



Episode 711, Story 1: Stalag 17 Portrait

Eduardo: Our first story looks at a portrait made by an American POW in a World War Two German prison camp. 1943, as American air attacks against Germany increase; the Nazis move the growing number of captured American airmen into prisoner of war camps, called Stalags. Over 4,000 airmen ended up in Stalag 17-b, just outside of Krems, Austria, in barracks made for 240 men. How did these men survive the deprivation and hardships of one of the most infamous prisoner of war camps of the Nazi regime? 65 years after her father George Silva became a prisoner of war, Gloria Mack of Tempe, Arizona has this portrait of him drawn by another POW while they were both prisoners in Stalag 17-b.

Gloria: I thought what a beautiful thing to come out of the middle of a prison camp.

Eduardo: Hi, I'm Eduardo Pagan from History Detectives.

Gloria: Oh, it's nice to meet you.

Eduardo: It's nice to meet you, too!

Gloria: Come on in.

Eduardo: Thank you. I'M curious to see Gloria's sketch, and hear her father's story. It's a beautiful portrait. When was this portrait drawn?

Gloria: It was drawn in 1944.



Eduardo: How did you learn about this story of how he got this portrait?

Gloria: Because of this little story on the back. It says, "Print from an original portrait done in May of 1944 by Gil Rhoden. We were POW's in Stalag 17 at Krems, Austria. Gil agreed to do my portrait in exchange for two onions and a small potato."

Eduardo: And I see that...that that is his name down here in the corner.

Gloria: Yes. Rhoden.

Eduardo: Rhoden. Is that a photograph of your father?

Gloria: Yes, it is.

Eduardo: Before he was a prisoner?

Gloria: He's a very handsome guy.

Eduardo: He is a handsome guy. What would you like me to find out for you?

Gloria: I would like to find out what happened to Gil Rhoden. If he made it out of camp. If he went on to become an artist. What has happened?

Eduardo: Okay. I'll see what I can do. Can I take this with me?



Gloria: Yes, you can.

Eduardo: All right, thank you very much.

Gloria: You're welcome.

Eduardo: Let's take a moment to look at what we've got here. We have on the lower right his name, Rhoden... I'm a little skeptical that the drawing is what the note states. He doesn't look quite like I would imagine a POW to look. He appears to be well fed, and happy and quite well groomed. So I'm gonna have to find out more information about that. I'm gonna have to talk to George. Gloria's father, George Silva, lives in Cupertino, California. Gloria says her dad never talked about the war while she was growing up, but he's willing to meet me. George, is this you?

George: Yes, it is.

Eduardo: Did you look this nice, as a prisoner of war?

George: No. I don't think so. This...this fella was amazing. I don't think I had my hair like that. Parted. And also, I didn't have the clothes on that he pictures there. I had what I was shot down in.

Eduardo: George Silva was the radio man on a b17 flying fortress. He and his crew were wearing flight suits during their mission to Chatuedun, France on March 28th, 1944. They had just bombed a German fighter base when they were attacked by anti-aircraft fire.



George: The first shell hit the nose, and then the second one hit between number three and four engines and blew the wing off. And the parachute went round and round and round, faster and faster.

Eduardo: So, you were inside that plane?

George: Yeah. The people above us were taking pictures.

Eduardo: This is amazing. Can you tell me what...what was going through your mind?

George: My main thought was I was going to die in that plane. I said my goodbyes to the family.

Eduardo: The plane broke apart, catapulting George into the sky...alone with a parachute he had no idea how to use.

George: I'd seen a movie with John Wayne, the paratroopers steered their parachutes by pulling ripcords. I did that, and the thing collapsed. And I landed right by the antiaircraft battery that shot us down. So, I was an immediate prisoner, so I didn't get any chance to do anything else.

Eduardo: How many men were onboard?

George: Ten.

Eduardo: Ten. And only...?



George: Only three of us.

Eduardo: Three survived. The airmen had thought they would fight or die trying. They hadn't trained to use a parachute, nor what to do when captured. George ended up a prisoner at Stalag 17-b. What kind of food would they give you?

George: Mostly it was rutabagas. And there was very thin soup, gruel. You each got a scoopful. And once in awhile, you got, uh, bread. Now, bread...uh, was made with a lot of sawdust in it.

Eduardo: George takes out the logbook that the Red Cross gave him and the other us POWs at the camp. In books such as these, they collected poems, and honored the men on their planes. And, I take it these were the men that didn't survive?

George: Yes.

Eduardo: ... and even pressed a rare flower or two. Then George shows me what had been even more valuable than food. What is this that's covering the sketch?

George: I asked the artist how can I keep that from being erased if it's just pencil. And he said, well, cover it with toilet tissue. And, the only toilet tissue we had was the German toilet tissue. So I did, and there it is.

Eduardo: So this is seventy year old...



George: Toilet tissue. [laughs]

Eduardo: POW issued toilet tissue. [chuckles]

George: Toilet tissue.

