

# POW 1

Another night fell upon Stalag Luft POW Camp. The cold and hunger was ever present and all-consuming due to the wretched conditions, relentless cruelty and suffering endured by those incarcerated. These once young, strong, idealistic men were left as shells of their former selves.

Almost as if in defiance of the dark and miserable surroundings, the melodic music of a violin, carried on the wind, filling the night air. The music came from the hands of a young Tipperary man, Lawrence Slattery, who holds the inauspicious title of being the first and longest serving POW in the second World War. Lawrence was my great grand uncle.

Throughout his childhood he displayed an immense talent for the violin. He went from playing before the famous musicians, John McCormack and Fritz Kreisler, at age eleven, to years later obtaining that same violin from his youth which he used throughout his six years of imprisonment. Larry created a camp orchestra in every camp he to which he was transferred. He knowingly traded his musical expertise with his fellow prisoners in exchange for their language skills, leading him to speak eight languages fluently.

Larry's story began when he was deployed as a gunner on the RAF's first mission. The following day war was declared. His plane, shot down by German enemies, was hurled into water, leaving Larry with a broken jaw, broken ankle, and destroying his face. When captured, the Germans saw his injured condition as a perfect opportunity for effective propaganda. They offered Larry a job to work for the 'German Ministry of Propaganda.' Their aim was to flaunt the dexterity of their doctors as they reconstructed his face. Being Irish, they had more regard for him, and allowed him to request one item to be sent over to him from his home in Tipperary. Larry wished for his violin, which they agreed to acquire. The Germans demanded that Larry speak positively on the radio about his treatment as a prisoner of war. Larry understood what the German motive was, he knew he was being used as a propaganda puppet and refused to cooperate. This led to any associated privileges being revoked.

The violin sustained him throughout his years in camps. Word got through from the Red Cross that his first nephew, my grandfather, also named 'Lawrence' had been born. To celebrate his birth he composed a piece of music. This piece of music was played on the BBC, honouring Larry's talent on the violin and his title as POW 1.

After six long years of suffering, finally, the day of liberation came in 1945. Captive in the infamous Stalag Luft POW camp, Larry remembers the moment himself and the other prisoners were freed by Allied troops. Together they burst through the gates, free at last. Their starving bodies smelled meat from the distance, hoping for an

abattoir or any food they eagerly ran towards the smell. Aghast, they ran into the centre of a concentration camp. The smell was not food, but the dead bodies of the Genocide victims. After experiencing this Larry was traumatised and said "he was never the same."

Following the war due to Larry's language skills, the Red Cross hired him to work as a translator in the Nuremberg Trials. Whilst in Germany he fell in love with a young lady from Belgium. They were set to marry but sadly the engagement ended when she suddenly died, at the age of twenty one. Larry was truly heartbroken. My grandmother has the love letters they wrote to each other. Written in French and German they are hard to interpret, except for one letter, Larry wrote in English "You are my biggest love in the world! I cannot forget you!" Reading and holding the crinkled creased letters was very moving for me, especially as I knew the tragic outcome. These love letters were written by two people that experienced and witnessed things I can barely comprehend, yet their love and hopes are timeless, just as if they were written today.

Years later he moved to London, and married. He worked for the British Civil Service and led their Orchestra and also played for the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Larry and his wife had two children together. He faced huge misery throughout his life, yet this didn't change his character as my grandmother tells me he was always kind and a true gentleman.

Mentally and physically the effects of the camp had an impact on his health, he sadly passed away in 1972 due to kidney damage. Nowadays Larry's legacy lives on to inspire and help young people. The 'Larry Slattery Memorial Fund' founded by Calton Younger, former POW and author of the famous book 'Ireland's Civil War.' It was created to help talented young musicians wishing to follow a career in music, whose financial circumstances make it impossible without any additional support.

**By Grace de Bhál**