



The US-Army entering Rome on June 4th 1944

Peter Pirker

“Tomorrow John Kitterer will play”

The SOE Operation Duval and the Mauthausen Survivors

Josef Hemetsberger and Hans Prager¹

When the US and British Armies marched into Rome on June 4, 1944 there was finally an opportunity for two deserters of the German *Wehrmacht* to come out of hiding respectively leave their precarious situation with the partisans behind and act openly: Josef Hemetsberger, then 23 years old, and Hans Prager, then 18 years old, went to the house of the former Austrian embassy in Rome without knowing of each other. Prager was responding to a newspaper announcement which encouraged all Austrians in Rome to take this step; Hemetsberger followed a long harboured wish to join an Austrian legion which was, according to rumours at home, led by the former *Heimwehrführer* (Home Guard leader) Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg and would fight for the reinstatement of an independent Austria on the sides of the Allied Forces. Both were considerably surprised when they were met by American soldiers and taken into custody.

Until recently, the building in the Via Perigolesi had been the regional headquarters of the foreign NSDAP. Two days after the liberation of Rome the building was occupied by a group of Austrians, among them Bishop Hudal and the last Austrian ambassador in Italy and former foreign minister in the Schuschnigg government, Egon Berger-Waldenegg. They flagged the building with the red and white Austrian flag and the banner “*Es lebe das freie und alliierte Österreich*” (Long live the free and allied Austria).² At the same time rumours were spread that the Allied Forces were already envisaging Berger-Waldenegg as head of a future Austrian government.³ After a couple of days, the Allied military police cleared the building after protests from left-wing and middle-class exile organisations in Great Britain and the USA and harsh criticism of the British press. All people involved were compromised because of their political history. Bishop Hudal had attempted reconciliation between Christianity and National Socialism in the past; Berger-Waldenegg was seen as a representative of Austro-Fascist politics. According to their standard proceedings the Western Allies did not acknowledge the “Austrian Committee” that had been founded by Hudal and Berger-Waldenegg but only tolerated it. It had also been the Austrian branch in the British war secret service, Special Operations Executive (SOE), in Italy which had immediately protested against the rumours and cautioned against acknowledgement: this would certainly



Bishop Alois Hudal

¹ This paper is based on the author's research within the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project “The Austrian Section of the British war secret service SOE: Politics, services, staff, remembrance” at the Department of Government at the University of Vienna (project coordinator: Prof. Dr. Walter Manoschek).

² VOIGT (2005): pp. 56-59.

³ Maryland to London, 9/6/1944, TNA HS6/12.

impair the efforts of the SOE to organise resistance in Austria with the help of the partisan movement in Slovenia and Friuli.⁴ An official representation of the “Austrian Committee” in the former Austrian embassy was out of the question. Prager and Hemetsberger, who were not aware of these conflicts, were immediately transported into a POW camp near Naples. Josef Hemetsberger had already found out in the former Austrian embassy that there was no Starhemberg legion. In which ways could the two now contribute to a fight against Nazi Germany? As they soon learned, there was only one.



Berger-Waldenegg

Hemetsberger remembers that only a couple of days later in the POW camp near Naples he was intensively questioned by the American officer Charles Ripper, a former Austrian in the US secret service, the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), concerning his political position, his biography and his knowledge of Austria. The same happened to Hans Prager.⁵

At this time the British war secret service SOE and its Austrian branch⁶ were preparing a number of undercover operations on former Austrian territory on their advanced basis “Maryland” in Monopoli, south of Bari. The preparations of the British in this respect were further advanced than those of the OSS and were still hopefully pursued in early summer. Thus, Hemetsberger and Prager were transferred into the British POW camp in Grumo, near Bari, and again questioned by the SOE officer Jimmy Darton, who was responsible for operations concerning Austria.

Darton was more than pleased with their answers. Hans Prager came from a Viennese working class family; his late father had been an activist for the Social Democrats; he presented himself as politically unaffiliated but supporting the idea of a free Austria. In 1943 the commercial apprentice was drafted for the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (*Reich* Labour Service) where he had volunteered for Hermann Goering’s paratrooper division to escape an impending recruitment by the *SS*. After his training in Amsterdam Hans Prager was relocated close to Rome, from where he soon deserted (in January 1944).

“I escaped and hid in Rome in order to work against the Germans”,

it says in the transcripts of the interrogation. As there seemed no alternatives he joined a communist partisan unit and was involved in acts of sabotage as well as in requisitions among Fascists. In March and April 1944, the partisans also provided Prager with forged identification documents, issued by the Vatican. Consequently, Prager already had several

⁴ Cipher Tel from Maryland to London, 9/6/1944, TNA HS6/12.

⁵ All of the following references or quotations by Josef Hemetsberger and Hans Prager are taken from interviews with the author on February 21 and 22, 2007.

