

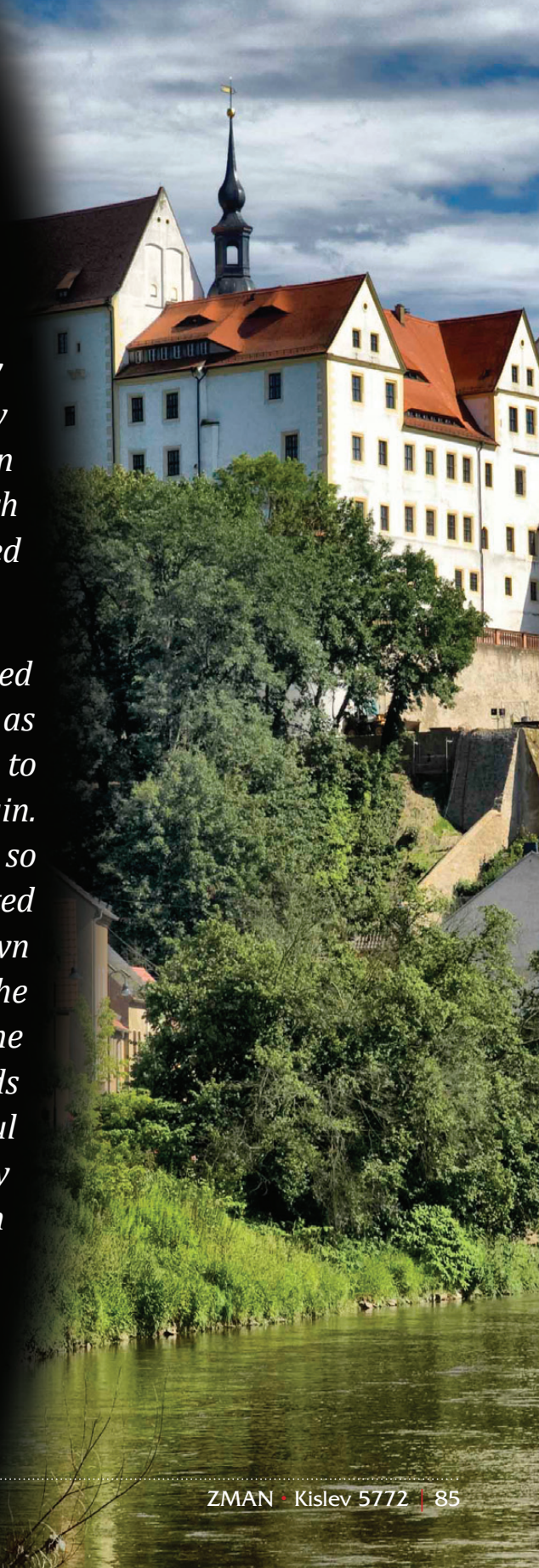
# *Colditz Castle*

*The Highest Security Prison  
in Nazi Germany—With the  
Highest Escape Record!*

*- Chaim Rivkin*

*The prisoners of war considered at highest risk of trying to escape were interned by Nazi Germany in its maximum security prison, the historical prison at Colditz Castle, which military officials declared escape-proof.*

*Allied POWs proved otherwise, however, as dozens of them managed to break free, time and again. Their ingenious ideas were so original that the exasperated Germans created their own museum to honor them. The concentration of some of the Allied armies' best minds proved more powerful than all the security arrangements the German command could muster.*



The two British pilots poured over their plans day and night, carefully honing each and every detail. They drew careful diagrams, erasing and redrawing constantly to make sure everything was in place. When they were sure everything was right, it was time to begin construction of their glider.

All this went on in Germany's most closely guarded maximum security prison where the most dangerous of the captive Allied officers were kept. Together the two British pilots worked out their daring escape plan and set up their aviation factory.

By erecting a false wall, the two prisoners created a small area beyond the view of the guards where they could go about their work unhindered. They even managed to install an electrical alarm system to notify them if the German guards came too close! They used wooden drawers, wooden slats taken from the beds, blankets and bedding, pieces of wire, food, even mud mixed with dust from the attic and anything else they could lay hands on to assemble their improvised flying machine.

