

# "It's Easy To Bluff Americans!"

Colliers Magazine — May 16, 1953

By UNTEROFFIZIER REINHOLD PABEL with BILL FAY

*Doubt it? Then read this astonishing adventure story by a captured German soldier who broke out of an Illinois prisoner-of-war camp almost eight years ago, married an American woman, started a successful business in Chicago, and might still be at large, if—*



Reinhold Pabel, as a noncom in the 115<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers of Hitler's First Army

Let us suppose for a moment that you are an ardent Communist living behind the Iron Curtain. You have been thoroughly trained in espionage and sabotage. You have learned to speak English with only a slight accent. One day your superior officer orders:

"You will proceed to Canada and cross into the United States. You will establish residence in Chicago and obtain a post-office-box address under the name of Joseph Brown. You will not under any circumstances communicate with anybody in this country or with personnel in our embassy or consulates in America. Instead, you will live as an ordinary American citizen. It should be relatively simple for you to establish a small mail-order business, preferably as a dealer in rare books. You will support yourself from this business indefinitely; it may be 10 or 20 years before you hear from us. When the time for action arrives, you will receive a personal letter containing coded orders.

"Then," your superior officer concludes, "you will carry out the acts of sabotage described in your orders."

If you were that hypothetical agent, do you think you could live in Chicago as Joseph Brown for the next 10 or 20 years without being caught?

When I asked an American friend that question recently, he commented: "The saboteur wouldn't have a chance. The FBI would grab him in less than a month." My friend may be right; I hope so. But I think a well-trained saboteur could slip into the United States and live here comfortably and undetected for an indefinite time. In fact, barring the outbreak of a war, I believe he could stay in this country long enough to collect Social Security benefits!

I make that statement on the basis of my own experience. I am a former noncommissioned officer of the 115<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers of the German First Army. On September 10, 1945, when I was twenty-nine, I escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp near Peoria, Illinois. For almost eight years after that, I lived openly in Chicago under the name of Phillip Brick.

As Phillip Brick, I washed dishes in restaurants, set pins in a bowling alley, clerked in a bookstore and worked in the circulation department of the Chicago Tribune while accumulating the \$450 it took to open my own bookstore, The Chicago Book Mart, at 1021 1/2 Argyle Street. As Phillip Brick, I courted and married my American wife. I have a ten-month-old son, Christopher Brick. Six months after I escaped, I filed my first American income-tax return, signed Phillip Brick; I have been filing them that way ever since. When, at 4:30 in the afternoon of last March night, eight FBI agents arrested me in the back room of my bookstore, I had been at liberty for almost eight years.

Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not reveal its investigative procedures, I believe my apprehension resulted from my continuous correspondence with my mother and sister in Hamburg, Germany—a calculated risk I felt compelled to take because they

desperately needed food and clothing, particularly in the days just after the war ended. I mailed them more than 150 packages, plus a letter a month, addressing the mail to a friend in Hamburg who acted as intermediary.

During all the time I lived as Phillip Brick, the FBI had the photograph and fingerprints of Reinhold Pabel on file. Moreover, a Wanted circular with the photograph of Reinhold Pabel was placed on the bulletin board of every post office in the United States. I used to see it regularly at one of the post offices where I picked up my mail.

### **Waitress Saw But Couldn't Believe**

Two years before I was recaptured, I met a woman who had known me as a dishwasher in 1946; she had been a waitress in the same restaurant. She remembered me and remarked: "Funny, Phillip; after you quit, one of the other waitresses saw the picture of a man who looked just like you on a circular in the post office. Of course, she knew it couldn't be you, but she said the resemblance was simply amazing.!"

I was constantly surprised at how easily I was able to assume a new identity in this country—and no questions asked. Only 10 days after my escape from prisoner-of-war camp, I walked into a Social Security Administration office in Chicago and applied for a Social Security number. The clerk who helped me to fill out an application blank asked: "What's your name?"

I thought fast. Phillip was a familiar name both in Europe and the United States and would match my slight accent. A last name? I cast my eyes about the office. The word BRICK stared at me in big black type from an advertisement on a calendar hanging on the wall.

"Phillip Brick, I said.

Once I obtained my Social Security number, I could go to work anywhere in the United States. Such absolute freedom of activity is permitted in few other nations. In Germany, a citizen must register with the government whenever he changes his address. Supervision is even stricter in Russia. If I had escaped from a Russian prisoner-of-war camp, I'm sure I would have been recaptured within a few days.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the United States adopt police-state methods. I know how Americans cherish their freedoms, and it would be presumptuous of me to suggest any limitations on them. However, I feel obliged to point out that the United States is peculiarly vulnerable to the threat of sabotage because of the American conception of personal liberty—and because of a willingness to take people at face value, which makes it easy to bluff Americans.

