INTRODUCTION TO

STALAG 17

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I

LIKE VLADIMIR NABOKOV, another brilliant exile and outsider, the cosmopolitan and urbane Billy Wilder had a highly idiosyncratic view of the radically different culture he encountered in America. His screenplays, like Nabokov's novels, have a fresh idiom and coruscating style. In a fifty-year career Wilder has shown astonishing versatility—and real genius—as both coauthor and director (beginning in 1943) of films about war, murder, alcoholism, Hollywood, sensational journalism, prison camps, trials and aviation, as well as of dazzling romantic comedies like *Some Like It Hot* and bittersweet love stories like *The Apartment*. His last film was *Buddy Buddy* (1981). He was also able to inspire great performances from previously undistinguished actors: Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*, William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard*. Three years later Holden won an Oscar for best actor in *Stalag 17* (1953). Wilder himself was nominated for twenty-one Academy Awards and won six.

Wilder was born in 1906 in Sucha (thirty miles south of Kraków) in Polish Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He grew up in a decadent, corrupt society torn by class conflicts and unstable institutions. As a child he witnessed the collapse of the empire after World War I and acquired a sardonic view of the frailty of personal relations. The son of a hotelier and small-time businessman, he briefly studied law at the University of Vienna, then became a newspaper reporter, first

in Vienna and later in Berlin, where he supplemented his income by working as a dance-partner and gigolo. With Robert Siodmak and Fred Zinnemann, he made the German documentary *People on Sunday* (1929). When Hitler came to power in 1933, Wilder fled to Paris and directed his first feature film, *Mauvaise Graine* (*Bad Seed*), with Danielle Darrieux. He reached Hollywood in 1934, and roomed with a fellow exile, Peter Lorre.

Wilder arrived in America with no knowledge of English apart from some obscenities and snatches of popular songs. He learned the new language in the same practical way as the Austrian-born director Fritz Lang. "I read a lot of newspapers," Lang recalled, "and I read comic strips—from which I learned a lot. I said to myself, if an audience—year in, year out—reads so many comic strips, there must be something interesting in them. And I found them very interesting. I got . . . an insight into the American character, into American humour; and I learned slang. I drove around in the country and tried to speak with everybody. I spoke with every cab driver, every gas station attendant—and I looked at films."[1]

Explaining his need for a coauthor, Wilder said: "I started the idea of collaborating when I first arrived in America, because I could not speak the language. I needed somebody who was responsible, who had some idea of how a picture is constructed. Then I found out that it's *nice* to have a collaborator—you're not writing into a vacuum, especially if he's sensitive and ambitious to create a product of some value."[2] After several years of screenwriting hackwork—*Music in the Air*, *Lottery Lover*, *Champagne Waltz*—his career took off in 1938 when he began his long and fruitful collaboration with Charles Brackett. They began with witty and intelligent movies like *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, *Ninotchka*, and *Ball of Fire* and ended with their greatest film, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

Between his long-term partnerships with Brackett and I. A. L. Diamond, Wilder wrote *Stalag 17* with Edwin Blum, an experienced screenwriter and friend with whom he often played tennis and bridge. Though their collaboration was successful and the film made $10 million the first year, Blum found the experience agonizing. Blum said that he regarded himself as "little more than [Wilder's] butler. It was his screen-

play. My name is on the credits but I don't think of it as mine. Oh, I made important contributions, especially in developing Sefton. When you work with Billy he rules you a thousand percent. I couldn't take insults. I wouldn't work with him on another picture. I know he is a man that the more he likes you, the more sarcastic he gets, but I couldn't take it." Twenty-five years later, and still licking his wounds, Blum recalled Wilder's caustic remark: "I have this cretin collaborating with me. Listen to the rotten words he uses. . . . That is not good enough, Eddie. When I had Charlie Brackett as my partner, he came up with exquisite words. . . . He was literate. That is the kind of writer I was working with. A literate man. Not an ignoramus like you."[3]

Emphasizing the roles he could play while directing, Wilder said: "I can become a masochist. I can become the Marquis de Sade. I can become a midwife. I can become Otto Preminger. I can do all sorts of things. It depends on what will work on actors."[4] Wilder planned all the camera shots while writing the script, and never let the actors deviate from his text. Just as he had used an Austrian director, Erich von Stroheim, in *Sunset Boulevard*, so he cast another Austrian director, the Jewish Otto Preminger, in the role of the camp Kommandant, Colonel von Scherbach, in *Stalag 17*.