⁶ The “Austrian Section” was a sub-section of the German-Austrian Section (“X section”) which was installed only few months after the SOE on November 18, 1940. Its task was the development of subversive attacks against NS Germany relying on acts of sabotage, negative propaganda and the sparking of resistance. On a first overview over the politics and mission of the Austrian Section see PIRKER (2008). On the SOE in general, among others: SEAMAN (2006) and MACKENZIE (2000).

months of experience in underground work. In Darton’s final assessment it reads:

“Makes a good impression – is definite anti-Nazi – also anti-communist. There was no hesitation or uneasiness in his replies. (...) Prepared to do anything for Austria. His whole story was straightforward and had no discrepancies. Security good. (...) This man might be a leader of a party.”

Josef Hemetsberger revealed to have been a member of the *Österreichisches Jungvolk*, a youth organisation of the *Vaterländische Front*. Hemetsberger had served in the army longer than Prager. In November 1939 he had been drafted for the pilot training regiment in Klagenfurt and had been stationed in Finland, Germany, the Crimea, and in various locations in Russia. In April 1944 Hemetsberger had been transferred to the motor vehicle company of a paratrooper corps. He deserted in June.

“Having heard that the Allies were forming an Austrian Legion he (...) went to Rome, where he gave himself up and asked to join any Austrian fighting unit which was being formed.”

In his final assessment Darton commented:

“Expressed great keenness to go back as soon as possible or he would not have a chance to do anything for his country before the war ended. Will probably make quite a good leader of a group.”

Thus, Prager and Hemetsberger declared to Darton that they were willing to take part in whichever action that would see to the liberation of Austria,⁷ and with their social-democrat and Christian-social positions they represented a spectrum of political stances that were acceptable for the SOE. Both were categorised as anti-communist and as declared Austrian patriots. Darton accommodated Hemetsberger and Prager in a villa in Polignano a Mare together with three other Austrian prisoners of war. They received Czech aliases and were responsible to a SOE case officer, Captain Harold Buckingham. The deserters did not know, however, which organisation had taken them on. According to Josef Hemetsberger, this did not matter to him. What was essential for him was that now there was an opportunity to take effective measures against the Nazis after all.

This first group of Austrians, which was recruited in POW camps in Italy, features in the routine reports of the SOE for the first time in September 1944, when they took up special training focussing on radio technique, close combat and parachuting.⁸ Already at the end of the same month the SOE organised them in the task force “Duval”. Their training had been comparatively shorter than that of previously recruited teams. Hemetsberger was declared commandant, Prager his assistant and the former SS member Emil Fuchs from Graz became the group’s radio operator. What was still missing was a task for Duval. By the end of September 1944 the leaders of the Austrian Section in Monopoli discussed their

⁷ PF Josef Hemetsberger, TNA HS9/691/2; PF Hans Prager, TNA HS9/1207.

⁸ Weekly Situation Report, 9/9/1944, TNA HS6/17.

employment; the three “agents”, as they were called by the SOE, had little say in this matter.⁹ Which options were there in summer 1944? The Austrian Section of the SOE worked from Monopoli (there were further bases in Istanbul, in Switzerland, and in Stockholm besides the headquarters in London) largely along three strictly separate lines. The first two were prioritised as they were the most developed:

- Under the command of the later British ambassador in Vienna, Peter Wilkinson, the SOE had been trying since spring 1941 to get into Austria via small advanced bases in the partisan regions in Slovenia and Friuli in order to create resistance and carry out acts of sabotage (“Mission Clowder”).¹⁰
- In cooperation with the London office of the Austrian Socialists (especially Oscar Pollak) a group of exiled socialists, headed by the later vice-director of the Austrian National Bank, Stefan Wirlander, worked on operational plans that aimed at establishing contact with the socialist underground in Styria and Vienna. They also prepared actions for late summer and autumn.¹¹



Oscar Pollak

For political reasons Hemetsberger was not suited for assignments in Slovenia or along socialist lines. Thus, it has to be assumed that by the end of September 1944 plans aimed at including the group Duval into a Christian-social project which emerged up after the liberation of Rome. The Austrian Section had been working on such a project since its foundation in autumn 1940, but had not found any useful partners for cooperation among the political

refugees in London – with the liberation of Rome new options appeared:

Egon Berger-Waldenegg, who came from an aristocratic Carinthian family, had presented himself as partner for cooperation to various secret services of the Allied Forces. Hence he declared to Darton, who had visited him undercover as a British diplomat,

*“that he arranged a means of communication with certain people in Austria, who have already organised an extensive resistance movement, and who will start operating when he gives the word.”*¹²

⁹ Weekly Situation Report, 28/9/1944, TNA HS6/17. Hemetsberger’s suggestion to jump off near his home town Krems was not further pursued.

¹⁰ Several task forces in the field respectively in villas around Monopoli were only waiting for a signal to get started. These groups consisted of British SOE officers as well as Jewish and left- and right-wing refugees respectively deserters of the *Wehrmacht*, who had been recruited in Great Britain, Northern Africa, and POW camps in the Middle East and Egypt since 1941. Cf. PIRKER/MARTIN-SMITH (2004), WILKINSON (2002), and BARKER (1990).

¹¹ Wirlandner had been active in Istanbul under the SOE member G.E.R. Gedye since September 1943 and in Monopoli since October 1944. There he joined the exiled socialists Theo Neumann and Hans Hladnik, who had come to Italy from London in September 1944. Later Walter Hacker joined them. Cf. memoirs of SANDERS (2008) and PIRKER (2004): pp. 88-120.