Eduardo: That is amazing. Prisoners were segregated by nationality into neighboring barracks, separated by barbed wire. An American POW could attempt a trade with an adjacent Russian soldier, but it required some ingenuity. George put four cigarettes in a sock with a rock, threw it over the wire, and waited for a Russian POW to throw it back. So the sock comes over. You open it up and you find two onions and a potato. Were you disappointed?

George: No. I thought, boy, I'm gonna have a feast. A young man came through and he says, I'm an artist from New York. And he says I'll do anybody's portrait in pencil, for...food. I thought, I'll eat the small potato and that onion, and I'm still gonna be hungry. And I won't have anything to show for it. But if I have him make my picture I can look at it and say, that's me.

Eduardo: So did you know Gil Rhoden?

George: No, I didn't. It's just like he disappeared, you know. He came two days and did my picture. All he ever said to me was, stay still. So when he got through, he got his two little onions and potato and...and out he went.

Eduardo: So you never had a chance to get to know him at all.



George: I never did.

Eduardo: Well George, thank you for sharing your experiences with me...I would like to take this with me to see what I can find out about the artist, may I do so?

George: You may.

Eduardo: It's hard to believe George was on that plane. Meeting him was a sobering reminder of what these men endured in their service. I get started with my search, but I'm not having much luck. I still can't find where Gil Rhoden is. I'm searching the National Archive's World War Two Army enlistment records. No Gil Rhoden. Maybe if I learned more about Stalag 17-b, I could figure out another way to find him. Here's a highly regarded account of a POW's stay there. It's a book called "*The Flame Keepers*." It was written by Ned Handy, a former POW, and Kemp Battle, who is an author and history consultant. I'm in Boston to talk to ex-POW, Ned Handy, who's now 87. He's with his co-author, Kemp Battle. Tell me about life as a prisoner. What would you do to pass the time of day?

Ned: A lot of time was spent just keeping alive.

Eduardo: During winter they fought off frost bite, and their daily enemy was hunger. Ned, Kemp, this is the log that George has shared with us.

Ned: Very few people in Stalag 17 had access to pencil and paper. Or even the time to keep a log. So this is a treasure. A rare one.



Eduardo: Because of the Geneva Conventions, Americans had some amenities. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, didn't sign the conventions.

Kemp: The Russian, Slavic side of Stalag 17 was a hellhole of unimaginable proportion.

Eduardo: The war between the Soviet Union and Germany was the bloodiest theater of World War Two, killing over 30 million people. Sixty percent of all Soviet POWs died in German camps.

Ned: They hated the Russians. And the Russians hated them. And so they starved them. You'd see Russian prisoners who were alive, carrying a dead prisoner. And they just dumped these guys in the...in the pit.

Eduardo: The German airmen who guarded the Americans saw them as their equals. So they allowed the Americans to organize themselves.

Ned: The Germans allowed us to elect our leader every six months, and elect our barracks chiefs.

Eduardo: They called themselves "Kriegies," short for the German word, "Kriegsgefangen" meaning prisoner of war. Each Kriegie had likely just survived a crash that had killed many or most of his crew. He was probably injured, hungry, and barely 20 or 21. Yet under these conditions, Kriegies managed to create a democracy. And they organized a cultural life within the camps. This is a playbill from Christmas Eve. Christmas carols, a choir and orchestra rendition of the messiah.



Ned: I did hear about the chapel, only because some guys got me to go with them that Christmas eve of 1944. That was a great experience for me.

Kemp: These young men were in a place where forgetting who they were was very easy. They were cut off from everything they knew. And so, drawing pictures, putting on plays, writing poems were all strong statements of defiance in its own way, against their captors.

Eduardo: Kemp says drawing George as a hale and hearty young man with a smile on his face was an act of imagination, and of hope. It sounds like they were asserting their humanity in a very dehumanizing process.

Kemp: It's saying, I know who I am. I'm an artist. I'm not a POW.

Eduardo: We're lucky to have this book at all. At the end of the war, as the Russians advanced along the brutal Eastern Front, the Germans told everyone at the camp it was time to go.

Ned: We're taking you out of here. They didn't say where we were going. But, whatever you can carry.

Eduardo: On April 8th, 1945, they forced the prisoners to march west, toward the Americans. After almost a month with little food and no shelter, on May 3rd, General Patton's men found the POWs, among them, Ned and George and, perhaps, Gil Rhoden. George and a few others were carrying their logbooks.

Kemp: How they managed to survive, to be here for us now, is a miracle.



Eduardo: Ned, did you ever know Gil Rhoden?

Ned: I did not. He was, obviously, in some other barracks. Even if he'd been in my barracks I wouldn't have known him.

Kemp: Guys in such close proximity might not know each other. And one Kriegie's comment to me was, well, how often have you walked through your best friend's bedroom? And, for him and for the Kriegies, that space was so private. It was the only private space they had.

Eduardo: We haven't been able to find Gil Rhoden. Do you have any recommendations of where we could look?

Ned: A website. POW news.

