of the journey I used to spring onto the wide conveyor belt and lie flat – ensuring I rolled off at the appropriate time. At first I worked with two men who worked furiously, like wild animals, and I couldn't understand why, when the "Steiger" came to inspect the work every day he would go mad and scream at them. I knew that HELL was supposed to be "Down there" where it is burning hot – and perhaps I had arrived!! I knew that I couldn't stand this crazy scene every day!

When I arrived at the camp in April, one of the chaps named 'Eppy' Tyler enquired whether any of the six newcomers used the gloves?? Yes, I told him that I had boxed before, so we arranged to spar together, although we didn't have a lot of space in which to box. A month later 'Eppy' organised a boxing contest of several bouts, and the main bout was between the alleged East Surrey Regiment champion 'Red' Burman and an opponent who he knocked out with a "hay-maker"!

My New Zealand pals were impressed but surprised when I said that he was not that clever and could be beaten with a good straight left. Several weeks later, 'Eppy' organised another boxing match and at the last moment – in front of my NZ friends – asked would I deputise for someone and fight 'Red' Burman? Following my earlier remarks, I could only accept the challenge, with the thought that if he really caught me with a "hay-maker" it would be curtains. Fortunately, luck was on my side – because I knew that I had to get in close and attack –

because he was taller at 6'1" – and I flattened him in under two minutes, before the Medical Doctor could stop the fight. That evening's boxing performance enhanced my reputation with everyone.

Now underground in the coalpit we had a stupid little man in charge of the workforce, who said that he had learnt that I was a boxer and if ever I attacked him "he would scratch out my eyes with a pick". I told the fool that he had nothing to worry about providing he was always polite to me. However, several days later I objected to his nonsense and hit him against the coal face. He glared at me and stood close with his pick in his hand – but decided to back-off. As a punishment he stopped me working with the miner who was always being castigated and ordered me to carry timber props into the tunnels. At that time the narrow gauge railway lines were a long way short of the tunnels and he thought it would be a difficult task for me – but although the props were heavy, I carried two at a time – one on my shoulder and another I dragged along on my pick. Of course, when the railway lines were extended I was told "tomorrow back shovelling".

Next morning I was determined that I could not work with the previous couple, so at the pit-bottom I looked around and saw an elderly miner. I asked him his name and how long had he worked in the pit, to which he replied "My name is Johann and I have worked here all my life". I thought that if he has survived – he has met his new friend. Johann was a lovely old man – who the "Steiger" respected because of his ability and experience. After Johann had blasted the coal and was having a rest while I shovelled the coal, I persuaded him to sing classical music (which he knew) and it was quite funny seeing his solitary white tooth in the glow of our lamps going up and down. One day he opened his newspaper and sadly told me that another British ship had been sunk, and I regret having got annoyed and telling him that it was propaganda and he didn't know anything about the sea. I was really upset about my bad behaviour – especially when almost in tears, he said "Robert, please tell me about the sea".

It wasn't easy for me to explain in German the motion of the sea – but this lovely old man had never in his life seen the sea.

One day in 1941, as winter approached, there was great excitement in the camp because the New Zealanders and Australians, who had been captured in CRETE, were so excited to see snowflakes falling for the first time in their lives. It was then I told them to expect to see several feet of snow during the winter and a daily fall of snow.

Although we were receiving occasional Red Cross parcels, through lack of calcium my fingernails started to come away from the skin on my fingers, so I reported to the Medical Officer, and I was taken to a nearby hospital to see a specialist "Ober-Stabsarzt" Medical Army Colonel – who said "that I had to do clean work and put cream on them". Heaven knows where he thought I could

obtain the cream from.

Incorrectly, I thought that this decision might mean being sent back to the main camp at LAMSDORF, and then to another camp – but that wasn't what happened. I remained at KNUROW but did not work underground again – but worked on several different jobs which I will relate. However, from time to time, as the months went by more Upper Silesians were recruited into the German Army and more Ukranian youngsters were employed on the surface at the pit. This meant that frequently POWs working “overground” were medically inspected with the hope of finding them fit enough to work “underground”. My pals could not understand how I could remain working above ground while being very fit, and others having to work underground, but I politely told them the reason why – was my secret.

