

HARRY VOZIC

A World War II story from Stalag XVII B, Krems, Austria

By Kenneth Kurtenbach

The story of Harry Vozic is of necessity in two parts, the first part being the story known to me, and the second part being that which I learned after my release from Stalag 17B, and subsequent events.

It was in July or August of 1943 that Harry Vozic first came to my attention at Stalag 7A at Moosburg, Bavaria. At that time I had been Man of Confidence for the American Army Air Force for a period of some months, having been previously selected by the members of that group, first at Stalag 3B, and later at Stalag 7A.

Prisoners-of- War of that period will remember this was a time when there was much turmoil, entering and leaving of prisoners-of-war from North Africa, intermingling of nationalities from all over eastern Europe and Russia, severe shortage of food due to bombing of marshalling yards in that section of Germany, numerous escape attempts with consequent reprisals by the German staff, and general upheaval in all phases of our camp life.

One evening about dusk a prisoner-of-war stepped up to me as I was bustling about the compound and asked to speak to me, that he had a problem. In looking at him I decided I had not seen him before. When assured I had time to visit, he drew me to a quieter part of the compound and related that his name was Harry Vozic, that he had been a member of the French underground, that he had over the last couple of years been aiding both British and lately American Air Force personnel evade capture in France and, with assistance from the Underground, been taking them to the west coast of France, contacting submarines, and helping them to evade capture and expediting return to England.

His clothes were of typical nondescript portions of both British and American uniforms, he stood about five feet ten, and had a somewhat ragged moustache on his upper lip, with black hair. At that time I would have guessed his age at mid to later thirties, certainly older than the average prisoner at that stage of the war, although not unusually so.

In retrospect, he bore a striking resemblance to the character who presently plays the role of Sydney, the psychiatrist on the TV version of M. A. S. H., with a slight resemblance to Groucho

Marx. His voice was very similar to that of the aforementioned Sydney and his accent, in my opinion, was pure New York City.

Vozic went on to explain that he was captured with a group of men who he was attempting to help evade capture, that with their assistance he related to the waist gunner, it had been his first mission, he knew nothing more. He stated he had maintained a low profile and displayed high ignorance when questioned at Dulag Luft.

He further felt the Gestapo would have more than ordinary interest in this group of men and, if his identity were discovered, he would be tortured for his knowledge of the Underground and would ultimately die at their hands.

He further stated since all the men seemed to trust me, he had come to me with his burden and in hope that ultimately I may be able to assist him in evading the pursuit of the Gestapo.

Vozic intimated he had friends in high places, but would not name anyone. When I asked how a New York boy had ended up in France, he stated he had been working there when the war broke out, had been unable to get out, and had ultimately turned to the Underground in an attempt to assist in the war effort in that manner. When I asked why he didn't use that method to escape from France, he did not answer directly but only indicated he felt he was serving his country by that occupation.

I faintly remember Vozic brought forward a couple of lads who then verified that Vozic had been captured with them, but not a great deal more than that.

It should be noted that a number of prisoners-of-war had come to me in just such a furtive manner and related stories, not on the grand scale that Vozic had related, but intimating they were in various intelligence agencies and offering to help, if need be. Their stories were filed away in my head, but never seriously considered and usually nothing more came of the matters. Thus it was with Vozic. Accepted and practically forgotten.

My contacts with Vozic thereafter during the time we were at 7A were casual, never speaking directly, and I only remember seeing him occasionally in the French compound visiting

with that nationality, but there was nothing remarkable about this as most Americans were over there daily trading and visiting.

My next contact with Harry Vozic came shortly after our arrival at 17B. There was a shortage of everything, barracks were filthy with lice and dirt, a very real threat of flak typhus, and were short of medical help, medical supplies, and trained personnel.

Vozic came forward, re-identified himself, stated he had some small knowledge of medical first aid, gave me a list of medical supplies that would be of help in our desperate situation. We then set aside barracks no. 13 for use as an infirmary. We were fortunate to have Mark Curtis at the hospital and with his aid and the aid of J. J. Katuzney and others, all natural born freebooters and scroungers of the first water, supplies were stolen from the Germans, passed into the camp, some order appeared, and for the first time we had an ability to assist the men with at least minor illnesses.

With the arrival of skilled personnel led by Dr. Fred Beaumont, major needs were handled most capably and our medical distress was much eased.

