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Omanson

From Page 1

“Man’s Search for Meaning.” Man exists, not to gather power or to find enjoyment, but to find meaning in his life. In everyday situations this could be creating or experiencing something or even meeting someone. The discovery might still occur when a person is “suffering,” such as Frankl did at Dachau. The Nazis could not take his mind or interfere with his thoughts. It is at this point, standing above the abyss, that a man must “choose one’s attitude.”

Oliver Omanson, a local veteran from Yankton who had been imprisoned by the Nazis for nearly 19 months, would certainly have known this. Omanson, a machine gunner with the 45th Division, was captured on Sept. 11, 1943, near Persano, located to the southeast of Salerno, Italy. I regret that he and I did not meet for an interview. Fortunately, we have his words in his wonderful book, “Prisoner of War Number 21860,” to assist us in a very personal sense explain how and why a man chooses to live or to die.

CAPTURE - SHOCK

Frankl suggested that each prisoner, in varying forms, has three separate responses. First, after the soldier is removed from the fighting there is the initial shock, which ends when he is a prisoner at a “secure” camp.

At the moment of his surrender, Oliver said, “I never felt so helpless, defeated or lonely as I did in that moment... I was mentally prepared to sustain serious injury or severe death...” This certainly constitutes a confession of shock. If it were death, then so be it because, “I took comfort in the thought that I would spend eternity in heaven if the Nazis chose to kill me that day.” He and his fellow prisoners were shipped north toward Rome, which Oliver described as nothing but “terror.”

During his trek north through Italy on his way to Germany, Omanson began to exhibit symptoms of dysentery, including severe stomach pains. He was temporarily placed in Stalag 7A in Moosburg, Germany. When he saw it, “my heart sank.” Guards with rifles, fixed bayonets and dogs patrolled around the 15-foot barbed wire reinforced, walls. Prisoner conditions were the equivalent of a “swine yard.” “I wondered how long I would survive in a placed like this.”

Within a month, he and 50-60 others were stowed in a “40 and 8” train car (large enough for 40 men or 8 horses), to be carted to Stalag 2B, a staging area, and then onward to a work farm located at Biesowice, Poland, about 228 miles northeast of Berlin.

ROUTINES AND VALUES

Prison life can be boring, which leads to the second of Frankl’s stages. The prisoner eventually operates within a predictable routine. As such, he prioritizes what is at hand and then puts value into those things or routines. If he intends to survive, then it is those basic necessities, which you and I take for granted, that he values the most.

Although Stalag 2B was one of the worst camps it was here that some semblance of order prevailed, thereby providing “a great deal of encouraging relief.” The men were shaved and deloused and given new clothing. New clothing improved morale. According to Oliver, his greatest relief was when he was assigned a prisoner of war number. Up till then, he was considered “missing in action,” and such an assignment may lead to communication with his parents.

From Stalag 2B he was taken to occupied Poland. A horse barn near a baron’s estate in the area of Biesowice was Oliver’s home from October 1943 through February 1945, and it is here that he found a “routine,” such as it was.

His quarters were austere. A single 20-watt bulb lit the entire crowded bunk bed area. Burlap sacks filled with hay served as both a bed and a pillow. A single, thin blanket was his cover. The latrine was a single can, once used to store chemicals, with a board, containing a single hole, atop of it. As night fell, the men were locked away.

Heat was provided by a single fireplace, which the men would stoke each evening. The heat dissipated around midnight, which made the nights cold as the men slept in their only set of clothing. The odor of animal refuse — ducks, chickens, horses, etc. — permeated the air.

Breakfast consisted of ground barley (which, inevitably, was mixed with mice droppings) covered with separated milk. Lunch was often a slice of German, dark bread taken to the fields where it was toasted and covered with lard. Each day their diet consisted of some form of soup with cabbage, turnips, potato, etc. During the summer, when flies accumulated, Oliver said the soup resembled “rice pudding” due to the pesky vermin. Occasionally the men received a Red Cross parcel. Without those, Oliver claimed that he would have been “a walking corpse.”