Following my hospital visit to see the “Ober Stabsarzt” Medical Colonel I quickly noticed that the subsequent medical parades were taken by lower ranking medical officers who I told in my well practised German, how I had previously seen the Colonel – who didn't say “I had to do clean work” – but he commanded that I had to do clean work. Presented with those words I felt pretty sure that they would not countermand the Colonel's earlier decision, and unfortunately they did not.

So I joined a party of ten men who worked in the nearby Brickfield – two working in the kilns, and four in pairs – picking and shovelling ten waggons of clay daily.

Although shovelling clay is much heavier work than shovelling coal, I was thankful to be working in daylight in the fresh air. My partner was a New Zealander, Jack Weaver, and we became life-long friends. The clay bank was about 7-8 feet high, and in the afternoons we did most of the pick-work – cutting into the foot of the bank; with the result that the dew and weather through the night caused about 2 feet of the bank to fall conveniently for us to shovel the fallen clay into the waggons next morning. Railway lines ran from “the four workings” to the foot of the incline leading up to the Brick-Mill, and after the bricks were made and cut they were pushed along on trolleys by young Polish girls into the long drying and storage sheds.

Jack and I liked to get our first three waggons into the Mill early from the fallen clay, knowing that later in the day we might have to wait if the Mill was already loaded.

During the warm summer months local Polish youngsters brought several geese to feed in the field nearby where we were working and often we could talk to them in German. Perhaps I should explain that after the 1914-18 War, Germany had to give back part of Western Poland (Upper Silesia), so many families spoke both German and Polish.

At this period of time the German Camp Commander (Feldwebel) was a right

b****d, who we knew was very friendly with the Frau in charge of the civilian kitchen, which also supplied our camp with sufficient soup daily to provide everyone with a ladle of soup – and on one occasion for three months it was horrible swede soup! Two young Australians unbeknown to everyone planned to make an escape, but made the mistake of negotiating with the Frau to exchange bread for Red Cross parcel tins of food. This request was unusual and made her suspect their intentions and she forewarned the Feldwebel, who armed with a rifle instead of his usual pistol, lay in wait for them to climb onto a flat roof. He shot ‘Gigg’ without a challenge but the other “Aussie” managed to safely return into the barracks. This episode happened in darkness about ten o’clock at night.

As winter approached, the weather conditions made it both difficult and dangerous to work excavating clay and one particular day in October the heavens opened with rain and we decided to stop work and shelter in the small room allocated to us in the Mill on the first floor. After about half an hour the Feldwebel could be seen approaching across the field, and he stormed into the room and demanded to know why we were not working. He was mad with rage. Finally I answered back, to be told to stand up when addressing him. I told him that there wasn’t sufficient room – so he shouted “make room”. So I kicked the form over on which I had been sitting and stood “properly at ease” (because I was determined not to stand “to attention”). We stood face to face glaring at each other. He reached for his pistol and ordered us to change back into working clothes and return to work.

When he left us to change and I didn’t know where he had gone. To return to the work area I could either go down inside the building or walk down the long incline – up which the waggons were hauled. Unfortunately, I chose to walk down the slope. The moment I walked out onto the slope I realised the danger, because the Feldwebel was waiting halfway down the incline. I had no alternative than to continue walking down the slope. The second I passed him I heard a scream from one of the young Polish girls and he thrashed me across the back three times with the flat of his bayonet. I braced myself and kept walking as if I hadn’t felt it!! Later I learnt that the Polish girl probably saved my life, because she maintained that he was going to stab me in the back until she screamed. The poor girl shook nervously for over two hours.

In our camp was a real comedian named Arthur Veasey from the KRR’s who introduced an anti-work challenge which he claimed scored “one point for Churchill”. The idea was that men working underground on the morning shift would try to hide below ground in previously excavated areas or come up from the pit with the earlier shift. We called this a “Bummel Shift”. Men working on the surface would delay their work effort by two men undertaking work that could be easily done by an individual.

Some men performed crazy “self inflicted wounds” to avoid work. One sunny day I saw an Australian pal Ron Kear sitting by the rubbish heap, which included

some empty Red Cross tins, and I had no idea what he was scheming. "Let me show you how it is done" he said. "See that bee? It is no good, but this one is okay." With that, he picked up the second bee by its wings and placed it on one knee which already was greatly enlarged by previous bee stings. He then related he had the doctors baffled – even our English doctor, because when they put him into the hospital they made the mistake of putting him near a window. He explained how easy it was to have a jam tin lid on the window-sill to attract the bees, who enjoyed stinging him!

