

Preface

The myth of Colditz has stood unchanged and unchallenged for more than seventy years: prisoners of war, with moustaches firmly set on stiff upper lips, defying the Nazis by tunnelling out of a grim Gothic castle on a German hilltop, fighting the war by other means. Yet, like all legends, that tale contains only a part of the truth.

The soldier-prisoners of Colditz were courageous, resilient and astonishingly imaginative in the ways they tried to get out of the high-security camp holding the most troublesome captives of the Third Reich. There were more attempted escapes from Colditz than any other camp. But life in Colditz was about more than escaping, just as its inmates were more complicated, and far more interesting, than the cardboard saints depicted in popular culture.

Colditz was a miniature replica of pre-war society, only stranger. It was a close-knit community intensely divided over issues of class, politics, sexuality and race. In addition to the resolute warriors, the participants in the Colditz drama included communists, scientists, homosexuals, women, aesthetes and philistines, aristocrats, spies, workers, poets and traitors. Many of these have hitherto been excluded from history, because they did not fit the traditional mould of the white, male Allied officer, dedicated to escaping. Moreover, roughly half the population of Colditz was German: the guards and their officers have also tended to be painted in one, uniform colour, yet this group also contained a rich cast of characters, including some men of culture and humanity far removed from the brutal Nazi stereotype.

The inside story of Colditz is a tale of the indomitable human spirit, and much else besides: bullying, espionage, boredom, insanity, tragedy and farce. Colditz Castle was a frightening prison but

it was also frequently absurd, a place of suffering but also of high comedy, an idiosyncratic and eccentric crucible that evolved its own culture, cookery, sports, theatre and even a distinct internal language. But this heavily guarded cage, surrounded by barbed wire and cut off from the world, changed everyone who entered it, as life inside the castle evolved, and the war ground on. Some prisoners were heroic, but they were also human: tough and vulnerable, brave but terrified, by turns cheerful, determined and despairing.

This is the core of the real Colditz story: how ordinary people, on both sides, responded to dramatic and demanding circumstances not of their making. It asks a simple question: what would you have done?

Prologue

Franz Josef

Every evening, Sergeant Major Gustav Rothenberger carried out an inspection of the castle perimeter, checking the sentries were alert at their posts and hoping to catch one napping. Rothenberger was a stickler for routine, and the last stop on his rounds was always the east side of the building, where a narrow walkway, with a sheer drop on one side and the mighty castle wall rising on the other, led to a barbed wire gate. Beyond that lay the park and the woods. Guards with machine guns were posted at intervals of thirty feet along the length of the terrace. Two more sentries guarded the gate itself, one patrolling a raised metal catwalk with a clear line of fire down the terrace.

Shortly before midnight on a warm September night in 1943, the Sergeant Major (or Stabsfeldwebel in German) appeared on the terrace as usual, accompanied by two soldiers with slung rifles. The prisoners had been locked into their quarters two hours earlier. Colditz was quiet. Powerful floodlights threw the guards' distorted silhouettes against the granite face of the castle.

Rothenberger cut an unmistakable figure. A native of Saxony, he had won the Iron Cross during the First World War and was said to wear his campaign medals in bed. He was feared and admired by the men under his command in Number 3 platoon of the guard company. The prisoners took every opportunity to mock their captors, but treated this bristling martinet with cautious respect, as a soldier from an earlier age: battle-scarred, disciplined and extravagantly hairy. The most distinctive thing about Rothenberger was his facial plumage, a spectacular moustache and mutton-chop combination. The old soldier was immensely proud of his huge gingery whiskers, brushing, clipping and waxing them to points, as if

grooming an exotic pet. The British POWs called him 'Franz Josef' (sic), after the Austro-Hungarian emperor with the handlebar moustaches, but never, ever to his face.

