

Petr Fischer. Roman Kodet

Americans in West Bohemia in 1945

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World War II was drawing to an end and people in West Bohemia eagerly awaited Allied forces coming to liberate them. Eventually, it was the United States' troops who were to liberate the western part of Czechoslovakia. Many of them experienced heavy battles on 6th June 1944 within Operation Overlord, the Normandy landings on Omaha Beach (V Corps); they participated in an offensive codenamed Cobra which was to break through from the Normandy peninsula to France and helped enclose the Falaise Pocket, where 100,000 Germans and a substantial amount of equipment were taken captive. They also participated in the liberation of Paris, proceeding through Sedan to the heart of the Third Reich, and they were the first to enter Germany after the Siegfried Line was broken. In December 1944, south from the positions of V Corps, Germans broke through the US lines during the winter offensive in the Ardennes. Shortly after their defeat, the Corps crossed the Rhine, continued to Leipzig and then turned south. By the end of the war, they advanced to West Bohemia.

The US Army came close to the pre-Munich Czechoslovak borders as early as on 18th April 1945 and around 10 am on that day, the first troops of the 90th Infantry Division entered the Czech territory close to the town of Hranice, in the Aš region. Patton's army proceeded further along the border mountains through Bavaria, heading south to Austria. The question of liberating Czechoslovakia was only dealt with in April 1945, and General Omar Bradley issued an instruction for troops on 19th April, ordering them to treat Czechoslovakia as an Allied country, including the Sudetenland.²

So what were the days of liberation and subsequent coexistence with American soldiers like? I will try to capture its course mostly in the southern

¹ The article represents a result of the research of the project SGS-2013-042 (*Perspektivy výzkumu přítomnosti americké armády v západních Čechách v roce 1945 I*) of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

² J. NEUMANN – K. WASKA, *Americká armáda v Čechách*, Praha 1991, p. 5.

Pilsen region, where a sufficient number of chronicle records still exist, although many of them were added later, based on contemporary witnesses' testimonials, after the US troops left.

Americans' advance to Bohemia

Patton's Third Army consisted of two corps: V Corps (C. R. Huebner) whose initial positions stretched on the line between Cheb and Železná Ruda and which liberated the major part of West Bohemia. It included the 1st Infantry Division (C. Andrus), 2nd Infantry Division (W. M. Robertson), 97th Infantry Division (M. B. Halsey), 9th Armoured Division (J. W. Leonard), and later also the 16th Armoured Division (J. L. Pierce). Another corps, proceeding to South Bohemia, was XII Corps (S. L. Irwin), which consisted of the 5th, 26th and 90th Infantry Divisions and the 4th and 11th Armoured Divisions.³ Americans appropriated 150,000 soldiers for the advancement to Bohemia; at that time, the Soviet Union planned the "Prague Operation" which was to involve 2,100,000 Red Army members. The number of forces deployed was in no way excessive since there were still about one million German soldiers in Bohemia, ranking from the remainder of Army Group Centre commanded by the fanatic Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner.⁴

Germans attempted to get a hold in the border mountains and resist the American offensive. The first major encounters took place near the town of Waldmüchen, then Americans fought their way to Domažlice and through the Všeruby Pass to Bohemia. Germans put up tough resistance felt particularly in the town of Klenčí pod Čerchovem, where a German military convoy was concentrated. It was attacked by the US air-fighters, with half of the 230 houses being reduced to ashes in the air strike.⁵

³ J. EŠNER, *Pattonova vojska v Čechách*, in: <http://www.fronta.cz/pattonova-vojska-v-cechach>.

⁴ NEUMANN – WASKA, p. 5.

⁵ Z. ROUČKA, *Američané a západní Čechy 1945*, Plzeň 2000, p. 61.