One crazy Irish commando captured at NAZARRE actually chopped off the top joint of a finger!! He really was a mental case.

Thanks entirely due to the International Red Cross, we were fairly fit and some Sundays we were marched under guard escort to the local football stadium for recreation and we either played rugby or soccer. When we were marching through the town to the stadium children who I talked to at the brickfield used to shout in German – "Look, there is Robert" and the guards were baffled, not realising how local children had got to know a POW, or which man to whom they were referring!

In the camp we elected a chairman and four team captains to form a Central Committee who introduced and organised four teams to encourage competitions between each other. The teams consisted of 1. Spitfires (Red), 2. Pirates (Yellow), 3. Wasps (Green) and 4. Buccaneers (Blue). Bill Rutherford was Captain of the Spitfires (Bill is a Solicitor from Aberdeen) and I was Vice Captain. This progressed into the "NZ All-Blacks" playing England XV at rugby, when I was pleased to be selected to play in the front row. The English team rugby captain was Ken Watkins – Gloucester Regt who lives at the Forest of Dean – and was an excellent fullback from whose experience we all benefitted. The New Zealanders I found great fellows both on and off the field. My pal Noel Drumgool from Auckland NZ was Captain of the Pirates and the New Zealand team – boy what a character!

A popular card game in the camp was cribbage, so I organised competitions among the men.

I managed to obtain different coloured cottons and later my Mother sent coloured silk thread from England with which I embroidered Regimental cap badges. It was not very long before nearly everyone requested that I did their Regimental badge – which prompted me to arrange a competition.

To comply with the Geneva Convention laws we had to be paid for the work we did and at "distant intervals" we paraded to receive specially printed POW camp money (Lager gelht). Naturally we did not have the opportunity to buy much, in fact I cannot remember anything except small packets of sherbert or saccarins. Nevertheless, to enter the competition everyone had to pay a certain amount with their lager gelht and literally the whole camp of 250 men entered. Frankly I

couldn't accept so much money (really barter money) for a single prize of one embroidered badge, so I persuaded my pal 'Curly' Craker to take half the money and for him to make a second prize. I had to make a Lincolnshire cap badge which was comparatively easy compared with the Scottish Regimental badges. Later in the war I used the money to possess an alto saxophone which had been given to the camp.

We were all very pleased to learn that the b*****d Feldwebel was going to join the German 6th Army near STALINGRAD and another Camp Commandant was taking control. I hoped he suffered and got his desserts!! Remember, the 6th Army Division was completely surrounded near STALINGRAD.

Following the rapid advance by the German Army into the Russian Ukraine, it was long afterwards that young Ukrainian boys and girls, probably from 15 years upwards, came to work around and in the coal mine, undertaking work on the coal-sorting sieves and the like. It was about this time that I had to undertake different jobs and for a short time I worked in the Boiler House stoking four furnaces. It was very hot working conditions and I worked stripped to the waist, using a large flat shovel to distribute the fine coal evenly inside each furnace, standing well back from the heat of the fire. Using the very long rake regularly to prevent the coal coagulating to the bottom of the furnaces and also for opening and closing the four doors. I wore "hand-leathers" and had to drink pints of water to prevent dehydration. You may not realise that at a Pit Head the Boiler House provides the necessary steam required to drive the enormous steam-engine which drives the pit-shaft wheel, around which the strong cable attached raises and lowers the pit cages. Pit cages are usually constructed, one above the other, in a set of four. Often there are two Pit Shafts close to each other. The main shaft transports the coal miners at the beginning and end of the shift – then all the coal. The second shaft transports pit props, timber etc down and brings up the rubbish.

My next job was helping reinforce the Main Coalmine Shaft Tower with metal plates which had to be drilled onto the existing tower. The plates had been previously cut to shape and drilled, and with an Engineer I had to climb up the tower and when on a plank of wood platform, secure my safety belt, line up the plate, mark the position of holes on the steel tower and drill holes into the tower. Strong rivets secured the plates to the main tower. With the electric drill we had to use water to keep the drill cool instead of oil, which often froze because we were high up and the weather was cold.