¹² Top Secret, Letter No. 11, X/A.2 to X, TNA HS6/12 and document, 27/6/44, Copy given to Mr. Harrison [civil servant in the Foreign Office], TNA HS6/12.

Naturally, this raised an interest among the SOE and they were afraid that an all-too negative stance of the Foreign Office would rid them of a “golden opportunity”. Berger-Waldenegg made his passing on of information dependent on some form of political acknowledgement by the Allied Forces.¹³ In the race of the various British and US American secret services for this information the SOE held a trump card: in February 1944 the SOE had taken Berger-Waldenegg’s son Heinrich under their wings after he had served in the Italian army.¹⁴ He had already suggested to the SOE to organise opposition against the Nazi regime with the help of his friends in Carinthia and Styria. Darton arranged a meeting between father and son and thus the SOE learned that his father’s contact consisted of one-way radio communication with a fruit importer in Carinthia. Supposedly, the latter had knowledge of the exact position of the *Gestapo* files that should be destroyed by the resistance group. The SOE did not want to destroy the *Gestapo* files but wanted to see them stolen.



OSS emblem

In the course of further negotiations Egon Berger-Waldenegg distanced himself from his original wish for official political acknowledgment as representative for Austria and instead demanded an allowance of 200,000 Lire to reveal his contacts and a number of safe places of refuge in Austria.¹⁵ Basically, the SOE was prepared to accept the deal (*“Let us buy the Baron”*).¹⁶ At the same time Darton found out about the identity of the contact person in Carinthia with the help of another source. It was Hans Zernatto, brother of the former federal minister in the Schuschnigg cabinet, Guido Zernatto. Very likely this information was provided by Norbert Trauttmansdorff, a young aristocrat who was acquainted with Berger-Waldenegg’s family. He had hidden in Rome and had been recruited by the SOE in June. Trauttmansdorff suggested to Darton to drop him off with a task force at some friend’s place in Neudau in eastern Styria in September.¹⁷

Besides Berger-Waldenegg other SOE members with a Christian-social background should be part of this group: Alois Bilisics, a Croat from the Burgenland, the Tyrolean son of a manufacturer, Friedrich Reitlinger, and Wolfgang Treichl from a Viennese banker’s family¹⁸. From there they should get in contact with Zernatto in Carinthia.¹⁹ Ronald Thornley, who headed the SOE’s German-Austrian Section in the London headquarters, was quite

¹³ From X to X/A.2, 7/7/1944, TNA HS6/12 and Top Secret, Letter No. 11, X/A.2 to X, TNA HS6/12.

¹⁴ PF Heinrich Berger-Waldenegg, TNA HS9/1547/3 and Monthly report on Clowder Mission, 22/2/1944, TNA HS6/17. Compare with Heinrich Berger-Waldenegg’s personal view in: BERGER VON WALDENEGG (1998): especially pp. 110-125. Interested in Berger-Waldenegg’s alleged connections were the British services SIS, A Force and the American OSS.

¹⁵ From X/A.2 to X, 15/7/1944, TNA HS6/12. Another document states 100,000 Lire.

¹⁶ X/Aus to X, dateless, TNA HS6/12.

¹⁷ The group’s code was “Temple”, later “Bellington”. Fortnightly Report for period 19/7 to 5/8/1944, TNA HS6/18 respectively Fortnightly Report, 28/8/1944, TNA HS6/18. BERGER-WALDENEGG (1998): p. 120. The group should jump in uniforms from the *Wehrmacht*.

¹⁸ Treichl died in mid-October 1944 in the course of an SOE mission in Friuli, cf. PIRKER (2004): pp. 287-323.

¹⁹ From X/A2 to X, 9/8/1944, TNA HS6/12.

sceptical concerning the Austrians' will to resist and rated this project as the litmus test for the conservative political exile:

*"The Trauttmansdorff project sounds most hopeful and will be a real test of the ability of people, with the same background as the Baron, to achieve anything."*²⁰

One reason why Trauttmansdorf and Berger-Waldeneegg were invested with great hopes was that cooperation with the partisans in Slovenia had proved conflict-ridden; besides, the borderlands were deemed increasingly unsafe with the expected withdrawal of the *Wehrmacht* from the Balkans. On the other hand, first information about attempted penetrations in Friuli showed that there proved to be few points of contact for resistance activities in East Tyrol and Upper Carinthia. Simultaneously, many plans among the Allied Forces that summer assumed that Germany would be beaten by winter 1944/45. This is why in September 1944 different projects of direct infiltration and penetration were being developed and the dropping-off of groups in Austria was planned in connection with Berger-Waldeneegg's and Trauttmansdorff's project²¹. This falls in line with the fact that Fürstenfeld was listed as prospective placement for the operation Duval for the end of September.²² With his political background Josef Hemetsberger fitted neatly into the project and as the Styrian in the team, Emil Fuchs knew the local territory.