Vozic remained in the infirmary and was usually referred to as "old Doc Vozic" and he performed yeoman service in his role as a first-aid practitioner. It did not seem to be in his nature to be a follower but rather a leader. This began to cause some resentment among the doctors and occasionally they would make some statement to me that Vozic was too pushy and arrogant. There was no authority that I could voice in that department so I stayed out of it.

One thing I did was to call Vozic for a conference and I pointed out that if he indeed was what and who he said he was, he certainly was becoming too apparent in the eyes of the German authorities.

There was something within him that made him tweak the noses of the authorities. While he was fluent in the German language, as I had learned by that time, he never used that language in the presence of the German authorities, but he simply had to twit some guard or insult another and attendant outrage on their part was making him more and more set apart from the average American.

Repeatedly it was necessary to caution him and he would grin, agree, and go back to the infirmary and be quiet for a time.

Probably Harry Vjozic was the source of more embarrassment to me than any other person during this period. Seldom a day passed that someone, persons in whom I had the highest regard, would come up and comment that Voizic was perhaps a spy for the Germans, perhaps a communist agent, did I really know anything about him, had I really checked on this guy, certainly he was not an Air Force man, what did I really know. It was difficult to do anything more than mumble inanelly, change the subject and walk away from it.

In retrospect, it was best that he remained in the infirmary with a group that had befriended him and were extremely loyal that to be in a close knit group in a corner of one of the barracks for his ignorance in military matters might well have destroyed him.

Voizic was forever a madman with humor, improvising practical jokes, kidding around and good at keeping spirits up. Eventually over the period of six months until March of 1944 we became very close, personal friends. He would slip into my barracks late at night and we had many, many visits. My memories of those discussions are a highlight of my experience as a prisoner-of-war. We discussed anything and everything. His knowledge of psychology seemed awesome to me. He had traveled extensively and was most capable at expressing himself. Eventually I learned he spoke five or six languages. I utilized him in discussions with the leaders of the various communities within the camp. He would sit looking at the center of the table and translate my thoughts into Russian, French, Polish and Serbian, then translate their comments into each of the other languages and back into English for my benefit. For the occasional person who spoke German and with whose dialect he was having difficulty, he would use that language instead. This was not uncommon for many of them who had been prisoners-of-war for over four years and had of necessity learned the German language.

From these meetings a great deal of good was accomplished; certainly intercamp relations were improved, mutual problems discussed, and occasionally the leaders would have the Arbeitskommandos who worked outside the camp bring in supplies that we needed badly. It helped set the stage later for a quasi-military force if it should be needed.

In short, Vozic became valuable in many ways. However, he was becoming a liability rather than an asset and he realized this and became more apprehensive as time went on. His phobia about being detected by the Gestapo was voiced more and more and ultimately a decision was made to get him out of the camp if at all possible.

An opportunity to accomplish this arose in about March of 1944 when a memo arrived that a repatriation of injured personnel was to commence in the near future, that I would be notified of it was the date of the hearings and that I should commence preparing a list of the men qualified for repatriation.

This repatriation fell into two categories. The first category was for the men who were completely unfit for future military service, e. g., the blind, limbs gone, seriously wounded.

The second category fell into the Camp Leaders list, who would act before the Commission as an advocate, and these disabled were composed of heart problems, partial blindness, wounds that caused one to perhaps limp but were not totally debilitating, internal problems not apparent to the naked eye and so forth.

Quite obviously Vozic did not fit in the more critical category. We decided that he would turn himself in to the hospital on the hill and we would go do work necessary to place him into the second category, the camp leader's list.

Contact was made with a physician from another country who shall remain nameless, and through an intricate set of discussions we came up with a plan. Vozic would go under the care of this physician at the hospital, this doctor then set up a carefully orchestrated set of medical records that he had filched from a desperately ill Russian (who ultimately died). I believe the condition assigned to Vozic was tuberculosis of the spine, but I could be in error about that. Whatever it was, it has a prognosis of death in a relatively short time. His complete medical file was set up, complete with x-rays taken from the other file and re-identified with Vozic's name.

Vozic entered the hospital the latter part of March. He must have been a consummate actor for reports reached me of his gradual decline, a facial pallor, total listlessness, becoming

more emaciated and completely prostrate in bed. Frankly, it began to worry me and upon inquiry with the doctor, I was assured all was going according to plan and quit worrying.