My next job has played an important part in my life, even after the war. Noel Drumgool (NZ NCO from Auckland), Reg Holland (Welsh Guards) and I commenced working at "Stückstoff" under the responsibility of Pawet (or Paul) Hajduk. This section of the Pit Head filled large cylinders with gasoline which had been extracted from burning coal in the "Kokerei". With special narrow trolleys it was our job to transport full cylinders to the ramp outside the small

factory, and load them in lorries or train waggons. We quickly got the “knack” of how to handle these “heavy bottles” – which sometimes frightened the civilians for fear they would explode.

The Director of that Department was a pleasant Austrian who we did not see very often. Paul Hajduk was a great fellow, who had served in the Polish Army. Greta – a plain young woman, but very kind, filled the cylinders. Hiedel, a smart woman, worked in the small office as did Lydia (18), a beautiful, smart young lady.

In the factory across the road worked Emile (a real Don Juan and excellent footballer), Gabruisz and Conrad (another impressive man who also played local football). So, over a period of time I became acquainted with them all.

After a while, Paul and I established an everlasting friendship and I greatly respected some risks he took in displaying his friendship. One particular Sunday we had to work and load waggons from Czechoslovakia, and after we had completed the work Paul took us to the slag-heap (hills of grass covering the fine coal) where he gave us a skiing lesson. He was able to do this because being Sunday the pit was really closed and with no-one around, except the security gate controllers.

Paul and his wife Angela and daughter Heidel (Jadzia) (14) lived in a first floor flat in the first road (at 90 degrees) from the Pit Head entrance, and below them lived a family – German inclined – whose son (12) I knew when I worked at the brickfield and he came there with a few geese.

Paul was aware of this, but he invited Reg Holland and myself to visit his home and meet his family, at the first opportunity when we had to work late. The day finally arrived, and the plan was put into operation. Reg and I walked from the Pit Head along the railway lines, over the bank into Paul's road, conceal ourselves in the rear garden and wait for the signal to enter.

We dived up the stairs. It was like entering a different world – to sit on a chair with a back instead of a form – the comfort – four walls – in fact everything that falsely gave a sense of security. The world was different outside the home! This was my first of three visits to Paul's home.

One eventful day, following a fall of snow, I went to put my trolley platform under a cylinder to wheel it away and then load into a lorry. From the top of the cylinder – by hand – you had to lean the cylinder away from you, which raised the base enough to slip the trolley platform under the cylinder base. Because of the snow the cylinder slipped out of control, which caused a whole row of cylinders to fall. We all realised that they could all have exploded and I was accused of sabotage. This could have been very serious!! The moderate Feldwebel was called to investigate the case and fortunately Paul had no hesitation defending my action and explaining how the accident happened. Afterwards the Feldwebel frequently

came around to witness us working, he always saluted us in military fashion and we returned the salute.

It wasn't long afterwards that we three were transferred to other jobs and Ukrainians did the work at "Stückstuff". My next job was working in the Timber Yard, where a little civilian was in charge of three of us whose daily task was to load "two train-loads" of timber which then went to the Pit Head, to be reloaded into pit waggons. This wasn't a bad job, and more frequently we would lie on the piles of pit props and watch the vast formations of American bombers flying to their targets. Some civilians asked why we were so pleased to see them, when we might get killed. We told them in reply, that the bombing had to happen to bring an end to the war and enable us to return home.

We endured a period of torrential rain and working conditions were impossible. I told our "Werkschutz" (the man responsible for us) that I intended to go into the main pit offices and speak to the Director – to request waterproof clothing. He appeared very worried and said that I could not do that. I told him in German that the working of the pit depended on its safety, that we provided the service with timber support props and that if he didn't accompany me, he would be in serious trouble which I wished to avoid. When I think about it – it was unreal! All eyes watched an English POW walk into the office, followed by a little civilian, who could not believe the outcome. We received waterproof clothing almost immediately!

The timber yard controller was an ex Polish Army fellow who had been wounded in the leg and lost the sight of one eye in the war – who we called "Willie". One afternoon he called me over to his "cabin" – and said "Your friend Paul Hajduk has received his calling-up papers for the German Army". The Germans cleverly made many Upper Silesians "3rd Class Germans", who were mainly sent to the Eastern Front to fight the Russians.