On Patton's order, the 2nd and 97th Infantry Divisions were proceeding directly to Pilsen. On 6th May, their lines were to open at the right moment to let the 16th Armoured Division come through which was in a fast pace heading to Pilsen on the road from Bor and Stříbro.⁶

Despite the resistance, the disintegration of the Wehrmacht continued culminating, among others, in the capitulation of the 11th Tank Division of Lieutenant General Wendel von Wietersheim. Commander of the US 90th Infantry Division (Major General Earnest) accepted the capitulation, and 9,050 perfectly tidy and equipped soldiers began almost immediately surrendering their weapons in front of the surprised Americans. The surrendering tank division still had considerable combat power, giving up, for example, 700 trucks, 300 cars, 85 personnel carriers, almost 40 tanks and 59 artillery guns during the capitulation.⁷ Other resources only state 25 personnel carriers, six PzKpfw IV tanks and one tank PzKpfw V Panther.⁸ This discrepancy may be caused by the fact that at the end of the war, many chroniclers put tank destroyers and self-propelled guns at the same level as actual tanks. Such a difference in numbers then seems possible.

One of the prominent Nazi tank generals, Edward von Kleist, also surrendered in the Všeruby Pass.⁹ From their point of view, Americans suffered perhaps the heaviest losses in a single battle during the encounter in the village of Zhůří in the Šumava Mountains, where Germans set a trap for them. When men of the 90th Infantry Division arrived to the village, they saw two US Greyhound vehicles and four jeeps standing on the village square. Germans let them get closer to their concealed positions and then opened fire, taking Americans completely by surprise, killing ten and injuring at least the same number of them.¹⁰ The remaining soldiers of the 90th Infantry Division

⁶ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 61.

⁸ K. FOUĐ – M. JÍŠA – I. ROLLINGER, *500 hodin k vítězství*, Cheb 2011, p. 149.

⁹ ROUČKA, p. 62.

¹⁰ Kronika obecné školy ve Starém Zhůří, p. 8.

retreated, waited for reinforcements and hit Germans with all their might. The second attack cost the defenders 20 lives and almost 80 of them were taken captive. On the same day, Domažlice and Klatovy were liberated as well.¹¹

Liberation of Pilsen

In the morning of 6th May, the tank group of Colonel Nobel entered Pilsen as a vanguard of the 16th Armoured Division of General Pierce. During the day, it was joined by the 2nd Infantry Division, which had a head of a Native American in its emblem and was therefore nicknamed “Indianhead”.¹²

Commander of the 16th Armoured Division, which arrived to Pilsen from the west, decided to first occupy the Škoda plant which had been bombed-out a few days ago. Only after that did they made their way to the centre of the city. Shortly after they occupied the “Square of the Republic” (náměstí Republiky) and the city centre, Nobel’s soldiers were hit by gunfire from German snipers hiding in Pilsen’s tall buildings. However, the experienced and battle seasoned troops of the US Army always managed to disable them quickly. They were also supported by some Czechs dressed in various uniforms, “*from flashy ones resembling theatre costumes, to Czech uniforms*”.¹³

Citizens of Pilsen welcomed the liberators with joy, showering them with flowers and giving them food and drinks. Surprisingly, the famous Pilsner beer was not among the beverages; only later did they found out why. Colonel Nobel commented on this: “*Only later we found out, that a dull (for us) crew of a plane of U.S. Air Force mistook the brewery with the Škoda Works and dropped the bombs on the beer tanks instead of the foundries of the arms factory.*”¹⁴

¹¹ FOUĐ – JÍŠA – ROLLINGER, p. 152.

¹² NEUMANN – WASKA, p. 4.

¹³ FOUĐ – JÍŠA – ROLLINGER, p.193.