Wilder joked, "I have to be nice to Preminger because I still have relatives in Germany,"[5] but kept the upper hand in their film. "He always forgot his lines," Wilder recalled. "He was very strict when he was a director, but he himself . . . [h]e said, 'Forgive me, I'm a little rusty,' and in the evening he always sent you three pounds of caviar. Very generous."[6] In the film von Scherbach wears a luxurious fur collar on his immaculate uniform, puts on high boots so he can click his heels when talking on the phone to Berlin, and walks on specially laid planks while everyone else steps through the mud. At the end of the picture, however, he too wades through the mud and discovers that his spy has been killed.

The basis of the film, Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski's play, *Stalag 17*, was directed by José Ferrer and opened on Broadway in May 1951. John Ericson played Sefton, while Robert Strauss (Animal) and Harvey Lembeck (Shapiro) appeared in both the play and the film. Wilder developed the play and made it more interesting in every way.

In the play the Kommandant issues orders but never appears; in the film Wilder makes him one of the most important characters. The first attempt to escape and the killing of Manfredi and Johnson, as well as the harsh interrogation of Dunbar, take place offstage in the play but are dramatized in the film. Taking advantage of film's ability to focus on tiny objects in a close-up, Wilder has Schulz and Price leave their notes in a hollow chess piece rather than under a loose brick. The prisoners' insult, "Drop dead," becomes the comic "Droppen Sie dead." Dunbar is an officer, rather than a sergeant-major, to intensify his conflict with Sefton. Wilder, in fact, invented the most memorable aspects of the film: Sefton's mouse race, his private schnapps distillery, and his telescope-observatory to watch the bathhouse of the female Russian prisoners. "You couldn't catch much through that steam," the narrator observes, "but believe you me, after two years in that camp just the idea what was behind that steam sure spruced up your voltage." Wilder also thought up the telltale light cord, as well as Sefton's trunk of luxury goods, his bets against prisoners who try to escape, and his great exit line.

Wilder's conclusion is also superior to the play's. In the stage version, as Hoffy says, Dunbar "came back to the barracks to pick up his gear so we slipped his guard a doped-up drink and sneaked Dunbar out of the barracks."[7] In the film, however, Dunbar is snatched from his SS guards when the prisoners explode a smoke bomb made from thousands of ping pong balls. And Price is unmasked by Sefton, who uses Price to help Dunbar escape.

The film was also influenced by Jean Renoir's *Grande Illusion* (1937). In both pictures prisoners of war dig a tunnel to escape, desperately try to amuse themselves and avoid boredom, and maintain a light-hearted attitude in order to survive. They put on a show (some dressed in women's clothes) and sing a patriotic song to keep up their spirits. They are friendly with the German guard, who is rather comic in his rigid militarism, and even manage to control him. And the intravenous line that hangs down after Boeldieu's death inspired the looped and hanging light cord in *Stalag 17*.

Wilder's film, however, is quite different from Renoir's humanistic, antiwar expression of international brotherhood. He transforms the chi-

valric self-sacrifice of the officer class into a bitter drama of egoism and betrayal. The prisoners become divided among themselves, and their traditional camaraderie is destroyed. Instead of uniting against their oppressors—as in classic prisoner of war pictures like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *The Great Escape* (1963)—the men find their personal and class conflicts accentuated rather than transcended in the camp. In the end the prisoners succeed, not because of their superior values, but because of Sefton's cold intelligence.