Despite all obstacles I simply had to see Paul again! Already I had a black jacket without either the mark E or K (Kriegesfängener), so I borrowed a real German hat from a South African and in daylight walked boldly down the railway lines, into Paul's road and very quickly up the stairs. I knocked at the door several times without reply. Then I was able to open the adjacent door to the verandah overlooking the street, so I lay on the floor to avoid being seen from below.

A few moments later I heard footsteps bounding up the stairs – "Goodness I have been seen!". Then a call "Angela, Angela". Thank goodness I recognised Paul's voice, so I came out of hiding and he greeted me "Thank heavens you have come, you are my best friend, you are English and my best friend, so let them all come!"

Soon afterwards Angela arrived. She didn't demand to know what I was doing there, and in her kind manner enquired whether I was hungry and would like some rabbit. Again I felt very secure. Paul had been to collect his "heavy

workers” rations which included a couple of bottles of schnapps. They were having an evening party and did think that I could stay?! I enquired who they expected would arrive to be told Greta, Lydia and three or four young Ukrainians who were working at “Stückstuff”. I decided to take a chance. Paul’s brother Emile arrived, and didn’t question me being there. The time passed quickly. The flat door opened into a fairly large living-room, with an adjoining long narrow room in which was a long table. The party was soon underway – the Ukrainians did not know who I was, but of course the others did, and we congregated in the narrower room. Everything was going happily when we heard a knock on the outside door, Angela went through and opened the door and returned “as white as a sheet” to announce it was Gabriusz (who knew me) and “Zwonk” – a real Nazi who had been awarded the Iron Cross’ and also had been wounded. For some strange reason he was supposed to be engaged to Greta (who wasn’t a Kraut). “Oh, let them come in” said Paul.

Paul then had the task of introducing everyone – Lydia, then the Ukrainians, then me – “This is Robert, he is Russian, strangely he cannot speak Polish, but he does speak German”. Fortunately the new arrivals had obviously been drinking before the party and Zwonk’s eyes brightened. He latched onto me and sat opposite. “Where did I live?” Before I could reply Emile chimed in “Stalingrad”. “Which way did I travel back to Knurow?” This time before I could reply he told me that he had been there, and rattled off the names of places through which he had returned. I told him that was probably right, but as I travelled in covered railway waggons I could not be sure.

Paul handed me a bottle of schnapps and repeatedly encouraged me to top up Zwonk’s glass. He was getting pretty tipsy!!

Then Paul announced he would sing an English song “One day when we were young”, which I had taught him and he had taught his daughter. Then a Polish song – and then, wait for it – a Russian song! The moment he suggested that he realised the problem, and quick as a flash said “Robert will sing bass notes”. Cleverly he sang the words ahead of the others, and it was quite easy for me to harmonise. Zwonk sat immediately opposite me, and hopefully appreciated my singing in Russian.

We were a little relieved when the late arrivals decided it was time for them to go somewhere else. Still the Ukrainians did not know who I was.

I had told Zwonk that because I spoke German, the Ukrainians and Russians were suspicious about me, and in fact I was going to volunteer to join the Russian White Army to fight Moscow. When the party came to an end the Ukrainians left together, Paul escorted Lydia home and I went out of the flat with Greta. The question remained what was I going to do? I told Greta that if it was before midnight I would try to get back into camp, but if it was later I would go to her home and sleep with her. Well, she exploded “You certainly will not”. “I have

told you that my father is a German – you could sleep in the barn if you like!”

Quite funny really. The time was 11.45 pm, so I bade Greta goodnight, and made my way back down the railway track toward the Pit. Suddenly, I heard a shout from a hut, and ran as fast as I possibly could.

I went into the bathroom section for POWs, hung up my working clothes and put on my uniform. I strolled past the guards to the Guard Room, where we had to report in and out. I was surprised that no questions were raised, and after I learnt how I had been so fortunately lucky.