¹⁴ Ibidem. The orientation above Pilsen during the air-raids could be somewhat complicated. The instructions of the RAF Bomber Command stressed that, “*to achieve the destruction of the Skoda Works by air bombardment great care must therefore be exercised in navigation,*

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The German garrison in the city had been preparing a purge among members of the resistance movement, Allied collaborators and Czech military garrison for the next day. Fortunately, the arrival of Americans took them by surprise and no other bloodshed took place. The Pilsen citizens who, like the rest of the country, had lived under occupation for six years now began to wreak their anger on traitors and Germans, giving them bloody thrashings which had to be dealt with by the US soldiers.¹⁵

Nobel then received a message of surrender from the commander of the German garrison defending the city. At first, he considered this a deceptive manoeuvre and sent his adjutant to the German headquarters. General von Majewski, Commander of the German forces in Pilsen, submitted capitulation into his hands and then shot himself in front of all the staff officers, their wives and his own wife.¹⁶

Exuberant and endless celebrations followed, not only in Pilsen but also in other towns and villages in the region. In Starý Plzenec, too, people rejoiced and were filled with tears. They looked with admiration at the Americans, who were perhaps not even aware how grateful these people were for their lives, their homes and for having a free country again.¹⁷

Demarcation line

For the next three days, everybody listened to the radio, with Prague crying for help. Guns were gathered and volunteers came from far away to help Prague, but all this was eventually to no avail, because Americans were not allowed to cross the Carlsbad – Pilsen – Budweis demarcation line, agreed

route and target marking and in the timing of the Operation". Amendment No.1 to Bomber Command Operation Order No. 182, 6. 11. 1943, The National Archives, Kew (Henceforth NA), AIR 14/851.

¹⁵ FOUĐ – JÍŠA – ROLLINGER, p.193.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Státní okresní archiv Plzeň-jih (hereafter SOkA), fond AM Starý Plzenec 1942–1945, Pamětní kniha Starého Plzeňce 1942–1945, p. 123.

between Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces Dwight Eisenhower and the Soviet command in April 1945. The demarcation line determined the boundary for the advancement of both the liberating armies, with patrols allowed to proceed a few metres beyond it within reconnaissance. Between the Russian and American zone, there was a several kilometres wide “interzone”, without any soldiers.¹⁸

One of a few complications caused by the presence of two foreign armies occurred at the touch points, i.e. the demarcation line, during the crossing of the new borders, transport of goods and supplies on the road and, in particular, by railway. Trains crossings from one zone to another were very complicated since both Russians and Americans inspected entire trains independently, searching for Germans on the run. For example, trains coming to Nezvěstice from České Budějovice and continuing to Pilsen were up to one hour delayed due to train inspections and due to the fact that train arrivals had to be reported to the US headquarters in Rokycany through a jeep liaison since no telephone connection was available. Later, this system changed, but resources do not provide any detailed information on this.¹⁹

Russian General Andrej Vlasov, who was captured by Germans in 1942 and then fought at their side, also wanted to surrender to Americans in Pilsen. However, accepting his capitulation would have been seen by the Russians as helping traitorous troops and would perhaps have political consequences. Americans therefore refused his offer, which meant Vlasov would be taken captive by the Soviets and sentenced to death.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Nezvěstice 1945–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Nezvěstice, Vol. 2, p. 64.

²⁰ FOUĐ – JÍŠA – ROLLINGER, p. 195.

The Dražkovice encounter

Another encounter took place south of Pilsen, near Dražkovice, in a forest called Pastviště.²¹ Around noon on 5th May, an US Army spy vehicle with two soldiers arrived to Spálené Poříčí. Local people showed them a German regiment near Dražkovice, moving toward Nezvěstice and heading to American captivity. They changed direction after a scout plane flew through around 10 am, after which the Germans turned to Struhaře, expecting low-flying fighter planes to fly past. The US soldiers in Spálené Poříčí monitored the situation and returned to Lipnice, their point of departure, for reinforcements. They soon came back followed by another two jeeps and two armoured personnel carriers M8 Greyhound.²²

A bus with insurgents and an ambulance with members of the local Red Cross joined them. The whole group headed to Těnovice and Hořehledy, intending to attack the German soldiers from the back since the main attack was to be lead from Blovice. Americans contacted their main forces located in Blovice, and they set off to Struhaře, towards the German regiment.²³ Germans were quite confused, unsure what to do and whether they should drop their weapons and surrender or keep fighting. The commotion was aggravated by some Nechanice residents, who meddled with the Germans, collecting gear dropped by the Wehrmacht soldiers. Surprisingly, the group of Americans and Czechoslovaks from Hořehledy emerged at that time at the “U sloupu” crossing, and without delay opened fire at the enemy located at the edge of the Pastviště forest.²⁴

Some German soldiers dropped their weapons and surrendered, others tried to return fire. In the meantime, Americans soldiers formed

²¹ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Spálené Poříčí 1913–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Spálené Poříčí, p. 750.