Rothenberger marched up smartly to the first guard on the terrace and barked: 'There is an attempted escape on the west side. Report to the guardhouse immediately.' The startled sentry saluted, clicked his heels and took off; the officer dismissed the second guard, and then the third. The two sentries manning the gate were surprised to see Rothenberger rounding the corner of the terrace with two replacement guards in tow. They were not due to go off duty for another two hours. 'You're relieved early,' snapped the moustachioed sergeant major. 'Give me the key.' Rothenberger appeared to be particularly irritable tonight; but appearances can be deceptive.

A close inspection of Rothenberger's facial hair would have revealed that it was made from dismantled shaving brushes, coloured ginger-grey with watercolour paints from the prison shop and attached with glue; his uniform, like those of his escorts, was stitched with precision out of prison blankets, and dyed the correct shade of German field grey; the Iron Cross on his breast was made from zinc stripped off the castle roof and moulded into shape with a hot kitchen knife; his headgear had been fashioned out of a peaked RAF cap using felt and string; his pistol holster was cardboard, shined up with brown boot polish, from which poked a piece of wood painted to look like the butt of a 9mm Walther P38 pistol; the two soldiers in greatcoats carried dummy rifles with wooden barrels polished with pencil lead, bolts fashioned from bits of steel bedstead, and tin triggers formed from metal cutlery.

The sergeant major was a replica Rothenberger, a fake Franz Josef. His name was Michael Sinclair, a 25-year-old British lieutenant who had already escaped twice from Colditz before being caught and brought back. Sinclair was fluent in German, a talented amateur actor and an obsessive. He thought only of escaping, and talked about nothing else. 'I'm getting out of here,' he insisted,

repeatedly. This was not an expression of hope, but a statement of belief. Some of the other prisoners found his singlemindedness off-putting: there was something desperate in Sinclair's determination. For four months, he had studied Rothenberger's gait, posture and accent, his routine, his mannerisms and the way he swore when angry, which was often.

High above the terrace, thirty-five more British officers waited in the darkness. The bars on the windows of the sixth floor had already been sawn through. The men wore handmade civilian clothes. Each carried a counterfeit travel pass, forged using a typewriter of wood and wire, a photograph taken with a camera made from a cigar box and spectacles, and authorized with the official German eagle stamp carved out of a shoe heel using a razor blade. 'It's going to work,' someone whispered, as the first guard hurried off. 'It's really going to work.'

The plan was simple: with the sentries out of the way, a first group of twenty would climb down the outside of the building on ropes made from knotted bedsheets, Sinclair would unlock the gate to the park, and they would all scramble down the slope into the nearby woods. If they got away, the rest would follow a few minutes later. Once in the trees they would split into pairs, and spread out into the countryside, before making for Germany's borders by a variety of prearranged routes. The 'Franz Josef plan' depended on ingrained German habits of military obedience, preparation, timing, luck and the credibility of Sinclair's false whiskers. The escapers calculated it would take four and a half minutes before the dismissed guards reached the guardhouse and found the real Rothenberger. At which point all hell would break loose. Many of the prisoners crouching in the dark had been captives for almost three years. During that time numerous escapes had been attempted with only a small handful of successes. In the escalating internal war between the guarded and the guards, a major victory beckoned. If it worked, this would be the first mass breakout in Colditz history.

The *Kommandant* of Colditz had recently issued orders that

everyone, without exception, entering or leaving the castle must produce a pass, with a different colour for each day. The sentry at the gate was sticking to the rules. Later, he would claim that the moustaches before him 'did not quite curl properly'; in truth he was merely obeying orders, even though Rothenberger had issued those orders and was now apparently telling him to disobey them. The sentry's voice floated up to the windows above: 'Nein, Herr Stabsfeldwebel. *Nein!*' Sinclair cursed him for his insolence. 'Are you daft? Don't you know your own sergeant?' But finally, he reached into his pocket and handed over an exit pass, or *Ausweis*, dated, signed and stamped.

This was a copy of a real pass obtained from a bribed German guard. It was a perfect duplicate in every respect. Except it was the wrong colour. The fake pass was grey. It was supposed to be yellow.

The sentry stared at it for a moment, and back at 'Franz Josef' Rothenberger. Then he slowly raised his rifle.