However, in late summer the plan was dissolving bit by bit. There was no news for months from a contact man that Egon Berger-Waldeneegg had supposedly sent to Carinthia shortly before the fall of Rome.²³ A first attempt to drop off his son near Udine in July failed due to a wrong ground signal; the plane returned without having achieved anything.²⁴ In August Trauttmansdorff did not intend to move from Styria to Carinthia anymore but to Vienna instead, Berger-Waldeneegg should remain in Graz with the radio set for the time being.²⁵ Additionally, the SOE did not have sufficient flying capacities. In the villas around Monopoli 32 men were waiting for action, but the Austrian Section already faced considerable difficulties in supplying missions in the field and the cooperating partisan units with replenishments and weapons.²⁶ As it was only possible to jump when there was sufficient moon light, scheduled missions were often postponed for weeks when the weather was not good. When Trauttmansdorff's and Berger-Waldeneegg's mission became imminent at the end of September, they both fell ill. Suspicions were raised that they had acquired a fever

²⁰ From X to X/A.2, 18/8/1944, TNA HS6/12.

²¹ "(...) and it looks as though our one chance of penetrating Austria during the winter may only be by means of direct drops. Alas! These mythical 'resistance groups' are still as elusive as ever, and until we have a few parties who are actively operating inside the country, we shall remain as completely in the dark as we are at present. That is why great hopes are laid upon Trout [i.e. Trauttmansdorff] and Baum [i.e. Heinrich Berger-Waldeneegg]." From X/A.2 to X, Fortnightly report, 28/8/1944, TNA HS6/18.

²² From Maryland to Clowder, 26/9/1944, TNA HS6/6.

²³ From X/A.3 to X, 28/7/1944, TNA HS6/18.

²⁴ Fortnightly Report, 2/7 to 19/7, 19/7/1944, TNA HS6/18.

²⁵ Fortnightly Report Nr. 12 6/8 to 26/8/1944, 28/8/1944, TNA HS6/18.

²⁶ From Maryland to London, 18/9/1944, TNA HS6/18. A problem the SOE was constantly confronted with.

on purpose.²⁷ Eventually, their project “Bellington” was not proceeded any further²⁸ and the RAF did not commission the SOE with any flights to Austria for the next three to four months – an indication for the fraught and instable relations between the SOE and the British air force, which rather used their resources for different purposes.²⁹ The operation Duval was still on the list of planned missions, but was postponed from one phase of the moon to the other like a number of other operations.

This waiting around, filled with uncertainties, and changing plans concerning the jumping proved straining for many members of the missions. A former member of the previously mentioned socialist SOE unit, Eric Sanders, describes in his recently published memoirs an emotional rollercoaster, the high tension before an imminent mission and the disappointment and emptiness which would spread after another postponing. For numerous young men a disillusioned feeling would arise of “living on call”.³⁰ Although the SOE attempted to keep the men busy with further training many suffered from low morale, and due to the inactivity dissatisfaction and conflicts spread.³¹ Some began to doubt that missions in Austria made sense at all and were about to throw in the towel.



Eric Sanders

In fact all attempts of the SOE to find active resistance groups in Austria had disintegrated. Since 1941 Ronald Thornley had urged the Foreign Office to clearly define Britain’s political stance concerning a post-war structure in Austria and to guarantee Austria a privileged position over Germany in their war propaganda in the case of resistance against the Nazi regime. From this Thornley expected a significant increase in acts of sabotage, in readiness to take risks and attempts to form contacts. Thornley’s urging eventually found expression in the Moscow Declaration from November 1943, although it was not as explicit as he had wished for. Already in January 1944 he criticised the Moscow Declaration as having failed.³² In the course of 1944, this assessment should prove valid for Thornley and the originally more optimistic case officers of mission Clowder. A memorandum of mission

²⁷ Weekly Sitrep, 28/9/1944, TNA HS 6/17. The SOE files do not provide any more detailed information as there is no Maryland material for the time between September/October 1944. Also cf. BERGER-WALDENEGG (1998): p. 121.

²⁸ The Austrian Section in London then sent their Christian-social member Felix Ernst Weiss, who had fled from Vienna for political and racist reasons, to Rome to influence the conservative political exile and to establish contacts to bishops in Austria together with Berger-Waldenegg. These attempts did not see any results until the end of the war. However, Weiss compiled a file with several thousand names of “reliable Conservative anti-Nazis”, which the British occupation authority could later fall back on. Cf. Austrian Activities in Rome 1944-1945, TNA HS7/146.

²⁹ Activities of X section in Italy, TNA HS7/146.

³⁰ SANDERS (2008).

³¹ Thus the former prisoner of war, Gottfried Neubauer, had to be withdrawn from Pomigliano after arguments among the “agents”, TNA, HS8/885.

³² “X emphasised that the Austrians, as opposed to the Slovenes, are the most unlikely people in the world to indulge in guerrilla warfare owing to their easy going nature an[d] incorrigible expectation that someone else will pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them. Since the Moscow Declaration they are all the more likely to consider that they only have to wait to achieve their independence.” MP1 to AD/E for CD, 12/1/44, TNA HS6/13.

