

'Gas' Station Operator Recalls US-Russ Union

Saw First American 10
Years Ago, He Was
Recognized in Photo
of Red Troops

Ten years ago Lt. Charles Thau of the Red army saw his first American. The meeting place was the Elbe river in the closing days of World War II.

Today, 33 year old Charley Thau, civilian and auto mechanic, sees Americans every day. He services and repairs their cars at the filling station he operates in Milwaukee.

How did a Russian army officer come to be a Milwaukee businessman?

The answer to that question is an unusual story. It came out because somebody recognized a picture published last Sunday in This Week magazine in The Milwaukee Journal. The picture showed Americans and Russians with hands outstretched in their dramatic meeting across a war smashed bridge at Torgau on the Elbe.

Drafted By Russians

The Red soldier at the left of a group of four, a Milwaukeean decided, looked like Charley Thau. Asked about it, Thau confirmed that it was.

This is his story:

Polish born, he was drafted into the Russian army in 1940 after the Reds and Germans overran his country.

"We became Russian citizens automatically," he said. "But that didn't mean anything. They didn't trust us."

By the spring of 1945, he had fought in some of the heaviest campaigns of the war, in the siege of Moscow, the epic defense of Stalingrad. He rose in rank as the months went by and finally became a lieutenant. He commanded an antitank battery equipped with four 76 millimeter guns.

Remembers Data Distinctly

It rolled up to the Elbe river with the 1st White Russian army late that April. Thau remembers the Apr. 25 first meeting with Americans distinctly.

There was heavy fighting that morning," he said. "One regiment of Germans wouldn't give up. But it was all over by afternoon and we were at the river."

There was no conversation that first day—the soldiers could not understand each other. But they shook hands and waved.

For the next week, however, there were daily gatherings.

Thau, who spoke Polish, Rus-

sian, German and Hebrew, finally met two Americans who spoke German.

Picture Was Posed, Claim

"They told me how wonderful it was in the United States," he said. "But I didn't tell them anything bad about Russia." He was afraid he would be overheard criticizing his superiors.

Meanwhile, there was plenty of "black marketeering" on both sides. The Yanks produced cigars and the Russians had vodka.

Actually, the picture in which he appeared was posed. Thau said. It was not taken at the first meeting, but several days later, he said.

Thau moved on with his unit in the advance on Berlin. In street fighting in the city, just before it fell to the Allies, he was wounded in the face by a machine gun bullet. He said he carried the slug in his cheek until 1951, when it was removed by a Milwaukee surgeon. He bears a scar on the lip where it entered and a scar on the cheek where the incision was made to remove it.

Transferred to Manchuria

The young lieutenant finished out the European war in the hospital.

"By the time I got out, it was all over," he said.

Then he was transferred to Manchuria. By that time, however, the Japanese were surrendering and there was not much fighting.

In May, 1946, he obtained a furlough and traveled from the far east to his family home in Poland.

His home city was Zablotow, about 40 miles from the Czecho-Slovakian border. A prewar population of 8,000—largely Jewish—was virtually gone. The town was in ruins.

Thau found some old friends and learned that his parents, two brothers and other relatives had been massacred by the Germans.

Runs Into Patrol

"When you come home and find nobody there, you have no reason to stay," he said. So he set out on foot for the border.

Wearing his Red army officer's uniform, he encountered a patrol, all Russian enlisted men.

"They could have asked me some embarrassing questions," he said, "but it would not have been polite to question an officer. I told them I was just taking a stroll and they let me pass."

He got in Czecho-Slovakia and was arrested in the first village he entered. The Czechs, however, helped him when they learned he was deserting the Russians. They got rid of his uniform and provided civilian clothes. Eventually he joined other refugees, civilian and



—Journal Staff

Charles Thau

army, and headed by train for Vienna, Austria. To avoid possible capture, he threw away all his papers and identification.

His Ruse Worked

In Vienna, Russian guards questioned him at the railroad station. He pretended to be Greek and that he did not understand their questions. That worked.

A free man in Austria, crowded with displaced persons, Thau wound up in Salzburg where he worked in a small shop as an auto mechanic.

Then the idea of America began to come to mind. He remembered some of the "wonderful things" the Yanks had told him at the Elbe. He determined to come here.

It took five years. In 1951, through the sponsorship of a Jewish agency, he was accepted to enter the country and came to Sheboygan. He said his papers were signed by Atty. David Rabinovitz.

Moved Here in 1951

He worked only a brief time in Sheboygan and then moved to Milwaukee in the fall of 1951. Two or three weeks later he met his wife, Ida, now 32. They were married the next spring. They now have three children, Martin, 28 months; Jeffrey, 1, and Aster, born only a week ago. They live at 1350 N. 36th st.

Thau readily describes life in the Red army with a frankness he feared to employ back in 1945.

The Russians enforce strict discipline and keep their troops busy either on army chores or required reading of propaganda material. They could take their pay in cash or have it credited to them for later settlement. Thau did the latter.

"I told them they had just as well keep it," he said, "because there was no place to spend it anyway." The Red army had no post exchange system.

Smoked Up Money

The rations were simple. Each morning, the troops were given an issue of bread and some tea or wa-

ter for breakfast. Dinner usually was soup. Occasionally they had meat, often in cans labeled in Russian to indicate it was packed in the United States. The shares were small, however. A two pound can of pork was split among 16 men.

They were supplied with vodka—"plenty of it toward the last"—and tobacco which Thau remembers as "more like little grains of sand." The Red soldiers had to find their own paper. When they had used up the propaganda sheets distributed for their reading, they rolled cigarettes with paper rubles, cupping the cigarets in their hands so superiors would not see them smoking up the money.

The army was run from the top. Junior officers and enlisted men never received explanations, he said. They got orders and obeyed without question.

"A man just gets to be a tiny part of the big machine," he said.

The system is good, for army efficiency, he said.

No criticism was tolerated.

"You can't even gripe to other soldiers," he said, "or somebody would turn you in." Thau recalled that he once expressed a complaint to his best army friend—a Jew and an officer.

"He told me I'd better shut up or next time he would report me," Thau said.

Troops Were "De-looted"

The Russian troops collected "loot" as avidly as any other conquering forces. In the drive across Germany, the Red soldiers became fascinated with wrist watches. Thau said it was not unusual to see one soldier with eight or 10 watches on his arm. All were "loaded" with cigarets from their trading with Americans.

But their superiors had a solution for this acquisition of "property." Periodically, everyone was ordered into an open field. They were forced to strip, leaving uniforms and all personal possessions.

Naked, they were marched a mile or so to another field. There from supply trucks new uniforms and equipment was issued. But no loot.