

# Downed in Hungary

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Our B-24 aircrew arrived in Venosa, Italy in November 1944, as a replacement in the 828th Bomb Squadron, 485th Bomb Group. Lt. Charles Watson was the aircraft commander; I was the bombardier-navigator. Like many other aircrews, we lived in tents heated by improvised gasoline stoves. Mud was everywhere.

About the 14th mission for our crew, the target was the railroad yards at Szombathely, Hungary. The date was March 4, 1945, which we would remember well. Over the target the gas line to one of our engines was cut by a piece of shrapnel. By the time it was repaired, we had only enough fuel for about two hours, and were five hours from home. We knew the "Russian-German battle lines were in eastern Hungary and decided to get over Russian-held territory before any subsequent actions, such as bailing out or crash-landing. Later, our aircraft commander (Watson) told us to prepare for bail-out; however, he spotted an open field where a landing might be possible. A good landing was made without incident. Later we learned the field was used by the Russian Air Force for emergency landings.

There was a village adjacent to the field named Szeged. We radioed from the aircraft to home base, to give our location, but received no acknowledgment. A large group of peasants had lined up at the edge of the field when we landed. It was obvious that a B-24 Liberator

was not a common item in their lives. The natives spoke only Hungarian, except for one man who said, in good English, "I'm going to take you home and give you fried eggs, potatoes, and bacon." It was about 3:00 PM and we had not had any lunch, so the menu sounded great. It then developed that our host had a grocery store in Brooklyn. He returned to Hungary for a visit just before international travel was cut off by WWII and could not return to Brooklyn.

For us, it was as if we were taken back two or three hundred years. It was a village of grass sod roofs, with no automobiles, except for an occasional Russian vehicle, and no water system except for a large well in the village square. It was indeed picturesque to see the ladies going to and from the well with large crocks balanced on their heads. We never saw one dropped.

After two days in Szeged, the local Russian Army decided we should move to Mako, which was more metropolitan. We were housed in a large hotel, which the Russians were

using for an officers' rest camp. The front lines were only about 20 miles away; we could hear the artillery booming night and day.

The Russian officer in charge of the Mako area was a jamor and was known as "the town major". Every few days we would ask him (through an interpreter) to contact the U.S. military and advise of our whereabouts, with no apparent success.



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About 25 days went by; we were beginning to feel we might never be found. One morning, however, Pete Graves, our copilot, and I saw what looked like a U.S. Army jeep heading out of town. We ran after it, yelling. The driver heard us, turned around and drove back. He was a U.S. Army major. We told him about our crew and he said, "I've been in this area twice before looking for you and this was going to be my last trip."



Our radio message from Szeged to home base had been received and the major in the jeep had been dispatched from a British-American-Russian mission in Debrecen, Hungary. Their job was to round up Allied military personnel who were escapees, evades, or shot down in that area of Europe. We were driven

to Debrecen (second in size to Budapest) and treated royally, with new uniforms and great food for two days, then flown back to our base in Venosa, Italy. After a week of rest and recuperation at the Isle of Capri, we returned to bombing missions again. By then it was late April 1945, and shortly thereafter, VE Day was announced.

There is an incredible sequel to this story. After the war I lived in California and about 1965, my wife Elsie and I were at her sister's house for dinner. Elsie and her sister had always been fascinated by my Hungarian adventure, and asked me to tell the story to the dinner guests. When I mentioned the target, Szombathely, one of the guests jumped up and exclaimed, "The date was March 4, 1945, and your bombs missed. Otherwise I wouldn't be here today." He had been a prisoner of the Germans, forced to work in the railroad yards, even during bombing attacks. The coincidence of his being at the same dinner party 20 years later was, indeed, "stranger than fiction".

