

"What is Katz doing at the Brigade?" "Well, dieses (this) Katz, you never can tell." It certainly added to my status. Nobody suspected the real reason. Captain Prochaska was a real expert and an excellent teacher. First he showed me all the intricate plans of all the connections between all the units involved, with very intelligent explanations. He had that ability to make things interesting. After the connections, we went into technical details and after a week I really felt I could face everybody with reasonable confidence. I had received a telephone education which was perhaps superior to that routine <sup>in a big class</sup> teaching at the school in Krakow. In the afternoons I stayed with the crew at the Telephone office and it looked as if a completely hopeless situation gradually became almost acceptable. I did not have to be riding around half of the night and most of the day just to escape questions.

One day the service wagon brought in a strange telephone box. Some German battery had to leave in a great hurry for the French front and this box was overlooked or lost on the way. We never had seen such an apparatus. It was something new from Germany. With my newly acquired skill I cleaned it, we connected it and experimented. We found it was not only a miniature-central but you didn't have to use an earphone. You pressed a button and you could hear the voices loud and clear from any station you selected. Many years later every self-respecting Bank president or business tycoon had such a machine in his office, but at that time it was a new sensation to us. Today I saw something more up-to-date, but similar, advertised in

The New York Times under the name of the "Call Director."

I asked the sargeant to install it in my room. I did not know why, but instinctively I expected great things from this machine. Any time during the day or night I could press some buttons and listen to the conversations or signals on any line of our system. Of course, sometimes during repairs or tests one heard nothing but those annoying, small trumpets signaling taa-ta-ta, taa-ta-ta--ta-taaa-ta-ta, etc., but especially at nights when the boys in the different stations tried to keep each other from falling asleep, one could hear all sorts of things--from just nonsensical noisemaking, or telling of silly jokes to serious conversations. Also Melem, the unpopular Major, was a very popular target for a biting humor. I trained myself to wake up about every hour at night, call one or two stations to see that I got immediate response and everybody soon knew that somebody was really watching. I also could keep an eye on the Major during the mornings and when I found out that Melem left for a surprise visit to a certain battery I could phone a certain signal to the selected victims and that visit was no longer a surprise. Such a little service produced a grateful popularity among the batteries.

On the second day after the installation of my new gadget, Melem saw me walk to my room and he followed me in. He was curious about me and what I was up to. He asked about my frequent trips to the Brigade. "Oh, that," I said, "an excellent idea. Captain Prochaska finds we need much more contact between the units because now, wires and equipment of any kind are so

terribly hard to get and everything becomes more difficult by the day, even the new recruits are arriving daily in poorer conditions, physically, mentally and in training." The Major looked around while I was talking, then he pointed at my new machine: "What is that contraption? Never saw anything like it." "We found it. A German station lost it when leaving in a hurry." The Major said, "I want to see how it works." Now, I had to indicate what this box could do and show him how to press the buttons and get any battery or observation he wanted. He was soon like a little boy with a new miniature railroad and he said simply, but without any maybe in his voice: "Have this installed in my room right away." I explained: "Only the sargeant knows how to connect it and he may not be back until suppertime." "As soon as you can," the Major said, and left.

Now we were in for it. This was a dozen times worse than the Major's surprise inspections. If he could spy on everybody, hear those nightly conversations about him and other unpleasant subjects, it would mean one continuous hell. I caught the sargeant on the phone somewhere at a station. I told him to come late and report many disturbances and to tell everybody to keep up the annoying testing signals all night.

We worked diligently all evening--pretending complications--and finally had the box installed at bedtime. After a stiff salute we left and I had a last word with the sargeant about plans for the next day. In the morning I was up early. I stepped outside full of expectations and there was the Major already roaring like a mad bull: "Verdamme Kiste (damned box),

all night it went on, this taaa-ta-ta, tateatateaat, ta-taata-ta. Enough to lose one's mind. Get that whorebox out of my room right away! You hear me?" "Jawohl, Herr Major, right away." He went to breakfast at the Mess but I simply turned right. There behind the corner I had the <sup>e</sup>sargeant already waiting, with his crew and we had the box removed "right away" and carefully reinstalled in my room. Thus another internal danger in the "Reitende Eins" had been successfully averted.

It happened that very night, when I woke up and turned the machine on to check on one of the battery stations. I heard some very unfamiliar voices. They were Prussian voices. I listened very hard because the conversation became more exciting by the minute. It was coming from the German Regiment on our left which used our phone lines to get fast connection with the German Regiment on the right. The Germans on the left delivered an order from the German Corps commando to the Regiment on the right to get ready and to leave their position right away for a Blitz-transportation to another front. "It has to be done before daybreak, in the dark of the night and to be ready for the train at 6 a.m. at such and such a station."

In my desperate need to make good as telephone officer my brain functioned with the speed of an electronic computer. In two seconds I saw the whole picture. The poor Germans having absolutely no time to collect their new copperwire from their miles and miles of connecting lines. Their central offices with superior equipment may have to be abandoned, at least partially, because there simply was not time enough to

dismantle and disconnect all their instruments. I did not wait to finish the picture in my telephone officer's imagination. I brutally awakened my sergeant and told him to see me at once. Then I whispered into his ear a few melodramatic "orders" until he grinned, nodded and ran away. I had told him to forget everything else but to wake up the whole crew, get every available service wagon, carriage or bicycle moving as noiselessly as possible to be near the different German phone offices the minute they leave, to have all empty wire-drums ready to collect all the wires on the ground carefully, and "save" all the abandoned material and equipment before anyone else knew what was happening.

"Furthermore," I said and this made his eyeballs almost pop out of their sockets, "we are going to take over the famous miniature palace observation post which our boys were dreaming about and we must get it ready, so that when the Major goes to breakfast I can phone him from there."

