THE DAY OF THE CONQUERORS

ON May 10, 1945, the confusion that followed the end of the European phase of World War II had barely begun. At the time, I was a technical sergeant in the Psychological Warfare Division of the United States Army, stationed near Frankfurt-am-Main, and when I heard on the radio that though the shooting was supposedly over, the people of Prague were fighting the German Occupation troops in the streets, I was suddenly impatient to go there. I could make it in a day or two in a jeep. I had spent my youth in Czechoslovakia, and had last visited it in 1938.

I was able to get permission to go, but a sergeant's influence is not always sufficient to secure what the Army calls "logistical support" for such a trip. However, with the help of a sympathetic major I finally got hold of a jeep, several cans of gasoline, some boxes of K rations, and a small American flag, which I intended to fly on the jeep while driving through the streets of Prague. Just as I was about to leave, the major—a vigorous, kind-hearted Irish-American—decided to go with me. He had never been "in on any liberation," he said, though he had barely missed the one in Paris the summer before. I was glad to have him along; we would have to cross the Russian lines, and I hoped his gold leaves would facilitate the inevitable negotiations. He was a round-faced, cheerful man with a great appetite for food and adventure, and I liked him.

So on the morning of May 10th, we left Frankfurt, drove through Nuremberg, and took the highway to Pilsen and Prague. The road was crowded. There were people on bicycles and horses and in haycarts and trucks. Many were walking. Some had a dazed expression, as though they couldn't believe the war was over. They all moved along at a steady pace, but when you asked them where they were going, most of them couldn't tell you exactly. Some were trying to get back to their countries and homes and families; most were running away from something or somebody they were afraid of. There were German soldiers going west, looking stunned and bedraggled, and Czechs and Poles moving east. There were soldiers cut off from their units, gaunt, haggard people who had walked out of concentration camps, children looking for their parents, parents looking for their children.

As our jeep approached the frontier between Germany and Czechoslovakia, which runs along the crest of the Bohemian Forest, the highway was even more jammed than it had been earlier. We got through the crowds, however. The people moved aside when they saw our jeep, with its American Army markings; some smiled and waved at us, and some stared at us with hate. But no matter whether they considered us liberators or conquerors, they took it for granted that we had the right of way. In order to ease military class distinctions, which in effect did not exist between the major and me anyway and could only be a complicating factor on such a trip, I had taken off my stripes, and was wearing only the insignia of a war correspondent, which I'd got some time before when I was working for the *Stars & Stripes*. This confused many of the people we encountered, and I hoped it would strengthen our authority. We had no orders or other papers of any kind and were not sure we would be able to cross the border.

I knew the region well. When I had been a law student at Prague University, twenty years before, I often went there in summer with my friends. The Bohemian Forest—called Böhmerwald in German and Šumava in Czech—which extends southward from the border of Bavaria and Bohemia, is only a few hours by fast train from Prague. It is a lovely, hilly region, with dense woods and clear trout streams, green meadows and fertile farms, pretty resorts and picturesque villages. In prewar days, most of the people were artisans, who worked in their homes—wood carvers, makers of musical instruments, and glass blowers.

Almost every village had its own home industry then. In Graslitz, for instance, thousands of cheap fiddles bearing the name of Antonius Stradivarius were made. In other villages, the people made beautiful etched glass or painted china. Their sense of symmetry and color showed in their buildings as well as in their crafts. The small houses had red roofs with pointed gables, and gaily colored shutters. In the middle of each village was a church, with a tall spire, and with a graveyard behind it, and across the square from the church was the inn, or a couple of inns,

with stained-glass windows and wood-panelled halls. On Sunday morning, after Mass, the men sat at the inn, drinking beer and playing cards, while the women went home to cook Sunday dinner.

We students went swimming in the streams or collected mushrooms and strawberries in the woods. The mushrooms there had a fine, strong flavor of earth and rain. Housewives cut them into small slices, dried them in the sun on flat stones or window sills, put them into white stockings, and hung them in their pantries, where they retained much of their flavor all winter long. And many pantries were also stocked with hams and sides of cured pork, with fruit preserves and sacks of potatoes. Often there was a barrel of beer in the cellar—either the dark, sweet, heavy *Bräu* from Bavaria or the light, pale, dry lager from Pilsen.