As I remember, it was in May of 1944 the hearings on the repatriation applicants were held. There were several whose cases were so apparent that no hearing was necessary and were granted automatic repatriation. Then the hearing on my list of applicants began. There were three German doctors and two Swiss doctors with a simple majority required for approval.

If memory serves me correctly, there were 56 on my list and we were successful for about 32. Germany had many wounded soldiers on duty around the camp and resisted letting several go as they felt they would still be useful in the military despite their wounds. Of those that left the camp, many died shortly after or in later years, and several are still alive today.

Late in the hearings, about the very last, Harry Vozic was carried into the hearing room on a stretcher. I was truly shocked at his appearance. He had a stubble of beard on his face, his mustache that he had vowed never to trim until Hitler was dead was positively hideous in length. He appeared emaciated and his eyes were listless and non-focusing. After conferring privately among the doctors, they announced he would go home. Now came the moment of true brilliance. Vozic raised up slightly and stated emphatically he did not wish to go home, it was much better that his wife and family should never see him in this condition, it was a long trip home across the Atlantic and he would never make it, better his family should remember him as he had been and not as this pitiful thing he had become.

He remained so adamant about his position that I thought to myself, if this guy blows this, I personally will kill him when it is over. His role was played to perfection. The German doctors as well as the Swiss came to his stretcher, stood around him and pleaded with him to go home. He ultimately acceded to their wishes, never thanked them, but sank back on the stretcher and he was carried out of the room with his certification clutched in my sweating hands.

I saw him only once more and believe that was on August 27, 1944, when I was allowed to bid goodbye to the "repats" (repatriated soldiers) at the train station in Krems. He had written a memo to me in a wartime log given by the YMCA and it was most affectionate and signed with

“Ole Doc Vozic” and just above it he had written “Rube”. I really didn’t pay a great deal of attention to “Rube” as it meant nothing to me until much later.

After release from the prison camp and ultimate arrival at Camp Lucky Strike, I was transferred along with Security Chief Joe Dillard to a hotel run by the Intelligence Corps on Rue Lafayette in Paris. There were in residence a couple of Generals and a group of Colonels along with support personnel.

Mid-afternoon of the following day after arrival one of the Generals stated he had invited an old friend of mine named Dr. Reuben Rabinovitch for dinner that evening as a surprise for the doctor since he did not know I was there. I blankly stared at the group and stated there must be some mistake as I knew no one by that name.

They smiled at each other and then asked, “How about Harry Vozic?” Him, I knew. Okay, he would be coming for dinner, his real name was Dr. Reuben Rabinovitch, he was one of General Eisenhower’s pets and a madman to boot. Joe Dillard looked at me and said, “You are still one lucky so-and-so, I always figured you were heading for a court-martial on that one.” I just replied I felt you had to play your hunches, whether it was poker or life, and this was one hunch that was correct -- fortunately.

To say this knowledge was a relief is putting it mildly. I had carried Harry Vozic as a nightmare in my mind for so long that it had become a small fire in my belly, never being able to discuss it with anyone and not knowing whether I had been right or wrong in my assessment of him as trustworthy.

Shortly before dinner that evening I went out on a small balcony overlooking the street below. It was a sunny evening in late May and I watched the street below. Shortly I saw Harry coming. He was striding jauntily down the street with a cane in his hand, he wore a civilian suit and his mustache was trimmed (Hitler was dead). I let him pass beneath the balcony and, when he was perhaps ten feet from the entrance to the hotel I shouted at him in German, calling his name and telling him to stand right where he was, that I wanted to talk to him. Vozic never flinched, never paused or looked around. He walked a few more steps, appeared to stumble as though he had stepped on a shoelace, bent down facing away from me and then peered under his shoulder back up at me while pretending to tie his shoelaces. He straightened slowly, turned

around and then said, "Kurt, you do that again and I will kill you, leap into my arms, you (expletive deleted). He ran into the hotel and we met on the stairway and it was a good feeling that I had at that moment.

