

A REPORTER AT LARGE

IN 1938, when my wife and I left our native Czechoslovakia and came to America, it naturally never occurred to me that seven years later I would be returning to my home town, Moravská-Ostrava, through the courtesy of the United States Army, as an American citizen and a technical sergeant in the Psychological Warfare Division. It was a long trek, which started at the Los Angeles induction center and took me through several Army camps, the New York Port of Embarkation, Liverpool, Coventry, London, Southampton, Omaha Beach, St. Lô, Avranches, Versailles, Luxembourg, Bastogne, Trier, Cologne, Nuremberg, Pilsen, and Prague. In Prague, where I was sent by the Army on a special mission, signs of the Partisans' uprising and the city's liberation were still visible. The war being over, the Army let me go on from there on my own special mission. In front of Masaryk Station, to which I went, blue barracks bag in hand, to board a train for Moravská-Ostrava early one morning, there were fresh flowers, wreaths, small flags, and burning candles at the spot where, during the uprising, the Germans had machine-gunned seventy-three Czech patriots. A few people stood there, their heads bowed, and a young woman knelt before the flowers, her shoulders shaken by silent weeping.

I was going to Moravská-Ostrava to look for my wife's parents, the only members of either of our families who, according to the last Red Cross message I had received, two years before, were still living there. I was not at all certain they were still alive. There had been severe and prolonged fighting between the Russians and the Germans in Moravská-Ostrava, and the town was said to be heavily damaged. Moravská-Ostrava, which had a peacetime population of a hundred and twenty-five thousand, was Czechoslovakia's fourth largest town, an important coal-mining and steel-production center in eastern Moravia, not far from the Polish and German borders. Before the war, it took less than six hours for fast trains to make the two-hundred-and-fifty-mile trip from Prague; there were four fast trains and six slow trains a day. Now there was only one "fast" train and one slow train; they both took twenty to twenty-four hours, depending on how many Red Army trains had the right of way.

My trip to Moravská-Ostrava was as unpleasant as I had expected. The

GOING HOME—I

coaches were dirty and in poor repair. In the first-class and second-class carriages most of the plush and leather upholstery had been ripped off the seats. In many compartments even the seats had been torn out. A Czech railroad man, wearing in his lapel a red star, probably the gift of a Russian soldier, said that I'd do better in a third-class carriage. "At least you won't have to worry about bugs on those wooden seats," he said. "We try to keep the trains clean, but there are still so many people from the concentration camps and so many displaced persons coming out of Germany that there is always the danger of typhus. Our railroad has become a cemetery," he went on. "First,

the Germans wrecked our transportation system by stealing locomotives, cars, everything. Then a great deal of damage was caused by our own patriot saboteurs, who dynamited tracks and bridges. And now the Russian armies go back and forth on our trains, destroying what little there is left of our equipment. It's a wonder that anything is running at all."

IN the third-class carriage I picked up a number of former inmates of German concentration camps. Most of them were Poles from Buchenwald and Mauthausen who had spent a few months in American or Russian Army hospitals and were now on their way back to their homeland. They wore German uniforms of all kinds and col-



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ors. Their only identification was a discharge paper signed by the American or Russian officer in charge of the Army hospital in which they had been treated. This piece of paper got them free transportation, food, and a straw mattress from the authorities wherever they happened to stop over. A big man with cropped hair showed me a photograph of himself looking like the conventional concentration-camp skeleton. "An American made it on the day they arrived," he said. "Since then I have gained over twenty kilos." He pulled up a sleeve. There was a number burned into his wrist. "The Germans treated us as though we were cattle," he said. "Now this mark has become a free pass on the trolley cars and in the movie houses of Prague. I just showed my wrist. I didn't have to bother about a ticket."