II

The film opens as armed German guards walk along a high barbed-wire fence with fierce-looking dogs. Stalag 17 (short for *Stamm Lager*, or "prison camp") is located near the Danube in Austria and filled with sergeants in the American air force. The time is Christmas week 1944, and on the secret radio the prisoners hear accounts of the Battle of the Bulge—the last great German offensive in World War II. The men in the harsh yet almost cozy-looking barracks are bored, tense, and nervous, resigned yet never hopeless. They have dug a tunnel and devised an elaborate escape. Two airmen plan to break out and travel to Krems, forty miles northwest of Vienna, along the river to Linz and Ulm, in southern Germany, then by train to Friedrichshafen on the north shore of Lake Constance and finally—as in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*—across the lake by rowboat to Switzerland. But the detailed plan fails and the men, shot while trying to escape, never get out of the camp. As von Scherbach insists: "Nobody has ever escaped from Stalag 17. Not alive, anyway."

Like *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*, *Stalag 17* is narrated by a voice-over. And there are other characteristic Wilder touches: Sefton keeps striking matches, like Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*, and an old Plymouth (which Wilder may have once owned) is repossessed in both *Sunset Boulevard* and (as Shapiro learns through letters from home) in *Stalag 17*.

After carefully calculating the odds, Sefton attracts hostility and suspicion by betting that the prisoners won't escape. Better dressed than all

the others, he wears boots, a hat, and gloves. He owns toilet articles, eats a precious fried egg for breakfast, and generously gives away the empty shells. After bribing the guards, he has sex with the Russian women and then boasts about it. He thrives in the camp while others are oppressed and defeated. His egoistic attitude—"This is everybody for himself. Dog eat dog"—is savagely Darwinian.

Sefton cynically yet realistically opposes all attempts to escape. Even if you succeeded and got all the way back to America, he says, the air force would simply "ship you to the Pacific and slap you in another plane. And you get shot down again and you wind up in a Japanese prison camp. That's if you're lucky! Well, I'm no escape artist! You can be the heroes." Even Animal, the dumbest guy in the barracks, thinks "Maybe the Krauts knew all about that tunnel all the time!" The prisoners suspect a spy in their midst, but as in a well-constructed murder mystery, the evidence points to the wrong man.

Both playwrights and screenwriters felt the need to lighten the serious theme with farcical comedy. Sig Ruman, known for his comic roles in the Marx brothers' *Night at the Opera* and Wilder's *Ninotchka*, plays Schulz, the German sergeant, in a jovial rather than menacing manner. He expresses the ambiguity of the prisoners' situation by joking with them and bustling about with Teutonic good humor. But as the liaison with the traitor, he is also responsible for betrayals and deaths. It is absurd, in both the play and the film, for the prisoners to ask Schulz to name the informer.

Animal's crudeness and slapstick comedy (when he falls in the mud) and his obsession with Betty Grable (a wartime sex symbol, now virtually forgotten) are tediously overdone. And the Christmas dance scene is far too long. Trzcinski, coauthor of the stage version, plays Triz in the film and is poignantly effective as the airman who desperately tries to believe his wife's story of finding a baby on their doorstep. He even knits a little garment for the infant. But the film loses intensity and interest whenever the focus strays from Sefton.

The arrival of the upper-class Lieutenant Dunbar deepens the themes of class conflict and personal betrayal, and sets up the final antagonism. While being transported to the prison camp Dunbar has

blown up an ammunition train in Frankfurt. Sefton, who knew and resented Dunbar in Boston and in training camp, is as hostile to the new hero as he is to the old prisoners. The tunnel and clandestine radio have already been discovered. So when Dunbar is seized by von Scherbach and accused of sabotage, the prisoners beat up Sefton—the obvious culprit—for ratting on Dunbar.