Each morning, seven days a week, at 6:30 a.m., a guard would unlock the door, kick it open and yell “Roustem bis faulen hund.” (Get up, you lazy dogs.) Every man worked on the 2,000-acre farm every day. The men were called to attention and informed of their respective work duty. Civilians worked alongside them, but only the Americans were overseen by a Nazi inspector. The jobs ranged from collecting wood, planting and gathering produce to grinding grain.

Oliver began to keep a diary in late February 1944. It explained the drudgery, the mundane and the hope that the war would end. Prisoners quickly heard about war events, such as bombing Berlin, the Normandy invasion, and the invasion of southern France. Everything was a possible sign that morale was low, such as people begging for food, wearing tattered clothing, confiscating horses and recruiting older men and boys, thereby indicating that the end was near.

On April 16, 1944, Oliver wondered what others thought of him for being captured. Certainly, no one in South Dakota knew how he was taken, but he attached a stigma to his status. “[I]t was a choice of living or being shot. I decided I would stick around for a while.” Three weeks later he was “plenty blue and homesick.” The signs of a quick end failed to materialize. “Every day we have nothing to look forward to but work.” The men were constantly hungry. Most men, according to Oliver, would be glad to return to the front to fight. “The hunger began to haunt us.”

And then The March came. Hitler, in anticipation of the Russians arriving from the east, ordered that “foreign labor” be moved “to the rear.” Of course, Oliver did not know this. The prisoners were instructed to gather their things and to make ready to leave. The men put on their tattered clothing, gathered some food and began to move out in February of 1945 along what has been called “the northern route.” The weather was some of the coldest experienced in Europe, with temperatures dropped below zero. This chaos of marching without adequate clothing or food and staying in barns or the open at night perhaps ratcheted the men backwards into a period of shock again.

Describing The March, as it has been called, is every

bit as bone chilling as the Bataan Death March. Oliver said each day was a walk from dawn till dusk. They slept on icy ground and rarely had sufficient sleep. One night, they slept in a barn where Russian prisoners had previously stayed. The next morning, the men were covered with lice. As they marched, more prisoners joined them until they reached more than 1,000. No more than 600, however, would see the end.

But it was food that was in most shortage. The men were given some dark bread every other day and perhaps some ersatz coffee in the morning. Fairly soon after initially departing, the men’s rations were eaten. His last was a can of sardines. They talked about food, and incessantly debated how to eat their small amount of bread. Should it be all at once in a hurry, slowly or over a longer period of time? This became “the monotony of continuous marching.”

Slowly, the conditions worsened. Some men cannot envision their survival, for whatever reason. Oliver certainly tried to avoid that. “I tried to hold on to the good memories from my past, and relieve my pain by mentally placing myself back home in South Dakota. The Germans could control every aspect of my life, but they could not control my mind.” He thought of “the feeling of my parent’s presence” and “I thought about God.” During breaks, he read the New Testament to “nourish my soul.” The verse that sustained him was Matthew 6:33:

“But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

He was, unconsciously, finding the meaning of his life. As they marched, “we grew weaker and weaker.” Russian prisoners died first. They just fell as they walked, and their corpses were trucked away. “Ravenous men devoured weeds, leaves, twigs or whatever they could get their hands on.”

And then disease came upon them. Men had pneumonia, typhus, frostbite and malaria. Men with dysentery chewed on charcoal embers for relief. Oliver likely suffered from this, too. The men had now walked 400 miles, but they didn’t know that the Germans were confused. They had gone too far to the west — near Hanover — and had met up with advancing American forces. They now began to push the prisoners back to the east.

Oliver consciously chose to live to find the center of him.

“One day I did not have the energy to march. I did not want to die and kept pushing myself to keep walking. ... I was literally starving to death.”

A nearby woman slipped him a cookie, which was the most food he had eaten since he had discovered a chicken egg in a barn several days prior.