Clowder from January 16, 1945 read:

*"It is most unlikely that any widespread resistance movement will develop in Austria before Germany herself suffers total defeat."*³³

Until winter the SOE had no single safe contact point on former Austrian territory. Additionally, for political reasons the Allied Forces' headquarters in Italy, which were responsible for missions to Austria from an operational point, were not interested anymore in inciting "large scale resistance".³⁴ The only relatively up to date and reliable information concerning possibilities of survival in the country as well as local political circumstances stemmed from interrogations of Austrian prisoners of war and *Wehrmacht* deserters as well as from the knowledge the "agents" themselves had.³⁵

"The English knew everything and nothing at the same time",

as Josef Hemetsberger assesses the British level of knowledge. Numerous leading SOE officers had acquired profound geographical, cultural, and political knowledge in their years in Austria until 1938, serving, among others, the secret service SIS; they knew little, however, about Austria under NS rule. One of the projects the Austrian Section was preparing for in spring 1945, besides establishing contacts with socialist cells and with agents who had disappeared in autumn 1944, was the "blind" dropping-off of groups of Austrian prisoners of war, who should install secret radio stations. After the high-flying and sadly failed project of "regime change" in the early years and the 1944 attempt to organise resistance, sabotage and internal disruption, the SOE now concentrated on the planning of "intelligence", "counter-intelligence" and strategic paramilitary projects prior to occupation; the POW project was connected with a specific risk for the SOE:

*"The limiting factor is that ex-P.O.W.s who must form the bulk of these posts are of doubtful reliability once they have returned home."*³⁶

The first group that was considered for such a mission was the Duval unit as their morale was still rated as "good". Josef Hemetsberger, Hans Prager, and Emil Fuchs should contact "anti-Nazi elements" in Salzburg and prevent the destruction of vital *Gestapo* documents at the end of the war.³⁷ Neither Hans Prager nor Josef Hemetsberger had contacts to NS opposition; their only possible point of contact in case of difficulties was Hemetsberger's uncle in Salzburg. His address had also been agreed on as meeting point with the SOE for the time after the war.

In a report he compiled after the war, Peter Wilkinson outlines how Duval had been ordered to establish

"a small base in SALZBURG, which was known to be an important centre of Nazi

³³ Memorandum by H.Q. Clowder Mission on Future of Special Operations in Austria, TNA HS6/17.

³⁴ From Maryland to London, 18/3/1945, TNA HS 6/20.

³⁵ Compare here, for example, interviews with prisoners of war in TNA HS6/6 und HS6/7.

³⁶ TNA HS6/6 and HS6/7.

³⁷ From X/A.3 to AD/X.1, 30/12/1944, TNA HS6/19.

*activity, and as a possible base for post-war Nazi resistance.”*³⁸

As the RAF was only willing to fly parachutists to the south of Austria the Zirbitzkogel near Obdach was chosen as destination for landing. From there the three “agents” should take the train to Salzburg.

Josef Hemetsberger cannot remember an issue of order; Hans Prager at least confirms the *Gestapo* quarters in Salzburg as operational target. They should have received more detailed instructions after their first radio contact with the basis. In any case, the three deserters were issued with uniforms of the *Wehrmacht* and forged pay books; it is likely that they also practiced a “cover story” – as was usual in other cases. After more weeks of waiting an SOE officer finally appeared at the Villa in Pomigliano on a motorcycle and explained to Hemetsberger:

“Tomorrow John Kitterer will play for you”,

a macabre reference to the bandmaster of the Central Cemetery in Vienna, Johann Kitterer. This allusion was habitually made between leading SOE officers, who by the way had mostly taken part in similar missions before, and their charges.³⁹ Incidentally, both Hemetsberger and Prager characterise the relationship to their superiors at the SOE as particularly companionable and friendly.

Jimmy Darton came to pick up Hemetsberger, Prager, and Fuchs in the night of February 16. Josef Hemetsberger remembers:

“Then Darton told us at the airport: ‘Don’t forget: You can resign anytime; 90 % don’t make it through these missions’, to which we replied: ‘No, it will all come to nothing.’”

When the plane reached the Zirbitzkogel around one o’clock in the morning, Emil Fuchs was the first to leave the plane with the radio set; Prager and Hemetsberger jumped after him. The following description of the events follows a meticulous investigation of the mission, which was carried out by SOE officer Harold Buckingham on location in June 1945.⁴⁰ Immediately after landing in the deep snow, Fuchs left the landing spot and went to a farmhouse.



Snow-covered Zirbitzkogel

There he woke the residents, betrayed the mission and his two comrades, and wanted to be taken to the next *Wehrmacht* or gendarmerie post. He told the farmer that he had jumped for the British but that he did not intend to work for them. From the beginning his sole

³⁸ History of Clowder Mission. Summer 1943 to autumn 1945, Sheet 18, TNA HS7/146. Contrary to other groups, Duval’s marching orders are not included in the HS files.

³⁹ Interview with Josef Hemetsberger, February 22, 2007.