Eduardo: Alright, George told me that he was in barrack 31a. So I scroll down to barrack 31a...and there he is. George A. Silva. Barrack 31a. While I'm in barrack 31a, let me look and see if I can find Gil Rhoden. Well, here's a Rhoden right here. But, it's a Harold Rhoden. It's not Gil. I wonder if George got the name wrong. I return to the online site of the National Archives, and under "POW" there is a Harold Rhoden. He was a sergeant in the 466th, and he was captured on April 8th, 1944. Years after the war, a Harold Rhoden in Los Angeles became a high profile lawyer and he wrote a book, "*High Stakes, the Gamble for Howard Hughes's Will*." This Rhoden is an author, not an artist. But the author's bio note says... "Harold Rhoden was born in Chicago. During World War Two he was a b-24 tail gunner. Shot down in 1944, he spent thirteen months as a prisoner of war in Germany." Then I find some sad news...Harold Rhoden's obituary.



Harold Rhoden died in a plane crash in 1989 along with his wife and daughter. He was survived by three sons, and one of them, Fletcher was living in Los Angeles at the time. And he still is. I've come to Los Angeles to see if Fletcher can confirm whether his father, Harold Rhoden, was also our artist. And there on Fletcher's wall, is a work by Harold Rhoden.

Fletcher: This is a painting of a Paris street, uh, after a rainy evening. And it's one of our favorite paintings. I love the color. Here's another one, an example of my father's work in portraiture. This is, of course, Tchaikovsky. Here you can really see my father's skill at bringing a face to life.

Eduardo: It's very evocative, and I see right down here his signature.

Fletcher: That's his signature. Usually paintings, he signed his name, Harold, but with his pencil sketches rarely.

Eduardo: George's sketch was done in pencil, but these two signatures look nearly identical.

Fletcher, I'd like to show you a sketch that we've been investigating that we believe might have been drawn by your father, but I'd like to have your reaction to it.

Fletcher: Of course.

Eduardo: Here it is. I can't wait to share this with Gloria and George! Gloria, George... we could not find Gil Rhoden. And it's, in fact, because there was no Gil Rhoden.

Gloria: oh!



George: Really?!

Eduardo: We were able to find in your barrack George Silva. In fact, there you are. But, if you look a little bit higher up...Rhoden, Harold. 31a. He was in your same barrack.

Gloria: Wow!

Eduardo: So the question remains...was Harold Rhoden the man who drew this sketch? Here it is.

Fletcher: Yeah, that's my father's work. No question.

Eduardo: Take a look down here...where he signed his work. Does that look like your father's signature?

Fletcher: It is my father's signature. It is, without a question. It's nice to see this. It's a little like... it's a little like shaking my father's hand again in a way... it's nice to see this.

Eduardo: there is no doubt that Harold Rhoden was the artist who drew...

George: who drew my...

Eduardo: ...your portrait. I was able to track him after the war. I tell Gloria and George about Harold, his life after the war, and some of the details of his service. In fact, he was shot down just two weeks after you were shot down.



Gloria: I'll be darned.

George: I can't believe it!

Eduardo: I have another surprise for you.

Gloria: Huh?

Eduardo: Hold on.

Gloria: Ok.

Eduardo: I would like you to meet Fletcher Rhoden.

Fletcher: Hello.

Gloria: Ohh!

Fletcher: George.

Eduardo: The son of Harold Rhoden.

Fletcher: Gloria, hello. Very nice to meet you.



Gloria: Hi!

Fletcher: Very nice to make your acquaintance.

Gloria: Oh, it's so good to meet you.

George: Good Christ, I've been living with this Gil Rhoden for sixty years.

Gloria: Yeah.

Fletcher: How are ya. Thank you for having me.

George: God.

Fletcher: Very nice to meet you.

George: God.

Fletcher: You look just like your picture.

George: Oh, thank you.

Fletcher: You haven't aged a bit.

Gloria: Ohh.



George: Oh, I know.

Gloria: Oh, it's so great.

George: God, I can't believe it.

Gloria: This is wonderful.

Fletcher: This was so exciting for me to hear about this, that you had a picture of my father and that you knew my dad back in the day.

George: God, I wish I... I wished that...I'd have given anything if I could see him again, you know.

Fletcher: Me too.

Gloria: Ohh.

Fletcher: George, me too.

George: I know. I know.

Fletcher: But, you know maybe the next best thing is gonna be this picture that I drew of my father.



Gloria: Ohh!

George: Oh, oh.

Fletcher: From back in the days of your time with him...

Gloria: Ohh.

Fletcher: In the POW camp.

George: Oh, god.

Fletcher: Maybe that inspires some memories.

George: God, that's super.

Gloria: Oh, that's...

Eduardo: George, is this Harold Rhoden the man...

George: Yes, it is.

Eduardo: ...who drew your portrait?

George: Yes, it is.



Gloria: Oh, my god.

George: That's him alright. Oh, god, that sixty some years I've been wondering about that man.

Fletcher: Well, I'd like to tell you all about him.

George: Well, I... I'd like to listen.

Eduardo: These airmen made the D-Day invasion possible by bombing nearby strongholds, knowing that they were more likely to die than to return home. And when they were captured, at their most desperate and isolated moment, they created a community and a civilization that allowed them to continue the fight. A play or a sketch was an act of defiance, and defiance itself was a work of art.

George: I'll never forget this day. Never.