²² Ibidem, p. 749.

²³ Ibidem, p. 750.

²⁴ Ibidem.

a phalanx and moved through the forest to which many German soldiers had retreated. People from Nechanice equipped with weapons collected on the road after the passage of the German convoy immediately joined the fight. Most Germans did not want to fight, but the SS members did not intend to lay down their weapons and continued to put up resistance. During the combat, the US soldiers set the enemy's supply trucks on fire.²⁵

In the meantime, the head of the German convoy met with Americans moving from Blovice and contrary to the original surrender plan, some of the soldiers put up resistance, which led to their prompt liquidation.²⁶ The entire encounter took about half an hour, during which two German soldiers were killed and another eight wounded. The gun fire gradually attracted other Nechanice residents, who then participated in the disarmament of the remaining enemies. The seized weapons were to be thrown on a pile and burnt, but some were taken by citizens and patrols from nearby villages.²⁷ One hour after the fight, about 380 captives with American and Czech guards arrived to the square in Spálené Poříčí. The Americans then took the captives back around the battlefield, toward Blovice and to the Seč POW camp.²⁸

Fear of Germans

Most people looked forward to the end of the war and returning to normal life, but were also afraid of revenge by the Wehrmacht soldiers, collaborators, Nazis and, in particular, the SS members. A record in the chronicle of Paroltice in the Žinkovy region shows what fears people had and how they tried to defend themselves or at least discourage the Germans from passing through their town: *“On 7th May, mines were laid down in Paroltice, on the road*

²⁵ P. KELLER, *Neznámá historie druhé světové války na Blovicku*, Plzeň 2011, p. 61.

²⁶ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond AO Nechanice 1927–1956, Pamětní kniha obce Nechanice, p. 84.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Spálené Poříčí 1913–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Spálené Poříčí, p. 750.

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between the homes of the citizens Švejda and Kubik, and everything was prepared for a fight. The Paroltice residents had actually found out that 18 cars and two heavy tanks, fully occupied by Germans, were waiting on the Petrov road. However, the Germans soon surrendered to the American liaison officer without a fight. In the evening on the same day, the American garrison moved to Žinkovy."²⁹

However, German soldiers mostly surrendered without a fight, knowing that they were going to milder American prison camps. In large numbers, they fled to West Bohemia, in the direction from Prague, running away from the advancing Red Army. Yet some of them wanted to escape from captivity, perhaps to try to get home or at least to Germany on their own. But Americans were uncompromising in case of an attempted escape and fired at fleeing captives. This happened, for example, when 2,000 prisoners of war were brought to the Pilsen barracks (which served as lodgings for captives until POW camps were built near the city). When passing through Ejpovice, eight Germans attempted to escape, but the American guards shot and killed all of them.³⁰

Not all situations around Germans surrendering to Americans unfolded with ease and according to expectations of either party. On 9th May, for example, a convoy of German soldiers with about 500 vehicles and one tank was passing through Nezvěstice in the Pilsen region, with the intention to surrender. By the cemetery, an US patrol stood in their way and ordered them to lay down their weapons.³¹ *"The cars and the tank remained on the road, the crew got off. They threw their guns on a pile, then emptied boxes with ammunition. They tossed hand grenades, panzerfausts and cartridges into the fields and ditches. They lined up, expecting the Americans to take them. But*

²⁹ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Neurazy 1915–1989, Pamětní kniha obce Partoltické, p. 32.

³⁰ SOKA Rokycany, fond MNV Holoubkov 1930–1973, inv. č. 57, Pamětní kniha obce Holoubkova, p. 114.