As the major and I drove toward the Czechoslovak border, it was hard for me to remember that those days of plenty had actually existed and that these were the very places I'd once known. The countryside and the people had a tired, battered look. The houses were unpainted, the inns neglected, the church walls marked with bullet holes. There were bomb craters along the road. The traffic and the confusion continued to grow worse as we got nearer to the frontier. People coming away from the border said that all controls had been abolished. "No passports, no visas, no customs!" they would exclaim, shaking their heads in wonder. This had been one of the most difficult frontiers in Europe to get across, and the border officials on both sides had been feared. Before the war, people had spent hours standing in line to have their baggage examined. And now, for the first time in memory, all the barriers were gone. The border guards on both sides had disappeared, and their barracks and the customs officials' houses were deserted, their doors standing open.

As the road mounted, the air became sharper. The major and I were hungry. We'd had nothing to eat since breakfast, at dawn. We had the K rations, but we agreed that this was no day for K rations. The weather was lovely, the war was over, it was spring, and I was going back to my native land. We decided to celebrate with a real lunch, preferably served on a white tablecloth. In those days, in Germany, you didn't bother to hunt up a restaurant and consult the menu cards posted be-

side its entrance. You just picked any place that looked as if it had good food, and went in and requisitioned a meal. If you felt generous, you left a few American cigarettes. The people you'd taken the meal from would thank you fervently, happy to get off so easily. It was highhanded, but the sense of victory was strong, and I suppose the attitude was natural.

The major and I made sure we were still in German territory, and then began to look for a good place. After a few more turns in the road, we saw a large Bavarian inn. The major looked at me and I looked at him. This was it—a substantial, three-story building, the ground floor whitewashed stone, and the second and third floors of wood. The roof was pointed, like that of a Swiss chalet. Above the door was an inscription,

GRÜSS GOTT, TRITT EIN,
BRING GLÜCK HEREIN

which means, "Praise the Lord, Come In, Bring Happiness."

IN front of the inn was a flagstoned terrace offering an imposing view of valleys and forests. In back was a large beer garden, with tables and chairs shaded by old chestnut trees. I had never seen this particular inn during my hiking days, but I was sure it must have been popular with tourists. It was still well kept up. There was even a festive air about it. The windows were clean, the gravel walks were freshly raked, and from the roof two flags were flying, both of blue, yellow, and red in vertical stripes.

The major and I didn't know what country's flag this was; in the past two days we had seen a great many flags of all sorts. They cropped up everywhere. This was peace, and everybody was flying any flag he pleased, and we were all for it.

We got out of the jeep and walked toward a large gateway, next to the front door, that opened on a cobblestoned courtyard. Through an open window came the sound of voices and a delicious aroma, which I recognized at once as that of fresh mushrooms frying in butter. The major stopped as we reached the courtyard and inhaled deeply. His snub-nosed Irish face was transfigured. "Oh, boy! That's for us," he said.

We crossed the cobblestones, our boots making a martial sound and the holsters of our guns—we both carried Lugers, which were more fashionable with American troops than American weapons—flapping against our hips. We

thought we looked suitably tough and formidable—like real conquerors. We found the kitchen door of the inn and went in, not bothering to take off our helmets. The kitchen was large and bright. It had a tiled floor and white walls, two large ranges with iron pots on them, copper pans hanging from the ceiling, and several tables and sinks. About a dozen women, some of them wearing white coats, were cutting mushrooms, peeling potatoes, frying meat, cleaning brook trout, and baking cakes. We had heard a great deal of animated talking while we were outside, but when we appeared in the kitchen it stopped instantly. The only sound was of water running in one of the sinks.

It was important to make a strong first impression. I decided to insist on seeing the innkeeper. "*Wo ist der Wirt?*" I asked, in what I hoped was an authoritative manner. "*Vortreten!*" The major was standing next to me, his legs apart, his right hand on his holster.

For a while, no one moved. Then we heard rapid steps, and a woman came out of an adjoining room. She was tall, dark-haired, and obviously a woman of the world. She wore a black silk dress that I was willing to bet had been made in Paris, and as she came up to us, a cloud of perfume that held memories even sweeter than the scent of fried mushrooms came with her.