The distance from the main Pit Head Entrance to the Controlled Gate of our POW Camp was about 75 yards and German guards controlled POWs walking between these two entrances. Upon leaving and returning from work we had to report at the Guard Room. Their control book stated four men (or numbers) in the section of the book headed Holtz-tragen (moving wood), three men including myself working throughout the day and one man ‘Taffy’ Evans on the late shift, helping on the Number 2 Pit Shaft sending down the pit props. ‘Taffy’ usually finished around midnight, but that particular day he finished much earlier, when a different guard was on duty. The guard who recorded my return in the book – would presume I was the man on the later shift. What luck – and I made sure that he couldn’t smell my breath.

A month later when I was in the timber yard, which was skirted by a large wood, Paul, dressed in civilian clothes, came down to meet me – now a “German” soldier on brief home leave he took the risk to come and meet me – carrying “zimmel cake” that Angela had baked and a bottle of “booze”. The day he received his calling-up papers he talked about us both making an escape towards Russia, but what he did not know was that for a very long time I had up-to-date news of the development of the war which deserves another special chapter, so I pointed out the many difficulties.

Secretly concealed radio

I have devoted my story-telling about the kind of work I had to undertake, but now I wish to refer to the period of time when I was working in the brickfield. In the POW Camp I have referred to how we organised our limited leisure time activities controlled by a Central Committee of five men. Well, one day I was approached by one of them, Tim Mahoney, who called me aside and talked about the secretly-known prospects that collectively we were hoping to purchase, with personal belongings from the Red Cross, a radio from a Polish worker which a man nicknamed ‘Nelson’ was negotiating (who worked in the Boiler Room).

He told me that everyday ‘Nelson’ was carrying a haversack to and from work, and next week he hoped to get possession of the radio. The committee realised that it was a responsible and dangerous task for the person they chose to operate the radio, and they decided to enquire whether I would be prepared to

“do the job”. At that time I was living in a room with about twenty men, and I told Tim Mahoney I would discuss the problem with “my mucker” (person you share everything with – even a crumb!). ‘Taffy’ Morgan agreed to the plan, I was prepared to accept the responsibility.

The Camp Buildings had previously been warehouses with barred windows. At either end of the four buildings were three separate rooms, below which was a cellar with two rooms – a square one and a long, narrow one. Because of crowded conditions, several of these cellars – with half the height of a window above ground level – had been converted by the men into living quarters, and it so happened that ‘Nelson’ lived with three other men in a cellar furthest from the Guard Room.

This cellar was long and narrow, and one half which contained the two double bunk beds had been screened off by using Red Cross plywood crates, in between which at a later date I kept my maps hidden.

‘Nelson’ moved out of this cellar into another cellar under Captain Lacey’s Medical Room, and, with the exception of the Central Committee, everyone thought that the radio was installed there.

‘Taffy’ Morgan and I moved into ‘Nelson’s’ vacated cellar.

According to plan, the radio was smuggled into camp – I insisted that I was never told where it came from. A Medical Sergeant who was working in the local hospital and occasionally came back into our camp had worked for a radio firm in civilian life and he converted the 6-valve Tandberg wireless set to ear-phones. ‘Curly’ Craker and I removed and filed out numbers stamped on the set, so its origin could not be traced. With Red Cross box plywood we encased the set which was one foot cube (1 cubic foot).

Previously ‘Curly’ and I had dug into the concrete floor a hole deep and large enough to hold the radio and ear-phones, but first we had made a metal container which we cemented into the hole. The radio was then inverted into the container, enabling me to reach the ear-phones and radio controls and an asbestos cover was “flush” to the floor.

Then, above this hole concealing the radio, we permanently positioned three shelves, except that the bottom one was not nailed to its support bracket which enabled me to raise the front of the bottom shelf, wedge a knife at the side to keep it elevated, which then afforded easy access to the wireless set. Above the lid of the container, on floor level, we always had a large old baking tin.

All this preparation meant that I could sit in front of the shelves, pull out the baking tin, position a knife in the raised shelf and take the news bulletin at midnight – the sound of the drum. ‘Taffy’ or ‘Curly’ would go to the urinal upstairs (on ground level) which had open-barred view to the centre yard and they could watch any guard movement. The warning signal was simply several taps on the

drainage down pipe into the cellar and one-two, my right foot replaced the baking tin and right hand removed the knife to lower the shelf on to its bracket supports.