³¹ ³⁰ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Nezvěstice 1945–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Nezvěstice, Vol. 2, p. 51; SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond AO Štřáhlavice 1924–1953, Pamětní kniha obce Štřáhlavice, p. 125.

the Americans were not going to do that. They checked the time, it was 6 pm; they turned their vehicles and left. The Germans were left alone. At first, they did not know what to do. Then, after consulting together, they picked up their guns, armed themselves again, turned their vehicles and headed back to the village."³² After that, the Germans stayed overnight in Nezvěstice.

Long after the end of the war, convoys of German captives were still passing through the Pilsen region; the last ones, who had been hiding in the woods, surrendered and encounters between Germans on one side and Czechoslovaks and Americans on the other side still took place. Executions were not uncommon at this time, particularly executions of the former SS members who tried to get to Germany, hide there, wait out the period of punishment of the Nazi war criminals and then live freely in obscurity. They absolutely did not want to be taken captive by the Russians, because their prospects of surviving imprisonment in Siberia were not great. For example, on 13th May, one SS soldier was executed in Spálené Poříčí and another six in the village of Dolšovka. In the evening on the same day, a Russian first lieutenant executed another five captives: a member of the Russian Liberation Army, two Ukrainians and two members of the SS.³³ In July, German soldiers who escaped from POW camps, as well as some SS soldiers, still roamed the forests of the Pilsen region.³⁴

Seč Prison Camp

The Seč prison camp was established on 7th May with the arrival of about 1,500 German captives from Blovice, mostly participants of the above-mentioned Dražkovice encounter. The camp was located on meadows, by the crossing of the Blovice road and a state road. Initially, the camp was not heavily guarded

³² SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Nezvěstice 1945–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Nezvěstice, Vol. 2, p. 51.

³³ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Spálené Poříčí 1913–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Spálené Poříčí, p. 760.

³⁴ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Louňová 1956–1980 Pamětní kniha obce Louňová, unpaginated.

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by the Americans, and the atmosphere was quite relaxed; prisoners were even allowed to walk to the village and pump water from public and private wells.³⁵ After three days, the camp was moved to a nearby brickyard and a meadow by the stream. At the same time, the rules became stricter and prisoners were no longer allowed to carry in water from Seč, but Americans brought it in with a water cart.³⁶

On the meadow beneath the camp, all captured panzerfausts were destroyed. Americans made some prisoners to do this task since they did not know how to use panzerfausts and also were aware that some weapons failed, as evidenced by the killing of one prisoner and wounding of another during their detonation.³⁷

The camp was considered temporary, which is why Americans transported all the prisoners to Únětice and Přeštice between 18th and 21st May; the last ones cleaned up the camp. In the following days, curious local people explored the former encampment, finding buried shoes, binoculars and even handguns.³⁸ This is indicative of a rather careless approach to prisoner inspections, a laid-back regime in the camp and Germans' little interest in escaping and exposing themselves to possible killing when the war was over.

American soldiers

The US troops included African American men, the likes of whom people living in Czechoslovakia had never seen before. This is why reactions to them were different: some welcomed them as liberators and felt closer to them than to white American soldiers because of their uncommon appearance. On the other hand, some were afraid of them, suspected them of various crimes, which might have been largely caused by their otherness in the eyes of Czechoslovaks

³⁵ SOKA Plzeň-jih, fond AO Seč, Pamětní kniha obce Seč, p. 65.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 66.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 67.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 68.

and perhaps the influence of the Nazi propaganda. For example, African American soldiers were suspected of killing a man and a woman in a forest near Bažantnice, south of Pilsen, in the evening of 2nd June. The suspicion was likely based on racial prejudice of the local people. The SS members, who were probably the real perpetrators of the murders, were also among the suspects, but this could also be a case of settling accounts at the end of the war, which was nothing uncommon at that time.³⁹

Soldiers of the liberating armies found lodgings in various spaces, from cities to the tiniest villages. Very often they stayed in family homes with the owners, who did not protest this infringement of their privacy at all.⁴⁰ They also found shelter in houses left by Germans, or at chateaus, such as Chocenice or Žinkovy.⁴¹ They often used public buildings for their needs, such as schools, gyms and community houses.