1940

1. The Originals

On the afternoon of 10 November 1940, Captain Pat Reid gazed up at the castle on the cliff and experienced the combination of admiration and anxiety its builders had intended. 'We saw looming above us our future prison,' he later wrote. 'Beautiful, serene, majestic and yet forbidding enough to make our hearts sink . . . a sight to make the bravest quail.'

Quailing was not in Pat Reid's nature. Indeed, he saw faint-heartedness of any sort as a moral failing, and refused to countenance it, in himself or anyone else. An officer in the Royal Army Service Corps, he had been captured in May, one of thousands of soldiers unable to get away after the fall of France. Initially held in Laufen Castle in Bavaria, he had immediately supervised the digging of a tunnel from the basement to a small shed outside the prison walls, and then made a break for the Yugoslavian border with five other officers. They were on the run for five days before they were caught and sent to Colditz, a new camp for incorrigible prisoners, and therefore a place for which Reid was amply qualified.

Born in India to an Irish father, at twenty-nine years old Reid was a natural contrarian and a born exhibitionist, a most dependable ally and, as an opponent, obstinate and insufferable. He had once climbed the rugby posts during an England-Ireland international at Twickenham to plant a bunch of shamrocks at the top. Described as 'a thick-set, wavy-haired fellow with a mischievous look in his eyes' by one fellow inmate, Reid spoke and wrote exclusively in the argot of the *Boy's Own Paper*, the British boys' magazine dedicated to heroic public school exploits. He displayed, at all times, a relentless, chirpy optimism. With a strong sense of his own place in the drama, Reid would become the first and most extensive chronicler of Colditz. He hated the place on

sight and spent most of the rest of his life thinking and writing about it.

The British officers, later known as the 'Laufen Six', were marched across the moat, and then under a second stone archway, 'whose oaken doors closed ominously behind us with the clanging of heavy iron bars in true medieval fashion'. In peacetime, Reid had been a civil engineer and he cast a professional eye over the battlements. The ground fell away in a sheer precipice on three sides, below terraces festooned in barbed wire. As the day faded, the castle walls were lit by a blaze of searchlights. The nearest city was Leipzig, twenty-three miles to the northwest. The closest border to a country outside Nazi control was 400 miles away. 'Escape,' Reid reflected, 'would be a formidable proposition.' The little group was marched under another gated arch, and into the inner courtyard. Only the sound of their boots ringing on the cobbles broke the silence. It was, wrote Reid, 'an unspeakably grisly place'.

Colditz Castle stands on a hilltop 150 feet above the Mulde river, a tributary of the Elbe in the east of what is now Germany. Before it became a German province in the tenth century, the Serbian Slavs who inhabited the area had called it *Koldyese*, meaning 'dark forest'. The first stone of what would become a mighty fortress was laid in about 1043, and over the next millennium it was repeatedly expanded and modified, destroyed and rebuilt by the great dynasties that tussled for power and prominence in the area. Fire, war and pestilence changed the castle's shape over the centuries, but its purposes remained constant: to impress and oppress the ruler's subjects, demonstrate his might, frighten his enemies and incarcerate his captives.

The hereditary rulers of the region, the Electors of Saxony, converted it into a hunting lodge, with a chapel and banqueting hall, and in 1523 the surrounding parkland became a game reserve encircled by high stone walls; white stags were held in a special enclosure in the park or *Tiergarten*, before being released and hunted down. The electors kept their dowagers, turbulent

relatives and unmarried daughters within the castle walls. In the early eighteenth century under Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, the *Schloss* was enlarged with additional fortifications and pleasure gardens, and a theatre. 'Augustus the Strong' was a man of immense physical stamina, skilled in the sport of fox-tossing (which was exactly as nasty as it sounds), and a prodigious womanizer said to have fathered somewhere between 365 and 382 children. The castle was expanded to 700 rooms in order to house them.