After months of hard work, the wings were in place and they even came up with an invention to provide the necessary power to launch the glider through a window and off the runway they had created by lining up tables on the roof of the prison.

Of all the methods for escaping, these two decided on one that had never yet been tried before: to fly out of prison! But this was only one of dozens of ingenious methods that the desperate prisoners used to escape from Colditz Castle, making it the most famous POW internment center of World War II.

## Colditz Castle

Colditz is a village in the heart of Germany, just 30 miles from the famous trade center in Leipzig. Some 900 years ago, then Germanic King Heinrich III built a castle on the peak of a mountain in Colditz. The site reveals a stunning panorama of greenery

dropping down in all directions and offers a breathtaking view, making it particularly well-chosen to host the elaborate medieval palace.

For the next centuries the palace served as a retreat for Germany's monarchs. After fire broke out in 1504, damaging much of the palace, it underwent extensive renovation and expansion. Later the extensions continued, adding hundreds of additional rooms as well as extensive underground cellars in new wings added to the original palace. The beauty and majesty of the castle increased considerably.

In 1829 the castle was converted to serve as a hospice for wealthy clients who suffered from terminal diseases such as tuberculosis or from mental illness. During World War I the castle was used for the first time to imprison captured soldiers. With the advent of the National Socialist Party in 1933, Hitler designated the castle as an internment center for "unwanted elements" including Communists, Jews and social undesirables.

With the outbreak of the war in the autumn of 1939, though, the castle began to be used to house the most dangerous war captives, such as captured Allied soldiers and officers.

Colditz Castle was ideally situated for the purpose, perched 250 feet atop a stony mountainside and a river running at its feet. In addition, the castle was built with seven-foot thick stone walls, making it impossible to break out. Even if someone managed to pierce the castle's defenses and make his way outside, he would find himself in the heart of enemy territory, 400 miles from the nearest border.

Although the castle makes a fabulous impression on observers who view it from outside, the moment the unlucky captives caught their first glimpse of its interior, their hearts stopped beating. It incorporates a huge open courtyard surrounded by five-story structures on all sides, and with 200 guards manning the entire area, there was little chance of finding a way to escape.

Within the castle's structures are long, winding corridors connecting the hundreds of rooms, each housing from 6 to 10 prisoners. The moment night begins to fall, the entire area is lit up by bright spotlights allowing the guards to see any movement taking place anywhere in the castle's vicinity.

Monolithic as the castle may sound, however, Colditz was never designed to hold men against their will, and even after its doorways and windows were outfitted with iron bars, the castle's winding corridors and tunnels were actually a boon to the prisoners who sought a means to escape. As a German official would later admit, "We will certainly never choose such an unfit location to hold prisoners again."

The officers who were imprisoned there, most of whom had already escaped or at least attempted to do so from other prisons, had no intention of awaiting until the end of the war to be released. As loyal soldiers, they saw it as their duty to find a way to return to their army and continue fighting the enemy.

Probably because Colditz Castle was under the jurisdiction of the Wehrmacht (the German army), not the SS, the Geneva Conventions were followed in the prison. As such, prisoners caught while trying to escape were moved to solitary confinement, rather than being summarily shot in the traditional Nazi fashion.

In keeping with its maximum security status, the Germans maintained a schedule of three roll calls every day (later they added a fourth). Each prisoner's number was called and matched to those standing at attention so that if anyone was missing the authorities would know of it. If a prisoner was missing, every police station within 25 miles would be notified at once. Often the Hitler Youth were called out to help in the search for missing prisoners.

But in Colditz Castle the captives found a way around every problem. One British lieutenant made it his business to disrupt the roll call regularly, even when nobody was trying to escape. That way the guards would

not be overly suspicious when a prisoner was indeed missing. That lieutenant was tried in a German military court no less than five times and punished with a total of 415 days of solitary confinement... but never relented from his efforts whenever possible.

Roll call was a crucial procedure that could aid or disturb any escape plans. If the



Royal symbols at one of the entrances to the ancient castle.



Remains of the castle's former beauty.