The end of the war in Europe and later the victory over Japan were celebrated for a long time, with entertainment nights organized by both the Americans and local people. In general, American soldiers enjoyed great popularity as did the renewed movie projections, amply frequented by both Czechs and Americans. Some celebrations shortly after the liberation were also attended by a few Soviet soldiers as guests.⁴²

On the other hand, complaints at the US soldiers also emerged. These often concerned soldiers who got intoxicated and bothered local people and also parked their vehicles on the fields. These and other offences, as well as accommodation, were dealt with by the local National Committees, such as the one in Starý Plzenec.⁴³

³⁹ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Štáhlavy 1922–1955, Pamětní kniha obce Štáhlavy, pp. 95–96.

⁴⁰ In the fall of 1945 the American General Harmon described the relations between the Czech civilians and the U.S. soldiers as good. Nichols to Foreign Office, 27. 10. 1945, NA, FO 817/17.

⁴¹ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Chocenice 1940–1949, Kronika obce Chocenice, Vol. 2, p. 143.

⁴² SOkA Rokycany, fond MěNV Rokycany 1936–1952, Kronika města Rokycan, Vol. 4 (1937–1946), p. 140.

⁴³ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond AM Starý Plzenec 1942–1945, Pamětní kniha Starého Plzenec 1942–1945, p. 136.

Kitchen

When the initial euphoria and interest in soldiers, now settled in West Bohemia, subsided, the US Army field kitchen became very popular. The US Army followed the principle that a well-fed soldier is a much better soldier than a poorly fed one, which was naturally noticeable in their kitchens. Their excellent supplies and skilful cooks did not go unnoticed by the local people, amazed by the amount of food which they lacked during the war or which they had never seen before. For example, one of the field kitchens was erected by the Děkanský Pond in Rokycany, and local people watched with astonishment: *“how the cooks took out boxes one by one from a pile, pulled out frozen capons from each of them, cut off the legs and breasts and threw out the guts (hearts, stomachs, necks, etc.) in containers for children or dogs who had gathered there and could now barely move. There were several hundred pieces of poultry for the soldiers’ dinner, which was served with a pineapple and cherry compote. Watching the kitchen equipment and the cooks at work was something special.”*⁴⁴ The kitchen was soon surrounded by women and children with containers, hoping to get some food from the cooks. However, there were also people among them who were not really in need of any extra food. The public address system in Rokycany therefore asked citizens to stop bothering the US soldiers, because it was demeaning.⁴⁵

All food was delivered by the Army, the local people only gave soldiers cakes and pies, for example, or a duck with sauerkraut as an act of goodwill. Only very rarely did local businesses deliver food to the Americans, although the supply of food was bad during the months after liberation.⁴⁶ A bakery in Nezvěstice was one of the exceptions, baking bread for the Soviet troops, as well the US ones, which was a little surprising because Americans did not really eat the Czech bread as they were used to its softer version resembling toast bread.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ SOkA Rokycany, fond MěNV Rokycany 1936–1952, Kronika města Rokycan, Vol. 4 (1937–1946), p. 142.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 140.

⁴⁶ Nichols to Shuckburgh, 25. 9. 1945, NA, FO 817/17.

⁴⁷⁴⁴ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Nezvěstice 1945–1952, Pamětní kniha obce Nezvěstice, Vol. 2, pp. 367–368.

How did Czech see them?