She stopped in front of me. "*Qu'est-ce que vous désirez, Monsieur?*" she asked. Her tone was icy, and so was her stare, directed at my helmet.

I was so surprised at being addressed in perfect French by a lady in a black silk dress in the kitchen of a Bavarian inn on the German-Czechoslovak border that I forgot to be a conqueror, and removed my helmet automatically. So did the major, whose face was a study in bewilderment.

I explained, in French and quite meekly, that we would like to talk to the owner of the inn.

"The innkeeper and his wife have run away," the lady said. "Perhaps they had reason. What is it you want, Monsieur? We're quite busy right now, as you must see."

By now, I had overcome at least a part of my surprise and embarrassment. "In that case, who is in charge?" I asked.

"If you will enter the inn through the front door, Monsieur, I'll ask the Minister whether or not he will see you," the lady said. "The kitchen is

hardly an appropriate place for any conversation he may have with you."

She turned away and—this time speaking perfect German—told the women to go back to work. They did. The major and I left as we had entered, by way of the courtyard.

"Who do you suppose she is, anyway?" I said.

The major wasn't curious, apparently. He was hungry. His Adam's apple was working in his throat. "Fresh brook trout!" he said. "And did you see that cake? What are we out *here* for?"

"All right," I said. "Come on. Maybe we'll be asked to lunch with the Minister. I wonder what country he's from."

WE went to the front of the inn once more and found a number of people crowded around our jeep. Some were obviously local Germans, wearing short leather pants, white shirts, and embroidered braces, or else breeches and checked shirts, and they looked at us with apprehension, trying to read in our faces whether or not our mission was punitive. But there were other people there who looked un-German and were dressed like city dwellers. All these wore small blue, yellow, and red flags in their lapels.

The major and I entered the inn through the front door. To our left was a small room that smelled of stale beer and was empty except for a zinc counter. To our right was a large hall with a platform at the far end, on which there were music racks and chairs. In the center of the hall, a large, U-shaped table, covered with a white cloth, had been set for an elaborate meal and decorated with blue, yellow, and red wild flowers. Near one of the hall's big windows was an improvised desk, made of three rough wooden tables pushed together. Behind it sat a gray-haired man, and behind him stood a large flag—blue, yellow, and red.

The man rose and came toward us, and we saw that he was tall and erect, and that he wore striped trousers, a black jacket, and a gray tie with a pearl in it. He looked precisely like a senior career diplomat except that he wasn't shaved. He was holding a white silk handkerchief against his right cheek, which was swollen.

The man bowed and extended his hand. The major mumbled something indistinguishable but polite in tone, and shook it, and so did I.

"Gentlemen," the man said in English, with a second bow. "I consider it an honor to welcome the representatives of the United States Army. Please be seat-

ed." He pointed to a pair of wooden chairs beside his desk. We sat down, and so did he.

"You must forgive my unusual appearance," he said, indicating the handkerchief. "As if I didn't have troubles enough already, I am now afflicted with an infected wisdom tooth. I sent the First Secretary to the village for a dentist but there is none. The pain was so great this morning that I was unable to shave." He permitted himself a faint sigh.

We stared at him. I could think of nothing to say, and the major, too, appeared at a loss. The gentleman stared back at us. The silence seemed to last for ages. Outside, someone was playing with the horn of our jeep. "You expressed the wish to talk to the proprietor of this inn," the gentleman said, at last. "Unfortunately, we don't know where he is. When the legation staff arrived here, he and his family had disappeared."

"Thank you, sir," said the major. "You say the legation staff . . ." He groped a moment for the right approach, and then, dispensing with any attempt at diplomatic finesse, asked bluntly, "What government do you represent, sir?"

The gentleman seemed somewhat put out. "But of course you know," he said, raising his eyebrows and pointing at the flag behind his chair, "that this is the Legation of the Kingdom of Rumania."

I nodded vigorously. The major hesitated and then said, "Yes, sir. Why, of course!"

"The Rumanian Legation that was formerly in Berlin?" I asked cautiously.

"No, no, *no!*" said the gentleman. "I am His Majesty's Minister Plenipotentiary to the government of *Hungary*. This"—he made a sweeping gesture to include the whole inn—"happens to be, temporarily, the Rumanian Legation in Budapest. In a manner of speaking, of course. We fled west from Budapest to escape the Soviet occupation. It is a somewhat preposterous situation, but this location has its advantages. Sitting, as it were, on the fence between West and East, I feel that I may be able to safeguard my country's interests quite effectively. It has, however, been a great strain on our nerves."