⁴⁰ Most secret. From Captain Buckingham to Major Renton, 24/6/1945, TNA HS8/884. Buckingham questioned local witnesses, the former gendarmerie commandant in Obdach as well as judicial officers in Judenburg at the time of the NS regime. He thus cross-checked the statements Emil Fuchs had made two days earlier and which had a different content.

intention had been to get back home as soon as possible. It happened precisely as the SOE had feared with regard to the employment of prisoners of war. The farmer, a *Volkssturm* (People's Militia) man, gave Fuchs a chance to reconsider the matter in the morning as there had been no paratrooper alarm so far. Fuchs insisted on his intention and reported at the gendarmerie in Obdach a couple of hours later, from where the NSDAP *Kreisleiter* was informed. Fuchs gave a precise description of Hemetsberger and Prager, who soon afterwards marched through the village in their *Wehrmacht* uniforms. They had assumed that Fuchs had drifted after his jump and had given up looking for him. Under false pretence a local gendarme asked them to the station, where they were received by several gendarmes with levelled machine guns and by the NSDAP *Kreisleiter*. Their cover story, namely that they belonged to a sniper company which was being trained close by, was blown by a simple phone call to the company. Besides, Fuchs had identified them by a look through the window of the gendarmerie station. After they both realised that their mission had been uncovered they behaved uncooperatively. Hemetsberger raged at the *Kreisleiter*, predicted the gallows for him after the war and kicked him against the chest; according to his own statements Prager behaved like "loud-mouth". What they did not know then was that Fuchs, who was kept apart from them, had betrayed them and was cooperating with the NS authorities.



Johann Sanitzer

In Judenburg all three were individually questioned by several *Gestapo* officers for one day and one night. According to Buckingham, Prager and Hemetsberger only revealed those aspects for which there was overwhelming evidence. During the interrogations they realised that Fuchs had betrayed them, who was from then on more moderately treated. After a brief arrest at the *Gestapo* in Leoben and in

Graz, where Prager and Hemetsberger had the opportunity to confer with each other, all three were transferred to the *Gestapo* headquarters at the Morzinplatz in Vienna. While Fuchs did not report to Buckingham of mistreatments and was housed with other "converted" (particularly Soviet) parachute agents on the fifth floor of the building⁴¹, Hemetsberger and Prager came to fully experience the violent cosmos that Johann Sanitzer, who headed department IVA2 (responsible for the persecution of enemy parachutists and radio agents), had established and run there for years.⁴² Hemetsberger as well as Prager report of hard blows into the face, on the back, and on the soles of their feet during repeated interrogations. Both were hung up for hours until they lost consciousness with their hands behind their backs on fences so that they could barely touch the ground with the tips

⁴¹ Detailed interrogation report on Johann Sanitzer, *Gestapo*, Vienna, Section IV 2, July 1945, TNA KV 2/2556.

⁴² Concerning Sanitzer see e.g. NEUGEBAUER (2004): pp. 197-214 and pp. 206f.

of their feet – once Hemetsberger had hung like this for 36 hours according to fellow prisoners.

In the interrogations Sanitzer was mainly interested in the radio codes with which he wanted to set up another radio game with the British.⁴³ As commandant Hemetsberger knew one key number of the code which he disclosed. In the meantime, according to his own information, Fuchs was threatened that if he refused to establish radio contact with his basis, his family would be shot. He eventually complied, first from Vienna and then in April from the *Gestapo* quarters in Salzburg.⁴⁴

But the SOE had been warned by the OSS on March 28, 1945 that three British functionaries were being controlled by the Germans. Sillio Sciaeder was named as their informant, a long-serving member of the radio observation in Berlin who had disclosed himself in Liechtenstein to an OSS contact man as emissary of an Austrian resistance organisation under Dr Gruber. According to Sciaeder's information one of the radio sets had been intended for resistance groups in Salzburg, which fit the description of Duval. As a consequence Thornley ordered Darton to rate all of Duval's attempts at contact as hostile.⁴⁵ Hemetsberger recounts that Fuchs' SOE instructor in Monopoli apparently noticed from the rhythm of the signals alone that the radio set was not always operated by Fuchs.⁴⁶

In the meantime, Hemetsberger and Fuchs were transported with a group of *Gestapo* prisoners from Vienna to Mauthausen on April 1. They survived with the help of older, more experienced political prisoners.

⁴³ In his interrogation by the OSS in July 1945 Sanitzer gave detailed information about the radio game “Thomse”, which he set up after the arrest of the SIS agents Crawford McKay and Rudolf Stuhlhofer in November 1944 with their basis in Bari. He thus managed to infiltrate the resistance group around Hans Strohmer with a contact man (“Pilot”, i.e. Framke). Detailed interrogation report on Johann Sanitzer, July 1945, KV 2/2556. The group Strohmer was arrested on March 16, 1945 (which Sanitzer did not mention); 16 of its members were murdered in Mauthausen. Cf. LUZA (1983): p. 250 and MARŠÁLEK (1995): p. 246. Sanitzer began another radio game in February 1945 with the arrest of the SIS agent Kurt Glauber. The vast majority of the radio games affected parachute agents of the Soviet secret service NKVD, cf. SCHAFRANEK (1996): pp. 10-40. See also various witness reports in the files of the *Volksgerichtsprozess* against Johann Sanitzer, WStLA, *LG für Strafsachen* (county court for criminal cases) Vienna, Vg11Vr586/47.