Perhaps the best answer to this question is provided in the Rokycany chronicle: *“The Americans are mostly young people whose walk is nimble and supple; they tread softly in superbly comfortable and sturdy shoes with rubber soles. They are not oppressed by march drills, there is no sign of fatigue or weariness in their eyes and they march gracefully. Now and then their car swishes by; almost everybody behind the steering wheel is a master of driving. They could make a u-turn around a nickel. And their vehicles – giants! Tanks and ploughs? The same picture of a technological wonder in a machine and the driver’s skilfulness. Small and large vehicles sometimes rest on street corners, in the shade of the houses.”*⁴⁸ The chronicle further quotes a soldier, an engineer in the civilian life, who served in the kitchen: *“Here, every soldier has to know everything that is needed in the military. To mend a car, dress a wound, to cook, send a report, take photographs, to telegraph, so that he can always cover for a fallen mate.”*⁴⁹ These were good, nice, kind, forthcoming and helpful soldiers. That was the impression the young men from Dakota, Texas, Nebraska, Georgia or Florida made on people in Rokycany and all West Bohemia.

The Americans themselves were happy in Bohemia, as evidenced by a record in the Rokycany chronicle: *“They have been here for 14 days and already made themselves at home. When we ask them how they like it here, we always get the same answer: Very nice, A beautiful country. The best of what we have seen in Europe so far. Not even France, Luxembourg and Belgium, not mentioning Germany, can compete with its beautiful landscape. And such good people.”*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ SOKA Rokycany, fond MěNV Rokycany 1936–1952, Kronika města Rokycan, Vol. 4 (1937–1946), p. 141b.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem. The stance of the Americans towards the Czech civilians is also described in the letters of British diplomats. For example see Nichols to Foreign Office, 27. 10. 1945, NA, FO 817/17.

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Unfortunately, communication with the English speaking soldiers was not always easy, because few of them could speak Czech and so they made themselves understood in German, French, in any way possible. Individuals speaking Czech, at least partially, were a rare exception; these were descendants of Czech immigrants to the United States. This realization took Czechoslovaks by great surprise, and they usually looked at these soldiers in astonishment. One soldier speaking broken Czech stopped with his tank unit in Nová Ves by Nepomuk.⁵¹

Americans in Žinkovy

It may be good to illustrate the liberation process and the arrival of Americans with the example of one village or town. These events are well captured in the chronicle of Žinkovy, a town located south of Pilsen.

On 6th May, the main squad of the US Army avoided the town, because it moved from Radkovice toward Skašov and further to Prague which called for help. Smaller units and patrols subsequently passed through Žinkovy, and only on 7th May did another convoy set up a camp in the local sanatorium and was warmly welcomed by the local people. There was one Slovak among the soldiers, who could speak Czech well. He came from Chicago where a large community of Czechs and Slovaks settled before the war.⁵² The surrounding forests were still unsafe as large groups of Germans remained hidden behind the first troops. On 10th May, the US troop captured 70 armed Germans in the vicinity, who were first held in the cellars of the former brewery and later transported to a POW camp in Klatovy.⁵³ A few days later, on 15th May, President Edvard Beneš visited Žinkovy, and a festive dinner on that day was attended, for example, by General Divine, Commander of the 8th Armoured

⁵¹ J. KOŽELUH, *Zpravodaj Okresního muzea Plzeň – jih se sídlem v Blovicech*, Blovice 1990, p. 87.

⁵² SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Žinkovy, *Obecní kronika Žinkov*, Vol. 2, pp. 12–15.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

Division, as well as by the Soviet delegates, Lieutenant Colonel Cherepanov and Major Zinoviev.⁵⁴

Like in other towns and villages, dance nights were held in Žinkovy, and the Americans even organized a public projection of a movie on the chateau wall, which was very popular with the local people.

The Žinkovy garrison was not at all small and became an important centre of the US forces in the area, which is evidenced by the fact that the soldiers established an airfield for airmail on the meadow “V Lipkách” by the chateau, and the chronicle reports that by 16th May, five US airplanes were already parked on the field.⁵⁵

An interesting event recorded by the chronicler was the passage of Russian captives from Germany, which took place on 16th May. According to the records, a US convoy heading to Žinkovy gave way to them, waiting for the road to be clear again. These were probably Russian soldiers imprisoned in labour camps in Germany.⁵⁶

In addition, American officers staying in the chateau guaranteed personal freedom for Baron Emil Škoda who worked for them as an interpreter and had to report to the local police station twice a day.⁵⁷

A few days later, on 23rd May, soldiers of the 1st Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade from England arrived to Žinkovy. They moved to West Bohemia from the French port of Dunkerque, where Germans resisted until the end of the war, and the 1st Tank Battalion temporarily settled in Žinkovy. They left the village two days later.⁵⁸

The Czechoslovak soldiers also did not stay long; the last ones left on 1st October for Nové Benátky, Mladá Boleslav, Janovice and Nalžovy in the Klatovy area.