There were many Russian soldiers on the train, too; some were going to Moravská-Ostrava on passes or orders, some were going back to Russia. They didn't like the overcrowded compartments, so they simply climbed on top of the coaches, rolled themselves in their heavy blankets, and lay down and went to sleep or sat about noisily enjoying themselves. They didn't appear to be at all worried about the possibility of falling off or being hit by the roofs of tunnels or by low bridges. The Czech railroad man told me that Russian soldiers were getting killed every day on the trains. They seemed to like riding out of doors even when it was raining, which it began to do a couple of hours out of Prague. They stayed where they were, singing and drinking vodka. Now and then one of them would fire a shot—at a haystack, into the air, anywhere, just for the fun of it—and I could hear their heavy, stumbling steps on the roof of my car. When the train stopped, which it did frequently and for long periods, they would climb down and sit along the tracks and roll cigarettes. When the train started again, they would wait until it had picked up some speed and then race after it and jump on. Many of them wore the Stalingrad Medal, which was awarded to all veterans of the siege of that city. They appeared to be full of snap and power after their four years of fighting the Wehrmacht. In eastern Bohemia, the train crossed a number of damaged bridges. The repair jobs that had been done on them were in no way comparable to what our Army engineers had done in western Europe. They were patched in perfunctory fashion, and often held up by cables and ropes. At all the stations we



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passed stood long trains, loaded with trucks and automobiles (German), agricultural and factory machinery, sacks of flour, sugar, and chemicals, pianos and other furniture, cattle, barrels, bicycles, bathroom fixtures, even Persian rugs. Each car was guarded by a Russian soldier with a tommy gun. The automobiles were mounted on flatcars, and half a dozen Russian soldiers were sitting in almost every automobile, playfully twisting the steering wheel. The Russians are terribly fond of automobiles, but it takes them some time to get the hang of them and learn that the horn is not the most important part and that you don't have to race your engine while you are waiting at an intersection.

Other trains were carrying Red Army outfits home. The cars were decorated with the branches of trees, and there was a big picture of Stalin on the side of each car. A Russian officer told me, in a whisper, that the pictures were government issue. These troop trains were mostly horse cars and cattle cars. Through the open doors, I saw officers and enlisted men lying on their stomachs in the straw, playing the harmonica, singing, and having a wonderful time. I was surprised to find that they actually did sing "The Volga Boatmen" and the other standbys that are always sung by Russian soldiers in a Hollywood movie. There were quite a few girls in uniform. They wore faded gray blouses, tight black skirts, and black boots, and carried field glasses, dispatch cases, and pistols.

AT noon we made a long stop at the railroad junction of Přerov, in the heart of the Moravian plain, where the railways from Vienna, Brno, Prague, and the Polish border meet. The Přerov station had always been a lively place, but now it was mad. The platforms were crowded with displaced persons, Czech soldiers, and armed Partisans. Standing by themselves, at one end of a platform, were a group of Sudeten Germans, all wearing on their chests a round, white patch with a black "N." The "N" stood for "Němec," which is Czech for "German." Several young, gaily dressed members of the Czech Revolutionary Guard were pointing their rifles at them, and they looked frightened and dejected. Thousands of Russian soldiers were wandering back and forth across the tracks, paying little attention to the moving trains. They crowded the footbridges and the passageways under the tracks and the waiting rooms. I counted eleven Red Army trains, steam



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up, ready to continue on their way east after chow; the soldiers were standing in long lines in front of the kitchen cars, which were converted horse cars with big kettles set up inside.

As I passed one kitchen car, a Russian captain invited me to eat lunch with him. He spoke only Russian and I spoke Czech, but we could understand each other and we got along fine. The soldiers stared at me with suspicion and curiosity. The captain said that they had never before seen an American soldier. Then he asked casually how it happened that I was travelling alone and did I have *dokumenty*. I took out the special pass I had been given by the Czechoslovakian Prime Minister in Prague. It had all the necessary data, a seal, stamps, signatures, and my photograph, and said, in Czech and Russian, "Technical Sergeant Joseph Wechsberg has the right to travel everywhere in Czechoslovakia. All officials are requested to extend to him their utmost help and courtesy." The captain read the paper carefully, then beamed and said, "*Khorosho, khorosho*," which means "Fine, fine." He was a small, solid man with bow legs and a very old face, and when he laughed he looked like Popeye the Sailor. We went over to the kitchen car. The captain asked for an extra mess kit and had it filled with food, then handed it to me. He got one for himself, and we sat down for lunch on the steps of a car. Our meal was a stew—potatoes and vegetables and big hunks of beef—and black bread, which was passed around in big loaves, from which everybody broke off hunks.