⁴⁴ After the evacuation of the *Gestapo* building Fuchs was briefly lodged in the confiscated villa of the “Semperit” managing director, Franz Messner, who had been murdered as a “spy” in the Mauthausen concentration camp, TNA HS8/884 and Missing Personnel, 21/6/1945, TNA HS6/22. For Messner: BEER (1993): pp. 75-100.

⁴⁵ The SOE took Sciaeder's information with considerable reservation. Sciaeder was very likely the son of the former Liechtenstein government president Schedler. The information is consistent with regard to time and place with Otto Molden's descriptions, cf. MOLDEN (1958): p. 297f. Also Karl Gruber, the later leader of the Tyrolean resistance movement and Foreign Minister, was difficult to categorise for Thornley: “We have the impression that the people concerned are a lot of rather shabby crooks. There is a Dr Josef Gruber in Innsbruck, and he may be concerned in some sort of resistance movement, but the Brillies, Puechers and Sciaeders sound rather phoney.” From AD/X.1 and X/A.2, 6/4/1945, TNA HS6/20 respectively from AD/X.1 to X/A.2, 6/4/1945.

⁴⁶ Hemetsberger met the SOE radio instructor David Potter several times in Vienna after the war.

“(...) and then we were taken to Mauthausen on April 1; and there it was actually Dr Becker⁴⁷ [who saved us], he was responsible for promotions in the Vaterländische Front and had been in the Schreibstube [camp registry] in Mauthausen until 1942; they knew him there and said to him: ‘Ah, you are back, we need someone for the Schreibstube anyway’ (...), and the Schutzhaftlagerkommandant, [Georg] Bachmayer, looked very friendly and he said: ‘I’ll take special care of you.’ Of course we idiots did not understand that, and then there was this smell and I said: ‘I am so hungry already; I’d be looking forward to something to eat’; and Becker behind me said: ‘Be careful, you won’t get anything to eat anymore, shut up and don’t move.’ Then we were led into the showers. In the showers a small bandy-legged guy appeared and asked: ‘Where are the two paratroopers?’ When no one answered he said: ‘Go on, otherwise you’ll all go into the gas now’, and Hansl [Prager] wanted to respond, he stood behind me.”

Hans Prager was saved by a fellow prisoner’s presence of mind:

“I presume that Graf Orssich saved my life. They asked for the two parachutists from England. In my youthfulness I lifted my hand and Graf Orssich pulled my hand down and said: ‘Don’t do that.’ I think that was life-saving.”⁴⁸

Instead of Josef Hemetsberger and Hans Prager two Soviet parachutists were taken away. Hemetsberger and Prager survived in the typhoid camp – most of the other British, American, and Soviet paratrooper agents did not survive Mauthausen. On May 26, 1945 the OSS officer Jack Taylor, who had also been interned in Mauthausen, delivered Hemetsberger and Prager into the charge of an American unit to return them home.⁴⁹ When Hemetsberger returned to Krems, he learned that his parents had died in a bomb raid.



OSS-Officer Jack Taylor

In August Hemetsberger and Prager were ordered to the SOE unit 6SFSS, which was stationed in Klagenfurt at that time, to be questioned and to produce written reports about the development of their operation. At the beginning of September 1945 they received a dismissal payment of 30 pounds as well as a suit; Prager, whose *“nerves had suffered severely”*⁵⁰ was allowed to recover in Klagenfurt until February 1946.

In a final assessment it said about the two of them:

⁴⁷ Hans Becker, the leading brain in the *“Siebenerausschuss”* (board of seven) and member of the short-lived resistance organisation POEN had been imprisoned again in March 1945. Cf. MOLDEN (1958): p. 206.

⁴⁸ Interview with Hans Prager. Orssich confirms in a letter to the concentration camp association from 1946 that Prager had been *“intended for gassing”* and that they had managed by coincidence to save Prager and Hemetsberger *“as the only parachutists in our transport”*. Bund demokratischer Freiheitskämpfer, ÖVP, to the KZ-Verband (CC association), 27/3/1946, DÖW 2000/9060.

⁴⁹ Missing Personnel, 21/6/1945, TNA HS6/22.

⁵⁰ Transcript *MA Wien, Abt. 12, Verhandlung Opferfürsorge f. Hans Prager* (magistrate Vienna, dep. 12, hearing victim benefits for Hans Prager), information of the SOE member Egon Pretzner, 9/7/1953, DÖW 2000/P441.

*“Throughout imprisonment period and Gestapo interrogations behaved well and remained loyal to us.”*⁵¹

The personnel files for Emil Fuchs are not in the archives of the SOE anymore. It cannot be clarified here what happened to them. In September 1945 he was in British custody in Klagenfurt.⁵²

After his return, Josef Hemetsberger hurled himself into the rebuilding of his parents-in-law’s food wholesale and in the course of his career achieved a leading position in one of Austria’s largest food combines. Hans Prager became a civil servant in Vienna’s municipal administration.