⁵⁴ KOŽELUH, p. 92.

⁵⁵ SOkA Plzeň-jih, fond MNV Žinkovy, Obecní kronika Žinkov, Vol. 2, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p 24.

⁵⁸ FOUĐ – JÍŠA – ROLLINGER, p. 267.

Departure

During the gradual departure of the Allied forces in the autumn of 1945, a disagreeable event happened which was perhaps hard to understand for the local people and somehow tainted the excellent impression the liberators made. On the fields from Klabava to Kyšice, where the POW camps had been located, Americans destroyed and burned clothes, shoes, typewriters and everything they got hold of. The Klabava chronicle contains a first-hand testimony by the local chronicler: *“We therefore made various comments on their actions, but we noticed that they might understand us, and suddenly one American soldier said: ‘And I understand.’ Astonished, I came back and asked him to explain their actions. Then he said: ‘It’s an order, I tell you as much as I can. Me a Slovak.’ I was surprised to see him in the American uniform; he had three stripes on his sleeve, perhaps he was a sergeant. He added: ‘Over there in America, there is everything; they will bring it here.’ I asked: ‘For free?’ He said: ‘Oh no, it’s a business. I burn this here, you will need it and buy it there; you know, it’s a business and order, that’s it.’ I was very surprised and he added: ‘The Hungarian, German, Slovak, Czech, Spaniard and others, all of them are American soldiers; they burn and go...”*⁵⁹

Local people were not allowed to take anything from the bonfires; only pretty girls for whom the soldiers had a soft spot could take a few things home. The last great event before the US Army’s departure was a visit by the four-star Commanding General of the Third Army George S. Patton, accompanied by the commander of the US troops in West Bohemia, General Harmon, and other high-ranking officers, who also participated in the US Army military parade in Rokycany on 14th September.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ SOkA Rokycany, fond MNV Klabava 1928–1946, Kronika obce Klabavy, unpaginated.

⁶⁰ SOkA Rokycany, fond MěNV Rokycany 1936–1952, Kronika města Rokycan, Vol. 4 (1937–1946), p. 154b.

Conclusion

The US Army withdrew from West Bohemia by the end of November 1945.⁶¹ Contemporary witnesses remembered them with fondness and did not forget them even during the 41 years of the Communist regime, not being fooled by a pack of lies claiming, for example, that Pilsen was liberated by the Russians or that the Americans were actually Red Army soldiers in disguise.

Today, the days of liberation are celebrated in grand style again and Pilsen is visited by the last surviving veterans and witnesses of the events, as well as by generations of people who did not witness the liberation and do not remember the elation and joy of people in West Bohemia at the end of the war, yet they are grateful to the soldiers and happy to shake their hands as a thank-you for the deeds done more than 68 years ago.

Abstract

The Article analyses some aspects of the presence of the American Army in Western Bohemia during the year 1945. Firstly it researches the question of the U.S. offensive to Western Bohemia, its causes and development and also describes the most important armed clashes with the Germans. In the second part the article concentrates on the presence of the Americans on the territory of Western Bohemia. It deals with the questions of the German prisoners, the stance of the civil population towards the Americans and their behaviour in Czechoslovakia and problems they had encountered (for example the question of their supply). In the conclusion the article describes the withdrawal of the U.S. forces during the autumn of 1945.

Keywords

Czechoslovakia, United States of America, Pilsen, Germany, U.S. Army, World War II

⁶¹ To the withdrawal of the Americans from the Western Bohemia see Nichols to Foreign Office, 27. 10. 1945, NA, FO 817/17.