

Dear Carl,

April 22, 1939 most of the Americans left San Sebastian on their way to freedom. Ten of us were left behind - the 10 last names of the alphabet. A tremendous disappointment!

Up to now, we knew negotiations were in progress for exchange. Now, the war was over and the exchange had been completed. What would happen to us?

On returning to San Pedro, Bob Steck said that we should be prepared for a long siege and should think about winterizing our quarters. Thereupon, I made a bet with Bob that we would be out of San Pedro by August 15.

I explained that people were working hard for our release and that the return of our fellow-prisoners would accelerate the process. I am not certain I was that optimistic. I made this bet - as the others - because I felt it helped morale.

However, I had been amazingly accurate in my predictions. I would pick a month in which a particular nationality would leave San Pedro to be repatriated and would bet a dinner and show. I won all bets and this included the previous departure of the Americans from San Pedro.

But this time it was close! On August 14th, there was no indication whatsoever and Bob was gleefully explaining that the next day, I would be pushing a coin with my nose across that filthy floor as I was losing the bet.

But the next day, our names were called and we were on our way to San Sebastian for 10 days of quarantine and on August 25th, we crossed the border!

As for our stay in San Pedro, nothing much happened.

We were all received warmly by those left in San Pedro and, somehow, they had learned that we were returning for they expected us.

Radevoy Nicolich - the Yugoslav who later became a general in Tito's Partisans - had prepared a place for me at his side.

Yes, I played a lot of chess - especially with Nicolich - but, believe me, I did not have a ball!

The food was just as bad, the place was just as filthy but conditions had improved. We were no longer beaten. More mail was received. I received 2 fine letters from you which were very informative - although, of necessity, in some Aesopian language.

There were no longer any classes nor other activities that we were engaged in prior to our departure for San Sebastian. We missed all of you and San Pedro was now a lonely, dreary place. The additional four months we spent as prisoners of Franco was, perhaps, the hardest time.

On our second trip to San Sebastian, we were taken to Ondaretta, the prison that Joe Young described so well.

We were visited by the Third Secretary of the Embassy and by Robert Murphy - a career diplomat who became quite prominent and was later an adviser to Eisenhower. These gentlemen - especially Murphy - worked very hard for our release. Of course, it was the work and pressure of our friends in the first place that brought about the decision of our Government to intercede. But once that decision was made, these men followed through diligently. We were also visited by a very handsome young man who brought us cigarettes as a gift from the wife of the Ambassador. This young man - the Secretary of the Ambassador's wife - looked upon us with awe and seemed to regard us as storybook heroes.

On the evening before we were to go to Irun and cross the bridge into France, we were visited by the Third Secretary and by Mr. Murphy. They told us that it was the eve of World War II and that was why it was essential to get us out of there. It might soon be impossible. They also told us that they understood that we have pent-up feelings and would like to express them. But they counseled us not to demonstrate but to walk quietly across the bridge. For the situation is very tense in the world today and France is not the same as it was when we crossed that country on our way to Spain. But they reassured us that everything would be alright. We would have to walk across the bridge by ourselves but they would follow in a car right behind us.

We walked across the International Bridge without incident and we were in Hendaye, the town from which I left for Spain via the Pyrenees.

The Secretary said goodbye and wished us luck while Mr. Murphy remained with us.

The two Frenchmen who crossed with us were manacled and ostensibly were being held to see if they had evaded their military service. Actually, they were threatened, insulted and harassed until they were located by French anti-fascists - the Committee to aid Republican Spain - and rescued.

It was not the France of the Popular Front. There seemed to be a semi-fascist regime. When war was declared, Germans were immediately interned as enemy aliens: Anti-fascist German refugees from Hitler and including Germans who fought against fascism in the International Brigades.

We were treated quite differently. We were taken to a Restaurant where a lavish meal was set before us. We were then given some money and Mr. Murphy told us to meet him 6 P.M. at the Railroad Station.

We bought some postcards and some French pastry but we sent most of the money to our comrades in San Pedro. Mr. Murphy not only agreed to get the money to the prisoners but added to the sum by matching the amount we gave him.

We left Hendaye that evening for Paris. We had breakfast in Paris with Mr. Murphy who then left us. Robert Murphy remarked that we would all be right back as war was about to break out. However, he said, we would probably all be generals.

"Do you think they'd trust us?" was the question one of us asked.

"It would be foolish not to utilize your experience" was Murphy's rejoinder.

We went on to Le Havre to await shipment back to the States. But that was not so easy. There were thousands of vacationers in France who wanted to get out. The ship-owners took advantage of the situation by charging First Class fare for Third Class accommodations. Those holding tickets for Third Class passage had to wait - and it could be a long one.

Our passage had been paid by the Friends of the Lincoln Brigade and the Consul in Le Havre had been instructed to get us on the first available ship. But the Consul cooperated fully with the ship-owners.

About a day or two after our arrival at Le Havre, we were told that there were four places available on a ship returning to the United States and O'Toole, Stone, Tenner and Ziegler left. But that was all.

We attempted to pressure the Consul, pointing out that most of the people returning had been away for months but that we had been away for years and should get some priority.

The Consul - a Mr. Biddle - took no pains to conceal his hostility toward us but said that he would do the best he can.

On September 1st, as we sat down to dinner, Joe Young and Bob Steck were not there. We were not too concerned about that. Stevenson had just come from the movies and he told us that he had just seen us in a news-reel crossing the International Bridge. After dinner, we went to the theatre. Sure enough, a Paramount News-Reel showed us crossing into France with the explanation - in French - that we were Americans who had been imprisoned by Franco.

When we returned to the hotel, Joe Young and Bob Steck were still missing. Now we were worried. Moish Tobman and I scoured the town, especially the waterfront where there were many night clubs. Although there was an effective Blackout in Le Havre, behind the lights things were going strong. But we could find no trace of Young or Steck.

The next morning, at breakfast, the Consul paid us a visit and informed us that Bob and Joe had sailed yesterday on the Ile de France.

On September 1st, the war was on. Germany had invaded Poland. Passengers on the Ile de France panicked and left the ship just as she was about to sail. Joe and Bob had come into the office of the Consul at that time and were told that they could go but that they had to leave immediately and would have no time to go back to the Hotel.

About a week later, we were told that the four of us who were left - Steinberg, Stevenson, Tobman and myself - could leave if we were willing to work in exchange for our passage.

I said that this was against the rules of the National Maritime Union. We would be glad to work if we would be signed on as seamen and get paid.

Mr. Biddle was very angry.

"Don't speak of unions to me!" he burst out.

I told him I was sorry he felt that way but that we are working people and respected trade unions.

About the middle of September, Mr. Biddle told us that freighters were being turned into emergency passenger ships and the four of us could be part of a crew on a freighter. Before I could say anything, the Consul turned to me and said:

"You'll be paid."

And so we signed on.

I understand that we were on the last boat out of Le Havre. They closed the port and Bordeaux became the only port in France.

In that situation, we were never sure that we would ever arrive. But we made it.

On September 30 - two weeks after we set sail - we arrived in New York. Of course, our fare was refunded to the Friends. We got our Sea-men's papers and were paid.

Hy Wallach - November 16, 1979  
255 Eastern Parkway  
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11238