“God used her to answer my prayer”

It was now April 12, 1945, and they heard American machine gun fire as they were herded into a barn. (Little did Oliver know, but President Franklin Roosevelt died that day.) They stayed overnight in a barn and later that day they were spotted by an American — Lt. Tommy Towne — flying a Cub plane as reconnaissance for the 5th Armored Division. Eventually,

the tanks saved the men in a small town called “Deutsch,” located just west of the Elbe River.

RELEASE

Frankl’s third phase begins at the time of release. There is a veritable cornucopia of emotions. Give thanks to the rescuers. Express exultation for the return of basic necessities. Cast bitterness upon the captors. However, there are dangers lurking, including a warped sense of right and wrong, or much worse.

“One moment I was a prisoner. The next moment I was free. I shall never erase the exhilaration of the moment from my mind.” Axelson described it as “The elation, the euphoria.” The men were given a box of food. They devoured it, “unable to think about anything else.” They were delivered to a local headquarters. “We ate, and ate and ate. I paid the price for this later.”

During his first night of freedom, Oliver declared that the Germans owed him one meal! He and his friends approached a home and demanded to know where they stored their meat. They gave him a key to an upstairs room, where they found a ham. He demanded that they feed him fried potatoes, ham and eggs, and they did.

After release, there is a period of gradual readjustment. There may be a partial belief that it is an illusion or a dream that it will be taken away again. Men can experience pleasure, but not comprehend it. The body breaks out first — eating and sleeping — and only then can the mind respond.

Oliver eventually caught a ride heading west to Hanover. On the way, however, his body was not yet cooperating. It was the consequence of so much rich food after many months of malnourishment. That night, he slept in a hangar, and he had the same problems, over and over. He was treated by a medic and brought into a new world — a bath, clean clothes, a hard cot and a blanket. It was a “beautiful” night of sleep. He flew into La Havre,

France, awaiting a transport to the States. He ate and ate. “Food filled my uppermost thoughts... I actually believed that, if I ever got home, I would have a drawer in my bedroom packed with food...” (He confided that he later did stored cans of sardines in the back of the cupboard, just a reminder that he would never feel the pangs of hunger again.) He “enlisted” as a member in several different Army companies so he could eat several meals. He took a loaf of bread and kept it under his pillow at night in case he wanted another bite.

There is, however, a danger and it depends upon the homecoming. For Frankl, he arrived home and there was no one. Everyone but his sister, had been murdered. The hope that had sustained him was gone. Could bitterness at the outside world for inadequately responding to the Holocaust overtake him? Or, worse, would he continue to suffer and become disillusioned?

Omanson’s homecoming was neither. He arrived at Newport News, Virginia, to the sound of a band playing “Deep in the Heart of Texas.” He telegraphed his parents and then flew into Sioux Falls. “I had dreamed of this homecoming for months. How wonderful to sit in my mother’s kitchen eating with my family again!” One brother was still away in the military, but he was safe. Furthermore, it was certain that Oliver would not become disillusioned because within mere days

after returning home, he met the women of his dreams — Genevieve Wickholm, who only lived five miles from his parents’ home.

As fate would have it, Oliver had the opportunity to vent his spleen. He did not have sufficient points to be discharged and his duty assignment was to guard German prisoners. “I often contrasted the way the Nazis treated their prisoners compared to the way the United States treated her prisoners. The Nazis treated us like pigs.” We treated those prisoners with “consideration and respect.” Oliver had no anger.

But why did Oliver survive while others did not? Certainly, the Russian prisoners were starved to death, and nothing they did — short of escape — could have saved their lives. The same may be true for many other American prisoners who starved and, in their weakened states, were inflicted with a fatal illness. But I think there is more.

Oliver found the meaning of his life. After returning home, he attended a church service and he was deeply impacted. He was thankful. “Lord, right here and right now I surrender myself to full-time service, where you lead me I will follow.” He had already returned to his family, which was certainly one of his quests. The symbolic nature of supping with his parents as Jesus had supper with his Disciples is over-arching. And, having made that promise, he fulfilled the meaning of his life, to join the clergy. And he did so for 56 years.



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