"I imagine so, sir," said the major.

The Minister sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Sometimes I wake up in the night and am unable to remember where I am," he said. "I'm not going to bore you with a report of our absurd experiences during this last while. I'm beginning to doubt myself that they ac-

tually happened. Suffice to say that, not being able to get back to Rumania, and not wanting to fall into the hands of any of the belligerents while the war lasted, my family and I, and my staff and their wives and children—forty-nine people, in all—have been chased back and forth across Central Europe, first by the advancing Russians, then by the retreating Germans, then by the Czech and Slovak partisans, then by elements of General Vlassov's army, and finally"—he coughed delicately—"by the United States Third Army."

"We're sorry, Mr. Minister," said the major.

"No reason to apologize, sir," the Minister said. "Technically—only technically, you understand—a state of war still exists between your government and mine, no formal peace having ever been concluded. My nation has had the distinction of fighting against everybody during this war. We were on the side of the Axis powers from 1940 to 1944, and we fought *against* them from 1944 until a few months ago, when an armistice was signed between the Allies, including my government, and the government of Hungary. Had I been able to get back to Budapest—" He didn't finish the sentence but merely lifted both hands in a gesture of dismay.

"Well, Mr. Minister," the major said, "it's all over now. You'll be back in Budapest with your staff in no time. To tell you the truth, we stopped in here only because it seemed a good place to have lunch." The major was fast becoming his brisk, cheerful self.

"I beg your pardon?" said the Minister.

Trying to be helpful, I explained that we were on our way to the Czech border and had supposed the inn was still run by its owner. We had, I said, chanced to meet a lady in the kitchen, who . . .

"Oh, yes, indeed," the Minister said distractedly. He pressed the handkerchief against his cheek again. "My wife is a remarkable hostess, but she never had to cope with problems such as she has here. Almost the whole staff is out in the countryside trying to buy food. This happens to be a Rumanian national holiday, and my wife and I decided to give a little party for our staff, in spite of the unusual circumstances. How glad I would be to have you as my guests"—the major leaned forward, evidently to accept with pleasure, but the Minister held up a hand to stop him, and continued—"but, of course, such an invitation might create an almost insoluble problem of protocol. As I

have mentioned, there still is a state of war between our two countries." He got up. So did we. The major looked deeply depressed. "I'm confident, though, gentlemen," the Minister continued, "that relations between our two great nations will soon be as cordial and mutually beneficial as they were prior to the start of this long and terrible war."

The Minister bowed, and so did we, and he led the way to the door. "Gentlemen," he said, "this was indeed an honor. As soon as I am able to establish contact with my government, I shall report your visit on this great day when the people of Rumania celebrate the anniversary of their liberation."

I cast a last, wistful glance at the table, thinking how delicious brook trout are early in May, cooked just a few minutes in a court bouillon with vinegar, thyme, and laurel, and served with melted butter. "Thank you, Mr. Minister," the major said, and shook hands with him again. "May I wish you a happy celebration of the anniversary of Rumania's liberation from the Germans?"

"You are very kind, sir," said the Minister. "As a matter of fact, it is *another* liberation we celebrate today. On May 10, 1877, during the Russo-Turkish War, the Principalities of Moldavia and Walachia proclaimed their independence from Turkey. On that day, exactly sixty-eight years ago, our great nation was born."

A MOMENT later, the door of the temporary Rumanian Legation closed behind us. We made our way to the jeep, which was still surrounded by people. The major seemed dazed. We got into the jeep, and I drove off as quickly as possible, but not before catching, once more, the odor of frying mushrooms. I tried to put it out of my mind, but this was very difficult. The major sat beside me with closed eyes. Neither of us said anything. A few minutes later, we crossed the border into Czechoslovakia. We were not asked for passports or any other papers. I pulled up the jeep under the first old chestnut tree I saw, and, still without speaking, we got out our K rations and opened them.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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A THOUGHT FOR THIS WEEK

[*Headline in the Herald Tribune*]

OFFICE TOWER IS ONLY
HOLLOW SHELL
WITHOUT TENANTS