Before we ate, the captain went off and got a plump, heavy-set, grim-faced colonel, whom he introduced as *Pan Polkovnik* (Sir Colonel). He was the regimental commander. The Russian junior-grade officers, up through captain, are addressed as *Tovarisch-Tovarisch* Lieutenant or *Tovarisch* Captain. Field-grade officers are called *Pan*—*Pan* Major or *Pan* Colonel. *Pan Polkovnik* shook hands with me and said we must celebrate with a drink, then shouted an order over his shoulder. There was a minor commotion among the nearby soldiers, and a few moments later a sergeant came up to us carrying a bottle of vodka and three large glasses. The *Polkovnik* gave us glasses, filled them, raised his own glass, and said, "President Truman! Marshal Stalin!" There was nothing to do but toss off my glass. The Russians make two kinds of vodka. The first is the commercial sort one gets in Russian restaurants in New York. The second, consumed by the

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Red Army, tastes like a combination of sulphuric acid and blue flame. I felt the tears running down my cheeks. I don't think I was much of a credit to the United States Army. To conceal my embarrassment, I offered an American cigarette to the colonel, but he shook his head, thanked me, and lighted one of his Russian cigarettes. We shook hands and he walked away.

The food tasted marvellous after the strong drink. The captain explained that for lunch they usually had the kind of meal we were now having. "But our breakfast is our big meal," he said. "We get big pieces of raw bacon, cold meat, plenty of bread, and vodka. Do you also get vodka for breakfast in the American Army?" I explained, not without bitterness, that our Army didn't serve liquor for breakfast, or even for supper. The captain looked shocked. "I guess that would be no army for me," he said. I told him about our K rations and C rations, but he wasn't impressed. He said that the Russians had some excellent fish in cans. With every meal, the captain said, the Russian soldiers eat small, half-ripe tomatoes which are preserved in vinegar and kept in big barrels. They supposedly supply the Russian soldiers with all the needed vitamins. I noticed that many soldiers had their mess kits filled twice or three times and that the officers and enlisted men were eating the same food. After lunch, the captain offered me another glass of vodka, this time toasting General Eisengauer and Marshal Zhukov. Then he took some tobacco and two strips of Russian newspaper out of his pocket, rubbed the tobacco between his fingers, and rolled two cigarettes, one of them for me. "We prefer our tobacco rolled in newspaper," he said. Russian soldiers always have more tobacco than they can use, he told me. Each company gets a tobacco ration—big hunks of pressed tobacco leaves—and every soldier breaks off as large a piece as he likes and stuffs it into his pocket. There were more drinks, in honor of People's Commissar Voroshilov and Secretary of War Stimson. I hastily shook hands with the captain before he could get down to drinking to two-star generals.

MY train pulled out of the station an hour later. Around 4 P.M. it reached the town of Hranice, where, I was told, it would remain until midnight. (Fifteen years before, I had taken part of my compulsory infantry training in Hranice, which is Czechoslovakia's West Point.) From Hranice to Ostrava is only forty miles, and I didn't