By the nineteenth century the Saxon princes had turned their attention elsewhere, and the castle on the hill became a poorhouse, a remand home and then a hospital for the 'incurably insane'. The most expensive lunatic asylum in Germany, Colditz was a dumping ground for the mentally disturbed members of wealthy and notable families, including the composer Robert Schumann's son Ludwig, who arrived, deranged, at the age of twenty, and never left. By the twentieth century it had become a place of death, a vast mausoleum of freezing stone floors, draughty corridors and hidden misery. During the First World War it housed tuberculosis and psychiatric patients, of whom 912 died from malnutrition. Before the war, the Nazis used it as a concentration camp for communists, social democrats and other political opponents of Hitler. More than 2,000 such 'undesirables' were imprisoned there in an year. Some were tortured in its dank cells. After a brief period as a camp for Reich Youth Workers, in 1938 it became an asylum again, but this time a lethal one: eighty-four physically and mentally disabled people were deliberately starved to death, a testing ground for Hitler's full-scale euthanasia programme.

But in 1939 it became what it will always be remembered as: a camp for prisoners of war. The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), or German Army High Command, turned Colditz into a special camp (*Sonderlager*) for a particular breed of captured enemy officers: prisoners who had tried to escape from other camps, or otherwise displayed a markedly negative attitude towards Germany. These were designated *deutschfeindlich*, or 'German-unfriendly', a

word that has no parallel in any other language and is virtually untranslatable: in Nazi Germany, insufficient friendliness was a crime. Being *deutschfeindlich* merited a red tab on a prisoner's record: a mark of demerit in German eyes, but a distinction of note among POWs. The castle was henceforth a camp for captured officers, an *Offizierslager*, designated Oflag IV-C.

The denizens of Colditz castle, over the centuries, had been many and varied, but almost all had this in common: they were not there out of choice. The dowagers, lunatics, Jews, virgins, tubercular patients, war prisoners and white stags in the park had all been brought to the castle by others, and could not get out. Even the bastard progeny of Augustus the Strong were trapped in this huge hilltop compound. The great castle had supposedly been built to protect the people, but it was always a projection of power, a vast castellated giant dominating the skyline, erected to awe those living below and keep its occupants securely inside. It was either magnificent or monstrous, depending on which side of its walls you were on.

The building consisted of two adjoining courtyards. The inner, older space, no bigger than a tennis court, was cobbled and surrounded by four walls ninety feet high. On the north side were the chapel and clock tower; on the west the *Saalhaus*, or great hall, with the theatre, parcels office and senior officers' quarters above; on the south was the prisoners' kitchen, adjoining the German quarters; the east wing was the *Fürstenhaus*, or Prince's House, which would accommodate the British prisoners. The sun penetrated the inner courtyard for only a few hours around noon. A single gateway led to the larger outer courtyard, which itself had only two exits: one over the dry moat leading down to the town of Colditz in the valley below, and the other through a tunnel under the barracks, sloping down towards the park and woods that had once been the gardens and hunting grounds of the mighty electors. The prisoners were contained in the inner courtyard, while the German guards, men of the 395th Defence Battalion, occupied the outer one: the garrison headquarters known as the *Kommandantur*.

Colditz Castle looked as solid and unyielding as the rock it stood upon. In reality, it was full of holes. The colossal stone warren had been built in layers, one on another, rooms expanded, windows opened up or filled in, corridors blocked, drains diverted and re-dug, by men who had been dead for centuries. It was riddled with hidden compartments, abandoned attics, doors secured by medieval locks, and long-forgotten fissures. Over the next four years, Reid and the other inhabitants of the inner courtyard sought to exploit these openings, while those in the outer courtyard struggled, just as energetically, to plug them.

A tall, sharp-faced German officer saluted crisply as the British prisoners entered the courtyard. 'Good evening, my English friends,' he said, in impeccable English. 'You must be tired after so long a day.'

Leutnant Reinhold Eggers was the antithesis of Pat Reid in every possible way, being formal, self-disciplined and humourless, as patriotic as Reid was *deutschfeindlich*. The two men detested one another on sight: their meeting marked the start of a long and bitter contest.