Nightly I “tuned-in” to the midnight news 12-12.30, and then spent an hour or longer writing out the news which I placed inside a certain book on another shelf. When the New Zealand Medical Orderly made his routine rounds twice a day to learn if anyone was reporting sick, he read out the news at each end of a barrack ensuring that one man was posted to keep watch and maintain secrecy. I was lucky to have 4½ hours sleep at night, so I needed to make up the lost sleep in the evening.

Perhaps I should explain that the electricity remained permanently switched full on in the camp, which enabled areas between the rooms and toilets to be illuminated throughout the night, and with men coming in and out from working on one of three shifts, it was no problem to quietly sit writing the news in the early hours of the morning, especially with the screened off sleeping area in the cellar.

I had secretly been operating the radio and writing the daily news bulletin for about two months when it was alleged that an old soldier named Scot had told the news to a Polish fellow, which caused alarm for fear that we would be suspected of having access by radio to World News. The New Zealanders who lived in Room No 4 called a meeting and insisted that we should hold a court and if ‘Scottie’ was proven guilty of revealing that we had a hidden radio in the camp, the verdict was “death by hanging”.

Those present at the meeting did not know that I was the person who operated the set and took the responsibility if our secret was disclosed to the German guards. However I was standing near the door, and the Chairman of the Court asked me to fetch ‘Scottie’ to the meeting. Obviously he knew that a meeting had been convened and what it was all about, and he was frightened to death when told that he had to attend. At first he refused to accompany me back to the meeting, until I promised that I would stand by the door in the room, and if anyone tried to attack him I would hold the door and let him escape. Reluctantly and very nervously he agreed to go back with me to the meeting. The “Kiwis” were all for “stringing him up”, and a NZ Medical Orderly proposed the solution that if ‘Scottie’ agreed to take the concoction he would mix next morning and report sick, he guaranteed that the MO doctor would send him back to the main camp at Lamsdorf, which action would save ‘Scottie’s’ life. Naturally, he had no alternative but to agree to the idea; and it proved successful. I was told that the potent mixture consisted mainly of tobacco and saccharin – and ‘Scottie’s’ heartbeat was going at a fantastic rate! Although, had our secret become widely known, it would have been me for the “high jump”, I thought the Court Judgement rather “over-the-top” – but it certainly served as a future warning to everyone in the camp.

Following the trial, a camp rule forbade the use of the word “radio”, which is exactly the same in German with a different accent, and also the words “BBC”

and “news” which in German is similar.

If a member in the camp wanted to refer to the News Bulletin in any way, the only acceptable word was “Betsy”. Therefore if you wished to enquire whether the Medical Orderly had already been to the room and read the news, you simply enquired “Has Betsy been?”.

After eighteen months or more Captain Lacey MO was told to hand his Red Cross tins back into the Store by a friendly guard because the Camp Commandant was expecting a visit. Following this the news was circulated stating that anything that should be out of sight must not be visible. Upon receiving this warning I secured the asbestos lid of the radio box with a little cement, swept thick dust over the top of it, and then firmly nailed the bottom shelf to the support brackets, and finally left the baking tin under the shelf.

Fortunately I was very, very confident how the radio was safely hidden, and it was just as well when our visitors arrived. The visiting inspection party comprised two from the Gestapo and three from the German Wehrmacht (Army), and I stood there all so innocently!!

While working in the Timber Yard – one morning my Polish friend ‘Willie’ was very excited and happily told me that something very big had taken place in France, but he wasn’t sure of the details. Needless to write, I was then most anxious to get back to Camp, and at the first comparatively safe opportunity early in the evening I arranged the “Look-out men” and listened to the wonderful, almost unbelievable news that we had been awaiting. 6th June 1944 the Allied Forces had landed tremendous forces. At last there was some hope of being liberated and becoming a free man again!

The news I was receiving created great excitement and it was “red-hot” which prompted me to exercise caution and withhold the daily news by 24 hours, just in case some chap could not resist talking to a civilian. I achieved this by spreading two days’ news over three days, and then holding the news back one day.

The Russians were maintaining their attack on a broad front, which meant that I had to obtain maps and familiarise myself with the names of Russian towns and rivers, so that I immediately recognised the names when mentioned on the radio.