That night was the spookiest one could imagine. In the darkness one heard wheels creaking, horses moving, ghostlike silhouettes of men were running busily from place to place in all directions. In some places they looked like German soldiers. When twilight came they were in Austrian uniforms. At daybreak the German Regiment was gone and our wagons were bulging with precious loads. Pipsi and I had been among the nocturnal wanderers. In the morning I was personally supervising the crew who was to move into the new observation post. It was in excellent condition and the little work that had to

be done was done with real gusto. The boys were singing and looked with real gratitude at me. What are a few more stars on a collar compared to such an improvement, such a really cosy and efficient place instead of that old pesthole they were delirious to give up. At a little after 8 a.m. the connection with the Messroom had been established and Melem, the Major, was called to the phone: "Herr Major, Corporal Katz obediently reports that the German Regiment on our right had orders to leave." The Major had his usual morning grouch and barked back: "So what, I received no orders about it from the Brigade." "Herr Major, I obediently ask for permission, at your command, to take over the German Regiment's observation post." "What? that wonderful place? You are crazy. How in the world do you expect to get there before somebody else grabs it?" "Herr Major, I obediently report, I am speaking from that place. Everything is ready awaiting for your order." "All right, go ahead, I have got to see that!" He called for his horse and galloped and galloped until he came to the post. He could not believe his eyes. He picked up the phone to see how it worked. He could reach any place in the Regiment. "How in Hell did you do it, Katz?" he asked. "It was that goddamned-box that did it," I thought silently with a grin, but all I said was "Thank you, Sir."\* I myself was astonished. Among my <sup>old</sup> friends I was known as the most clumsily undiplomatic fellow and the poorest business mind in captivity. Now I seemed clever, of all things.

Towards evening, that day we had finished the unloading

*in military german it was <sup>537</sup>; "zu Befehl, Herr Oberst!"*

<sup>the</sup> and inventory. It was a dream. Miles and miles, or if you prefer, tons and tons of first class, practically new, copper-wire. For many months we had received nothing but that awful wire made of some miserable ersatz-alloy. It deteriorated fast and conducted the current most reluctantly. The Germans also felt certain limitations in materials, but their industrial potential, their organizational efficiency and their stock-piles of essential materials were incomparably superior to ours and they seemed to have excellent wire and instruments. We also were able to replenish our collection of tools.

During the following day the desperate first lieutenant from Battery Three came with his little wagon and almost cried: "They can't hear anything any more on their phones but those taa-taa-ta-ta trumpet signals. They need batteries, wires, receivers, everything." It was pathetic to see a first lieutenant standing like a beggar in front of a corporal. But I offered him a cigarette and said calmly: "Herr Oberleutnant, do you want our old wire or do you prefer new copperwire?" He got furious, thinking I was pulling his leg. But when I opened the door to the storeroom, he was speechless and his amazement turned into awe, just that he did not cross himself. I also gave him new receivers and when he left, he had forgotten my two bone stars on my collar. I had become the Regiment telephone officer.

Others heard the improbable story of our sudden wealth and different battery officers sent for this or that and when they actually got it, they joined the chorus: "Also dick<sup>S</sup>er

Katz, we never had a telephone officer like that. He may be an excellent painter, but as a Regiment Telephone Officer he is a real genius." And they congratulated Captain Kubin for having transferred me to the staff and for having judged my extraordinary fitness for the Telephone job so correctly.

They kept talking for some time of that Golden Era under Corporal Katz.

It all came to an end when the regular Regiment Telephone Officer returned from his furlough to take over a much improved department from a corporal. Even Major Melem changed his attitude considerably. He knew how, as a corporal, I had all the odds against me and to see me come out of it on top gave him a feeling of respect. He too hated to see me leave the telephone officer's post and it was he who kept me at the Regiment Headquarters, giving me all sorts of clerical jobs. He even started to visit me in my room to have some talks with me. Somewhere inside, there was a little, starved part of him, which was human and he turned to me, although I was so much younger. He had to talk about himself. He was a very unhappy person, married to a woman he had loved and adored but she was the kind who had to do exactly as she felt like doing. Not that she was unreliable as a wife, oh no, none of that sort of thing, but she developed a terribly painful kind of rheumatism of the joints and had to be kept warm all the time, and all the income went to the doctors. The moment she felt better, she jumped out of bed, undressed and went straight to the open window. She just

loved the feeling of cold air around her naked body and all the pleadings of her doctor or husband made no impression whatsoever. So she enjoyed the air, the colder the better, and then became terribly ill again. The poor man took it patiently for a long time, but reached a point where he no longer was able to endure that situation so, he drowned his despair in a fanatical sense of duty and kept busy every moment of the day. He told me other things about himself and I gave him my sympathetic ear. I was really grateful to discover the causes for his behavior and see the other side of his nature. What the real story behind his wife's strange self-destructive behavior was, I never found out. I never met her.

The regiment Reitende Eins in the meantime adopted the legend of Corporal Katz which proved to everyone that "if you know your stuff and love your job you can do miracles against all obstacles of rank, etc., etc." No one suspected my horror and despair when crazy conditions forced me into a job I was utterly unprepared for, my suicide plans, and how a few coincidences saved me and many others from an unpredictable misfortune. Had we not found that German "box," had I awakened myself a few minutes sooner or later to make my night-check calls, and had the Brigade Telephone Officer come from Pilsen, Klagenfurt or Debreczin instead of from the vicinity of Prossnitz, the end of this episode might have become too awful for my creative imagination to reconstruct. Only Captain Frochaska of the Brigade, bless his soul, knew part of my desperate story and he buried his knowledge behind a benevolent grin.