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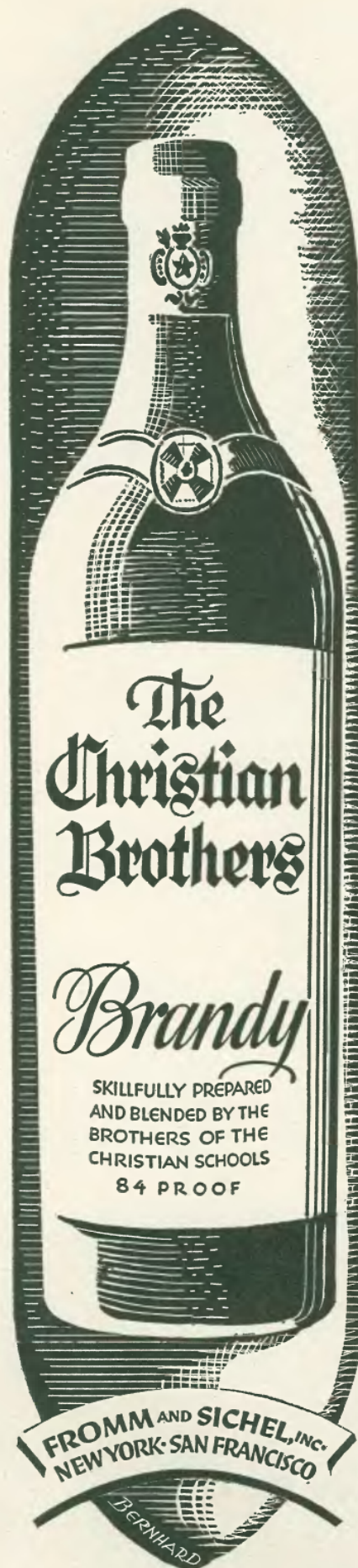
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like the idea of hanging around Hranice for eight hours anyway. I saw a large Russian convoy rumbling in the direction of my home town on a road that ran by the station, so I got my barracks bag out of my car and went over to try to pick up a lift. A Russian major came by in a jeep that had a small Persian rug spread over the seat. He slowed down and grinned at me, and I saluted. I asked him, in Czech, whether the convoy was going through Ostrava. He said yes. I told him I wanted to get there myself and would like to bum a ride. The major grinned again and said something that seemed to mean "Hop in. We'll be there in no time." Then he tooted his horn, for no apparent reason, and raced his engine a moment, and off we went.

The convoy was a colorful nightmare of about everything that runs on wheels. There were American-made weapons carriers and two-and-a-half-ton trucks; Willys and Ford jeeps, which the Russians indiscriminately call *Willyski*; German staff cars and Škoda-made buses; motorcycles with sidecars; American Army vehicles (captured by the Germans and recaptured from them by the Russians, my major told me); private cars, "liberated" all over the Continent; and horse-drawn hay carts and droshkies. The Russians were a wild-looking bunch of men. The regulations about uniforms in the Red Army are not strict. I saw soldiers in khaki, brown, blue, white, black, yellow, and red blouses. Their trousers were often of another color and material. Some of the men wore heavy winter coats lined with thick layers of cotton. The major explained that all the vehicles belonged to one regiment and had to stick together, no matter how slow their progress; so the motorized vehicles would race ahead for a while, then stop and wait for the hay carts and droshkies. Then the whole convoy would take off again.

Presently we met a large convoy that was heading in the opposite direction. Since both columns filled the road from one side to the other, I wondered what would happen. As I pondered the problem, the convoys stopped, and the higher-ranking officers of the two convoys got together under an oak tree for a conference. The major explained that such matters were always straightened out amicably and said that our convoy would probably get priority because, now that the war was over, going home was the most important thing. In a few minutes, orders were issued for the other convoy to get off the road.

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The whole westbound mêlée of vehicles, horses, and men moved off into the fields, and we passed on. It was as easy as that.