I clearly recall Christmas 1944 (when many thought we would be home), I organised a small group of Carol Singers to sing in the camp open compound on Christmas Eve about 8 pm. It was a cold clear night, with a snowfall of about twelve inches, and some of our chaps who were being Guard escorted back from the town hospital – could hear our voices when nearly a mile away.

On the radio Winston Churchill spoke to the Nation about the Home Front (which I did not report) and followed on to inspire the people about the War Fronts. I was

so determined to record most of his speech that I finished writing a special News Bulletin containing 3,100 words – with the hope that the chaps appreciated their unknown reporter.

Daily the news was exciting and to enable myself to report advances on both fronts I had to constantly study both the Russian and the French/German maps. In case you have wondered whether I write shorthand the answer is no, but I very quickly developed my own method of taking rapid notes to which I referred later. At last we were excited about the war possibly entering its final phase during the year 1945.

One Sunday we were called on parade in five ranks when the Commandant addressed the whole camp personnel, and threatened us about the consequence if it was ever discovered we were concealing a radio. I was standing in the centre-third rank, and one or two pals in the front rank turned toward me (who had learnt that I was operating the set) reassuring me of their confidence that I was not easily scared – and I had to quickly say without moving my lips “Look to the front”. Of course I realised that if the Commandant observed men’s heads turning toward one person he would form one conclusion. Fortunately the head movements failed to draw the Commandant’s attention.

Early in January 1945 we speculated whether the Russian advance would encircle our camp and liberate us, but quite frankly even this thought left many doubts in our minds. Their wild and savage behaviour was well known.

About the middle of the month of January there were strong rumours that the Germans were planning to evacuate our camp to a position west of the River Oder, along which they hoped to check the Russian troop advance. The roads were like rivers of ice and the surrounding town and countryside enveloped in over two feet of snow.

At this time I was still working in the Timber Yard loading small railway waggons with “pit-head timber” so I hit on the idea to use the circular-saw bench and made a sledge which measured about 6’ long x 2½’ wide, with cross struts and also a rear frame about 3’ high to help push and control the sledge. In addition I obtained two side ropes, and a friend in the “Coal-mine engineers shop” drilled screw-holes in two metal runners and also provided the nails and screws.

I can still picture the enquiring look on the Feldwebel’s face, when he was standing by the Camp Guard Room as I walked from the Pit Head into Camp. Of course he wanted to know why I carried so much wood! With convincing innocence, in my best German, I told him that we knew the Russian soldiers were approaching and I was confident that they would not leave us to suffer from those barbarians, which meant that they would march us westwards, and therefore I intended to make a sledge. Perhaps I should explain that this officer was a reasonably older man, and naturally concerned about his own personal

future, and he accepted my explanation with a nod of the head.

Next day we were ordered to pack our belongings and be ready to march within two hours. Little was it known that on our wonderful sledge, 'Curly', 'Taffy' and I had our personal belongings including the saxophone plus the six-valve radio measuring one cubic foot.

Despite all this preparation I explained to my chums that as darkness was approaching, if I saw an opportunity to escape into the town I would take it alone, not doubting that Paul's wife Angela would help hide me, until it was safe (if ever it would have been!).

However that plan did not materialise. When we set off the time was about 6.30 pm, it was dark everywhere except the northern sky which was ablaze with shell-fire and destruction in the town of Katowice.

German troops wearing white camouflaged uniforms patrolled the road at twenty yard intervals, so I quickly had to forget about escaping and instead endeavour to remain on my feet, as we trekked along this slippery road.

Remember that we had not been accustomed to marching long distances for many years, and this proved a terrible ordeal. Fourteen weary hours later we finally reached our destination, which the previous day had been a Jewish working camp. We were crowded into the lice-infested rooms. The old iron beds had no blankets, but when we lifted the straw paliase we quickly learnt that "the place was walking". Still nearly everyone was shattered and fell asleep except the three of us. I simply don't know where our energy came from – but in broad daylight 'Taffy' and 'Curly' sat against the closed door to prevent anyone entering, and I tried to receive the BBC News which was only half successful. Next morning, carrying a pair of pyjama trousers, I raided the camp kitchen where I knotted the bottom of the pyjama legs and filled the insides with some kind of ground oats from which days later we made some "old fashioned" gruel. At this time we had no idea what the future held in store – and the Germans didn't know either.