After a wild dinner he informed the Generals they would be taking me away for a few days and they agreed. I had only some ragged uniform clothing, but that made no difference wherever I went as everyone accepted me. He took me to a hospital the next morning where he performed some cranial surgery and during this time he informed me he had been a neurosurgeon and had continued his practice in Paris after the Germans had left it an open city. This country boy cannot remember all the things that happened in the next few days, but they included a sumptuous dinner at the home of a wealthy industrialist, a Confirmation party for a little girl, a tour of nightclubs where I learned he was a Knight of the Wine tasters and could tell what wine and even what hill the vine grew on. He was a man of many talents and very relaxed and revealing in his ability to amaze me.

He had many, many friends in all walks of life in Paris and seemed to be appreciated by all. After those few days were over he returned me to the hotel and left almost immediately for home and ended up in Washington. After the war Dr. Rabinovitch called me at home in Montana several times and wrote a few letters. In the early 1950's he was awarded the Medal of Freedom at a ceremony in Washington, D. C. by then President Eisenhower. While I was invited, I was unable to attend.

It now becomes necessary to return to the time when the repatriates left Krems for their trip home. Portions of this were related to me by Harry Vozic (Dr. Rabinovitch), and portions by Frank W. Bartlett of LaVeta, Colorado, who had become a close friend of Dr. Rabinovitch and had lived in Montreal with him and attended McGill University after the war.

The repatriation train went to a marshalling area where their number swelled with other repatriates from other prison camps throughout Germany. After a few days they then went on a ferry to Sweden where they embarked aboard the Swedish hospital ship Gripsholm. Frank relates how somewhere in the Baltic the ship was stopped and a search made by the Germans. Vozic, as I will continue to call him for now, became agitated for he feared they were looking for him, but it was to search for a couple of defecting Germans.

The ship then went on to Liverpool, England. While in the Liverpool harbor prior to sailing for America a Colonel of some importance came on board and commenced a grueling interrogation of Harry Vozic lasting some seven hours. At the end of this closeted interrogation, Harry and the Colonel walked off the ship.

Harry had commandeered a civilian suit, a cane and hat, and blithely went down the gangplank. He was taken immediately to London where he had an audience with General Eisenhower. The General issued to Vozic, now to be called Dr. Reuben Rabinovitch, a signed order empowering him to use any forces of the Allies for whatever purpose.

Rabinovitch then crossed the channel, proceeded down the coast and with the help of an armored column moved into bordeaux (portions of which were still held by the Germans) and recovered his wife, a French Catholic woman, and his two eldest sons, Alexander and Steven, along with his wife's mother and, I believe, her father.

I believe he left his family in the British Isles and Rabinovitch returned to Paris where I met him almost a year later when the war ended.

Now to the background information that I gleaned from Dr. Rabinovitch and other sources, primarily Frank Bartlett.

The elder Rabinovitch, Reuben's father, had emigrated for one reason or another from Russia sometime around the revolution and had settled in the Province off Quebec, Canada. He commenced operating a successful fishing camp in the Laurentian Shield country of Quebec. Many Jewish people would vacation at this lodge through the twenties and thirties as well as many high-ranking officers of the U. S. Army including, I have heard, General Eisenhower.

When and where Reuben Rabinovitch was born, I never asked, but he did attend schools in Montreal. He gained his doctor's degree and had a leaning toward neurosurgery. He stated to me upon entering practice about 1936 the practice of neurosurgery was somewhat restricted in Canada and the United states and, in his words, in France they were more liberal in their approach and experimented more.

He then went to Paris where he met and married his French wife. They started their family and then the war came along. He continued his practice in Paris without interference from the Germans after the capture of Paris.

During this time, in an effort to do something constructive, he and several other persons organized an escape committee, among them a couple of the people I met in Paris while in his company. It was while engaged in this practice of helping evaders that he was captured.

Dr. Rabinovitch, incidentally, was made several offers from book publishers and movie producers to do his story, but his feeling was that too many people could be harmed by being specific and he would never give his permission. It is for this reason I have respected his wishes and have not named names or events.

His ability with languages was superb. Hence the impression he had given me as to being a New York boy, there was none of the "oot" and "aboot" of the Canadian, unless he wanted to use it. He got a kick out of imitating my Montana accent, he called it flat, hard English.

Dr. Rabinovitch returned to Montreal shortly after the war where he and his wife had two more boys and, I believe, one little girl. He obtained a Fellowship with the Montreal Neurological Institute and practiced at Royal Victoria Hospital.