Many of the men on our hay carts wore the Stalingrad Medal. The major said that they had come all the way from Stalingrad in their carts, and that their horses were the ones they had started out with. I don't know how this patchwork caravan managed, but it did. The only uniform thing about it was that it was all moving in the same direction. The idea was to get back to Russia, and that was that. At best, our progress was a nerve-racking game. We met other vehicles, passing them on the right side, on the left side; we passed broken-down trucks which had to be circumnavigated; we were harassed by motorcycles weaving in and out among the other vehicles. The motorcycle men looked very tough. Two men sat on each motorcycle and one in the sidecar; they had no duffel bags, sleeping bags, barracks bags, musette bags, or any other bags. They didn't, in fact, have anything. They, too, had come all the way from Stalingrad on their noisy little machines, and they, too, would race ahead furiously, then stop to wait for the rest of the convoy.

There were few people in the squares of the small villages through which we drove—a queer contrast to the "Welcome" signs and the victory arches decorated with the Czechoslovakian and Russian colors and greetings such as "Long live our Russian liberators!" This was quite unlike the noisy, sincere welcome the American Army had been given in western Bohemia, where everybody was out to watch our troops pass, shouting "*At' žije Amerika!*" (Long live America!), the children waving little flags, the girls throwing kisses, the old women offering us bread and salt. Here the streets were almost deserted. Passing by the houses, you could see the faces of the people peeping from behind their curtains. The villages had an apprehensive, even a hostile air.

We found an altogether different situation when we reached Vitkovice, a suburb of Moravská-Ostrava. Here the Czechs were out in the streets in great numbers. Vitkovice is the home of the great Vitkovice iron works. The large tenement buildings in which the steel workers and coal miners live were gaily decorated with Soviet flags, and there were pictures of Stalin and Beneš in almost every window. There was also evidence of heavy fighting: shell holes, caved-in buildings, heaps of rubble, burned-out German pillboxes, wrecked



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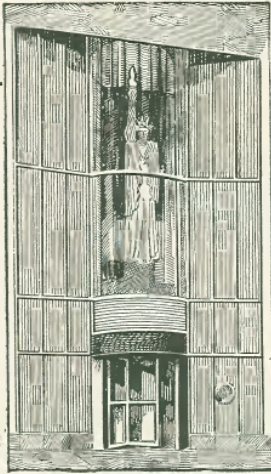
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German and Russian tanks. Large crowds stood in front of the tenements, shouting merrily, greeting us with the clenched-fist salute or waving Russian and Czechoslovakian flags. Vitkovice had always been mostly a Social-Democrat town. As we drove past the large furnaces of the steel plants, we saw smoke coming out of the chimneys and heard the humming, swishing, hammering sounds of machines. The plants were undamaged. Red Army guards were posted at all the entrances. When, finally, we reached the center of Moravská-Ostrava, the crowds that greeted us were even bigger. It seemed as though all the workers in town had turned out to welcome the convoy.

EVERYTHING was familiar now. We drove past the house where my wife had lived when I met her for the first time, and past the small *confiserie* where she and I had gone so many afternoons after school. The front of the shop was full of holes; the windows were broken, and through one of them I could see a large Russian flag hanging on the rear wall. We rolled along Trída 28. října, the town's main street. Two or three houses were bombed out, and others were burned or damaged; few windows were unbroken. The jeep pulled up in the town's main square, the Rynek. From where we were now, I could see the house in which I was born. Somehow its shape seemed changed, and it had no roof. I got out, shook hands with the Russian major, and picked up my barracks bag. As I walked away, I kept staring at our house and wondering what had happened to it, and trying to tell myself that I had come home.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

(This is the first part of a two-part article.)

Actually, Brahms never forgot Clara or Julie Schumann. Clara, in particular, remained one of his staunchest friends throughout their lifetimes. She understood his moody nature as many another person failed to do, a nature which began simply enough on May 7, 1833 . . . —*Biographical sketch in a Victor album.*

Well, you hardly look for moodiness during childbirth.

HOW'S THAT AGAIN? DEPARTMENT

[From "The Fashion in Shrouds," by Margery Allingham]

Since Sidney Ferris had died the death he deserved in a burnt-out motorcar with which, in a fit of alcoholic exuberance, he had attempted to fell a tree, he had never heard his widow mention his name.