The son of a blacksmith from Brunswick, Eggers had fought at Ypres and the Somme, and finished the war after 'fifty-one dreadful months' with an Iron Cross and a bullet wound in his leg. Eggers described himself as a 'German patriot, devoted to my country'. But Eggers was no Nazi, and had briefly fallen foul of the party before the war for failing to show sufficient enthusiasm for National Socialism. Already forty-nine years old when the second war started, he was called up again and, like many older soldiers, deployed in the army prison service as deputy to the senior duty officer at Oflag IV-C. He would go on to become the supreme security chief of Colditz.

A schoolteacher by profession, Eggers retained all the attributes of an old-fashioned Prussian headmaster: an orderly, fastidious disciplinarian, as brittle and stiff as a stick of chalk, but even-handed, unflappable and insistent on good manners. He believed that a career spent educating disobedient children ideally suited

him to maintaining control over the rowdiest POWs in Germany, and he applied his rules for teaching to running a prison camp: 'Never show any emotion; keep smiling whatever happens; punish disobedience with energy.' A man of principle, he strongly disapproved of using violence against inmates, except in self-defence. His diary and other writings offer a remarkable insight into Colditz from the German perspective.

Eggers was also an ardent anglophile, a risky enthusiasm in Nazi Germany. He made no secret of his admiration for the British countryside, courtesy, language, food and good sportsmanship. The dissertation for his teacher's diploma was entitled *The Theory and Practice of School Reform in England from Victorian Times to the Present Day*. In 1932, he had organized a school exchange between the Johann-Gottfried-Herder-Gymnasium in Halle and Cheltenham Grammar School. While Nazism was on the rise in Germany, he had spent several happy months in the Gloucestershire spa town lapping up British culture and English beer. But the experience had left him with a warped perception of England, and he emerged with the impression that all Britons were like those he had encountered in Cheltenham: polite, interested in Germany and incapable of unfair play. He was about to get a rude surprise.

Even before the first prisoners arrived, Eggers had spotted two major flaws in the Wehrmacht's plan to create a super-prison for difficult prisoners from which it would be impossible to escape. The first was the building itself: it looked daunting, to be sure, but the sheer complexity of its medieval layout made it extremely hard to render secure. 'The place was impregnable,' Eggers wrote, 'but a more unsuitable place to hold prisoners will probably never again be chosen.' The second was the nature of the inmates: *deutschfeindlich*, 'the bad types', as Eggers put it, 'undesirables [with] established reputations as disturbers of the peace'. Removing troublemakers might make the other prison camps easier to manage, but Eggers the schoolmaster was acutely aware that if you put all the naughtiest boys in one class they pool their resistance, egg one another on, and soon your classroom is on fire.

Every school and prison needs a rule-book, and for Eggers this was the Geneva Convention on POWs, signed by Germany and thirty-six other nations in 1929, laying down regulations governing the feeding, housing and punishment of POWs. Prisoner welfare was monitored by a neutral 'protecting power', initially America and then Switzerland. Under the Convention, captured officers enjoyed certain privileges, including being 'treated with the regard due to their rank'. Unlike prisoners from 'other ranks', who were held in a labour camp known as a *Stammlager*, or Stalag, officers imprisoned during the Second World War could not be forced to work for the Reich. The most senior officer among them was recognized as an official intermediary between the camp authorities and the prisoners. The inmates of Colditz might have lost their freedom but they knew their legal rights, and so did the Germans. The paramilitary SS operated the concentration camps with an inhuman disregard for international law, but in the army-run POW camps most senior German officers saw it as a matter of soldierly pride to uphold the Convention, and took offence at any suggestion they were failing to do so. In the midst of an increasingly brutal war, the German army guards were still sticking to the rules, for now. 'They do not resort to petty tyranny,' wrote one British inmate, 'but treat us, after they have taken every precaution to prevent escapes, as gentlemen who know the meaning of honour and possess a gentleman's dignity.'