If Josef Hemetsberger is asked about his experiences at the *Gestapo* and in the Mauthausen concentration camp his narration mostly begins with the words: “*No matter.*” This is followed by a succinct rendering of the events. He often finishes with the phrase: “*End of story.*” The listener experiences an incredible harshness of the narrator with himself, which closes these experiences. Josef Hemetsberger became “familiar” with physical violence in political contexts already before the *Anschluss* in affrays with illegal Nazis in Krems. What followed were dramatic experiences around the *Anschluss*, when Hemetsberger volunteered for armament with the *Frontmiliz* (Front Militia) but was sent home again. A couple of weeks later he was arrested by the local National Socialists, severely abused, and in the following not allowed to attend school anymore. His narrations reveal that these experiences of violence created an enormous rage and harshness in him, but also a feeling of helplessness, which led to numerous disciplinary measures during his time in the *Wehrmacht*. Deserting and working with the SOE gave him a chance to strike back. The disappointment about the mission being failed by a comrade’s betrayal and the immediate post-war experiences with politics and the legal system may have contributed to a certain closing off. Briefly, Hemetsberger worked in the municipal council in Krems for the ÖVP (Austrian People’s Party), but very soon withdrew again:

“Afterwards I was angry with myself, because I had been stupid enough to do this for the state; I had a different concept then, that politics did not need the power of its party but should serve the state, that they’d say: Wait, that is what we have to do, that is what we can do, that’s how much it costs, can we afford it, can we not afford it, end of story. That would have been my idea for the party, but not that they are only interested in increasing their power and in getting their people into positions here and there, and putting through their party interests, no matter which effect this has. (...) Well, and then I asked myself, why I had been such an idiot to risk all of this and this is why I am embarrassed about it today, that I was so stupid, but after all one does have different attitudes with 22 or 23 than with 86.”

⁵¹ PF Josef Hemetsberger, TNA HS9/691/2 and PF Hans Prager.

⁵² It has yet to be found out whether Fuchs was brought to trial before a British military court. According to his wife he died a couple of years ago.

Additionally, there were conflicts with former National Socialists in his home town who publicly insulted him as a “traitor”, whom he defied toughly. When the *Volksgerichtsprozess* (lawsuit) was prepared against Sanitzer, Hemetsberger did not want to face the torturer.⁵³ If he had been able to lay his hands on Sanitzer, he would have done the same things to him that he had had to endure. Previously, Hemetsberger had already had negative experiences as a witness in a *Volksgerichtsprozess*:

“(...) and then the judge talked to me so stupidly that I said: ‘Your Honour, am I charged or here as a witness?’ Then he said: ‘If you get insolent, I’ll lock you up.’ Then I said: ‘That’s what I’m used to, that wouldn’t be anything new for me’, and then he sent me away. Then I said: ‘I don’t need to stand here and be sent up (...) by them.’”



Viennese “Schlurfs”

Before he was drafted for the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (*Reich* Labour Service, *RAD*) Hans Prager belonged to a group of unruly youths (the so-called “Schlurfs”) in the Viennese district of Favoriten, who were constantly involved in violent conflicts with the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth). Once, the *SS* publicly shaved his head in a tavern. Also at the *RAD* and the *Wehrmacht* Prager lacked discipline in the eyes of his superiors, which led to a number of curfews. Like Hemetsberger he escaped through desertion. For Hans Prager, who was 19 years old when he was turned over to the *Gestapo*, the imprisonment by the *Gestapo* and in the concentration camp have left indelible physical but especially mental scars. For years he has suffered from severe nightmares followed by amnesia and fear neuroses. Although these have been diagnosed by specialists, this did not seem sufficient for the authorities responsible for the payment of victim benefits. He can barely remember detailed events in Mauthausen or during his time in *Gestapo* arrest:

“Could this be a kind of protection? Because I have suffered for years from awful dreams and some of it is coming back again; it might even be your fault that it is all somehow stirred up at the moment.”

His social environment declared Prager “stupid” for taking part in the parachute mission. For a long time he used to block all questions from relatives; only his grandchildren’s interest has moved him to sometimes tell his story.

Hans Prager’s and Josef Hemetsberger’s experiences demonstrate under which external pressures young men had to move and assert themselves during the war, against the background of unfathomable strategies of political exile and between rigid state and terrorist apparatuses – who, without any “individual” institutional support (like organised resistance groups or an acknowledged exile), left the allegiance of the NS regime. In this precarious

⁵³ This is why all references to Duval and the radio game with Emil Fuchs are missing from the trial against Sanitzer, *WStLA, LG für Strafsachen Wien, Vg11Vr586/47*.

institutional interstice liberation might be tangible for some time; what was more likely, though, especially in this area of resistance connected with the secret service, was that one lost all kinds of securities, particularly as not infrequently personal friendships and mutual trust turned into betrayal. The experience of “extreme loneliness” and a “constant feeling of abandonment”, which Jean Amery⁵⁴ describes as a consequence of the tortures, were very unlikely to be lifted or mitigated by gestures of acknowledgement in post-war Austria, especially not for resistance fighters, who had deserted and worked in connection with an Allied Force. Soon internal political conflicts were characterised by a rhetoric which accused the political opponent – even in the own party – of being/having been an “agent” for a foreign power.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ AMERY (2004): pp. 46-73.

⁵⁵ Cf. RATHKOLB (1985): pp. 295-317 and p. 309. This assessment is based on an analysis of various party-biased newspapers in the post-war period.