Sefton, the pariah, must discover the real spy in order to save himself. He notices that Price loops the light cord whenever he leaves a message in the black chess queen and that Schulz, after retrieving the message, unties the cord and lets it hang down and swing. Hiding in the emptied barracks, Sefton overhears Price telling Schulz, in German, how Dunbar blew up the train.

In a satisfying dramatic scene, Sefton tells the astonished prisoners that Price "lived in Cleveland, but when the war broke out he came back to the Fatherland like a good little Bundist. He spoke our lingo so they put him through spy school, gave him phony dogtags." In a neat parallel, Schulz, like Price, had also returned to Germany from America when the war broke out. The crucial question, as Sefton (but none of the others) perceives, is not so much *who* the traitor is, but "what do you do with him? You tip your mitt and the Jerries pull him out of here and plant him someplace else. . . . Or you kill him off and the Krauts turn around and kill off the whole barracks."

Since Price is a German, the horrible possibility of a traitor within, of "one American squealing on other Americans," is evaded. In the tightly constructed conclusion, Sefton devises a plan by which Price, acting as a decoy for Dunbar, enables the American to escape. Price has tin cans tied to his ankle just as Manfredi had a clothes bag tied to his, and just as the Germans shoot down the Americans in the beginning, so they kill their own spy at the end.

Sefton had said "I'm no escape artist" and bet against Dunbar's escape as he had once bet against Manfredi and Johnson's. But he now likes the odds and takes Price's place with Dunbar, though the lieutenant has been exhausted by von Scherbach's interrogation and then frozen by his long wait in the icy water tank. Before leaving, however, Sefton takes a last parting shot at his dim-witted companions by con-

temptuously exclaiming: "If I ever run into any of you bums on a street corner, just let's pretend we never met before. Understand?" He then succeeds, for the first time, in breaking out of the camp—alive.

Analyzing the development of Sefton's character, Wilder said: "He is the black marketeer in Stalag 17. He bet them cigarettes and whatever he could for self-aggrandizement, but then when the chips are down, you slowly change your opinion about him. You need that kind of twist. Suddenly you see that the guy they have beaten up because they think, as the audience does, that he is a shit . . . slowly, slowly he emerges as a superhero."[8] Trzcinski disliked the emphasis on Sefton's nastiness so much that he refused to speak to Wilder after the film was completed. But, as in all Wilder's best work, motives are mixed and morality is ambiguous. Focusing on the depravity of the group and on Sefton's moral isolation, François Truffaut emphasized the film's originality: "Sefton escapes to get away from the companions whom he despises rather than from a regime he has come to terms with and guards he's been able to bend to his needs. . . . For the first time in films the philosophy of the solitary man is elaborated; this film is an apologia for individualism."[9]

The final irony, Wilder later recalled, took place three years after the film was released: "I got a letter from the head of distribution saying, 'We've got good news. The Germans are crazy about *Stalag 17*. They would like to release it, but we have to make one little change: The spy that is hiding among them is not a German—make him a Pole.' And I just said: 'Fuck you, gentlemen. Haven't you got any shame? You ask me, who lost his family in Auschwitz, to do a mistake like this? Unless somebody apologizes, forget about my contract. Good-bye, Paramount.' Nobody apologized, and I left Paramount. But it remained the way it was in the American picture."[10]

NOTES

1. Quoted in Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 15.

2. Quoted in Kevin Lally, *Wilder Times: The Life of Billy Wilder* (New York: Holt, 1996), p. 416.

3. Quoted in Maurice Zolotow, *Billy Wilder in Hollywood* (New York: Putnam, 1977), pp. 181, 300–301.

4. Quoted in Jay Leyda, *Voices of Film Experience: 1894 to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p. 508.

5. Quoted in Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors* (1997; New York: Ballantine, 1998), p. 606.

6. Quoted in Lally, *Wilder Times*, p. 224.

7. Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski, *Stalag 17* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1951), p. 56.

8. Quoted in Lally, *Wilder Times*, p. 220.

9. François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (1978; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 163.

10. Quoted in Lally, *Wilder Times*, p. 226.