I believe the story of how Reinhold Pabel was able to live as Phillip Brick for years should give every American cause for grave concern. Here is my story:

My escape was scarcely as dramatic as some of the cloak-and-dagger fiction on the shelves of my bookstore. From January 2, 1945, until early September, 1945, I was held in prisoner-of-war camps at Camp Grant, Fort Sheridan and Camp Ellis, all in Illinois. During this period, I accumulated about \$15 in American money by selling my medals and war souvenirs to guards. I also bought a white sport shirt and a package of blue dye from a guard; I told him I wanted to color a pair of GI khaki pants for use in a play staged by a group of prisoners. After these purchases, I had \$10.20 left.

Early in September, 1945, I was transferred from Camp Ellis to Camp Washington, near Peoria. Washington was a small camp holding about 200 prisoners who were working in a corn cannery. I was assigned to the night shift.

On the morning of September 10<sup>th</sup>, after answering eight-o'clock roll call, I went to my tent and put on my white sport shirt and blue-dyed pants; then I strolled along the barbed-wire fence. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the guard in the sentry tower. When he turned his back, I ducked through the skimpy fence and into a clump of trees.

The prison stockade was about 50 yards from a highway and traffic was fairly heavy. Concealed from the camp by the trees, I started waving my thumb. Within two minutes, a farmer driving a truck picked me up. In those days, when tires were rationed and gasoline rationing was still a sharp memory, it was considered patriotic to pick up hitchhikers.

During our 30-minute drive to Peoria, the farmer bitterly denounced the late President Roosevelt as a warmonger. When asked how I felt, I was in a quandary. In view of my accent and the fact that he had picked me up almost at the front gate of the prison camp, I decided it would be less suspicious if I was for Roosevelt. I had been reading American newspapers for more than a year, so I had no trouble citing pro-Roosevelt arguments.

Apparently angered by my political views, the farmer didn't even speak to me during the last 10 minutes of our trip. We arrived in Peoria at about nine thirty. After locating the bus station, I experienced my first and virtually only language difficulty. In German idiom, I would have asked the ticket agent: "When does the next bus ride for Chicago?" I realized that would be incorrect in English, but I didn't know the correct phrase.

When I reached the ticket window, I said only one word: "Chicago?"

"Eleven thirty," the ticket seller volunteered. That was that.

The ride to Chicago was uneventful. I read a pocket book most of the way to discourage conversations with other passengers. My ill-assorted clothing—sport shirt, dyed GI pants and Army shoes—aroused no comment. In those days, immediately after the war, it was not unusual for discharged soldiers to wear bits of Army clothing.

In Chicago I ate a big dinner of bacon and eggs in the bus terminal, then walked into Grant Park along the lake front. I intended to spend that night sleeping under a bush. It was damp and chilly near the lake, but two years of infantry action on the Russian front had accustomed me to cold.

Unfortunately, the park seemed overrun with police. Afraid of being discovered and questioned, I left the park, walked into Chicago's brightly lighted downtown business section and made a marvelous discovery—an all-night movie. So I bought a ticket for 50 cents, curled up in a back-row seat and slept until an usher shook me awake at 6:00 A.M. with a brusque "Get goin', buddy."

When I walked out of the movie that morning, I had only a few dollars left. I would have to get a job, and quickly. Walking aimlessly, I spotted a Dishwasher Wanted sign in a restaurant window. The job paid 50 cents an hour plus meals. I took it.

The second night I found a small furnished room in a dilapidated boardinghouse at \$2.75 a week. I washed dishes for six days, saved \$19, then refurbished my wardrobe with a secondhand suit (\$12.50) and a raincoat (\$4).

### **Told to Get Social Security Card**

At the start of the second week my boss, who knew me only as Phil, asked for my Social Security number. When I told him I had lost my Social Security card, he said: "You'll have to get a duplicate. You can't work without a card. It's the law."

So I got a Social Security card, quickly and easily, as Phillip Brick. Once in possession of that card, I felt there was no need to go back to dishwashing. I could work anywhere.

In the want-ad columns of the Chicago Tribune, I discovered an intriguing headline: YOU CAN MAKE \$10 A DAY! It was an ad for pin boys at a bowling alley. So I went to work setting pins. I never did make \$10 a day, and I developed a very stiff back. After two weeks. I found another restaurant job on North Clark Street as dishwasher and general handy man at \$1 an hour plus meals. Now that I was earning so much, I felt justified in moving into a more comfortable room on North Orleans Street. It cost \$6 a week.