As he looked around the courtyard for the first time, Pat Reid felt he had entered 'some ghostly ruin' and sure enough, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, eerily pale faces began to appear at the upper windows. A contingent of 140 Polish officers had arrived a week earlier, and now welcomed the new prisoners with a slow-rising chant: '*Anglicy, Anglicy . . .*' The English, the English . . .

As POWs, the Poles occupied an anomalous position. Some 420,000 Polish soldiers were captured by the Germans in 1939, and their country had been carved up between Germany and the Soviet Union. In German eyes they were not protected by the Convention. 'Poland no longer exists,' Polish officers were told upon

arrival in Colditz. 'It is only due to the magnanimity of the Führer that you are benefiting temporarily from the privileges accorded to prisoners-of-war of the other belligerent powers. You should be grateful.' The Poles did not feel grateful. Most felt only visceral loathing for the Germans, which they did little to disguise. The Polish officer contingent was led by General Tadeusz Piskor, who had been sent to Colditz for refusing to shake the proffered hand of a camp Kommandant. 'The Poles seethed with hatred of us,' wrote Eggers.

Reid and his five companions were marched up a narrow staircase, and locked into an attic room, where they found three more inmates: Canadian RAF officers who had been shot down over Germany the previous April and escaped from another camp, only to be swiftly recaptured, comprehensively beaten up, and taken to Colditz.

The British were settling into their new quarters when they heard a scratching at the door, which swung open to reveal four smiling Polish officers carrying several large bottles of beer. It had taken the Poles less than a week to work out that the ancient locks on the castle's internal doors could be opened with ease using 'a couple of instruments that looked like button hooks'. A small party now took place, conducted in fractured English, with snatches of French and German, the founding ceremony of an enduring Anglo-Polish alliance in Colditz. As he fell asleep on a straw-stuffed mattress in a narrow wooden bunk, Reid reflected that the Poles must have opened at least five locks to reach the British quarters from their own billet on the other side of the courtyard: 'If they could get from one place to another through locked doors, well, so could we.'

The first few weeks in Colditz resembled another phoney war, similar to the period of tense inaction just after war itself was officially declared, as the different nationalities, the guards and the prisoners, carefully assessed one another and their new shared home. Compared with some of their previous camps, the castle

seemed almost comfortable, despite the peeling walls and pervasive smell of mould. One new inmate felt he had joined a 'sort of club'. The British and Canadian contingent was moved to permanent quarters in the east wing, with flushing lavatories, showers, spasmodic hot water, electric light, a stove, and a long hall used as a mess room for eating and recreation. They could circulate in the courtyard during daylight, but the rest of the huge castle was strictly off-limits. The food produced by the German kitchen down in the courtyard was unappetizing – ersatz acorn coffee, thin soups and black bread – but it was edible. As officers, the prisoners were theoretically entitled to pay, which came in the form of 'camp money' to be spent in the prison shop or canteen on cigarettes, razor blades, blankets and, at least initially, weak beer. Three times a day, the prisoners were assembled for a roll call, or *Appell*, in the courtyard: having formed up in ranks by nation, they were counted, laboriously recounted, addressed by the Germans if there was anything worth saying, and then dismissed. The first roll call was at 8 a.m., and the last at 9 p.m., shortly before 'lights out', when the electricity was cut off, the staircases were locked and the courtyard was shut off. The 200-strong German guard contingent outnumbered the inmates, but over the first few weeks prisoner numbers steadily increased: more British and Polish officers, a handful of Belgians and a growing contingent of Frenchmen. Each nation was assigned to separate quarters.

At first the prisoners of different nations were kept forcibly apart, but the Germans soon realized this was going to be impossible, and so the inmates mixed and mingled in the courtyard during the day, and covertly at night. For many, this was their first prolonged exposure to people of different nationalities and cultures. National rivalries persisted, but some were rather surprised to discover how much they had in common. 'The Poles and the French are excellent fellows,' observed one British inmate. 'They are all of the difficult-prisoner type, but difficult prisoners make interesting prison companions.'

The *Blitzkrieg* invasions of Poland and Western Europe were so