One month after I escaped, I wrote a letter to my friend in Hamburg. I explained that I was now living in the United States ("under changed circumstances," I said carefully) as Phillip Brick. I enclosed my address, and asked my friend to relay the letter to my mother.

At that time I was deeply concerned for my mother, who had undergone three saturation bombings and was virtually destitute. In early November, about eight weeks after my escape from Camp Washington, I shipped \$25 worth of food-sugar, powdered milk, canned butter, coffee and tinned meats to Hamburg. In my first year as Phillip Brick, I was able to send almost \$500 worth of food and clothing.

Although these expenditures kept me broke, I had one unexpected windfall. On March 15, 1946, I made out my first income-tax return, and discovered that too much money had been withdrawn from my weekly pay envelope; I got a \$72 rebate from the Internal Revenue Bureau.

When people asked my nationality, I said I was a Dutch refugee; that explained both my slight accent and my disinclination to talk about my past. On several occasions, when other workers at the restaurant asked about my wartime experiences in Europe, I easily diverted the conversation by saying, "Please, the whole business was so terrible I don't like to discuss it. It brings back bitter memories."

My accent proved no handicap. After studying English for eight years in prewar Germany and polishing my idioms for a year in prison camp, I discovered that I actually could speak the language more fluently than many of the native-born Americans who frequented the restaurant. Consequently, when one of Chicago's largest bookstores advertised for a salesman in April, 1946, I felt no hesitancy about applying for the position.

The job paid only \$36 a week, \$9 less than I was averaging at the restaurant, but I felt that it offered promise of advancement. I knew something about books. When I was drafted into the German army in the spring of 1940, I had completed three and one-half years at the University of Münster. I know Latin well (at one time I intended to enter the priesthood), and can speak Russian, Ukrainian, French, Italian and some Greek.

I had been on my new job just three days when I encountered my only serious threat of exposure up to the day of my arrest. A customer asked me where the dictionaries were located and I recognized him as one of the guards who had been on duty during my stay at Camp Grant. Fortunately, he did not recognize me. I pointed to the dictionaries, and he walked away and never came back.

I worked as a book salesman from April, 1946, to late April, 1948. During this period, I became interested in the numerous requests which our customers made for rare or out-of-print books. Since our store made almost no effort to fill these orders, it occurred to me that I might be able to establish a profitable business by finding and selling these hard-to-get volumes.

The more I thought of the idea, the better I liked it. The beauty of it was that I could operate on a mail-order basis, which would eliminate that one chance in a million of being recognized by somebody who might spot my photograph on the post-office circulars.

On May 1, 1948, I opened a small office at 1166 Diversey Avenue. My assets totaled \$450 and 50 assorted books on photography which I had bought for \$8 from another bookstore owner who was going out of business. As a starter, I placed small ads, offering to find and quote prices on rare books, in the Chicago Tribune and Popular Mechanics magazine.

At the outset, business was decidedly slow. Within two months, my \$450 capital disappeared. To keep myself going, I took a part-time job in the circulation department of the Chicago Tribune at about \$40 a week.

I worked almost a year at the Tribune. During that period, I made my first real friend in this country. I'll call him Joe, to avoid embarrassing him. He was an ex-Army pilot, who also was working part time at the Tribune while completing his college studies at Northwestern University.

For nearly three years, I had deliberately avoided friendships. I felt that friends inevitably would ask questions about my past which I could not answer. But I liked Joe—and I had gradually acquired considerable confidence in my ability to play the role of Phillip Brick, the Dutch refugee. And so when Joe invited me to have Sunday dinner at his house, I accepted.

### **Sunday Dinner with Joe's Family**

It was a strange feeling, sitting down to dinner with Joe and his mother, father and brother. It was the first time I had eaten in a family group since I had gone home to Hamburg on leave in the summer of 1943, almost five years before. I realized how lonely I had become when Joe's father casually addressed me as "son."

Joe liked to dance. He kept urging me to go out on double dates, but I couldn't dance. Finally, to quiet Joe, I started taking lessons at the Y.M.C.A. on Chicago Avenue. Within a month, I learned to fox trot, waltz and rumba.

After that, I dated a lot of girls. It was fun, but I quickly discovered that the female of the species can be much more inquisitive than the male. The girls' questions would probe deeper with each date, and I found that it wasn't safe to go out with a girl more than three times. By then, the questions would be so penetrating they were almost impossible to answer.

During the summer of 1949, I took one inquisitive blonde swimming in Lake Michigan. While we were sun-bathing, she asked: "Phil, were you in the Dutch army?"

"No," I said.

"Gosh, that's funny. When I saw those scars on your shoulder and thigh, I just took it for granted they were bullet wounds."

"Nothing as exciting as that," I said. "I got them in a fight."

Actually, the scars were indeed from bullet wounds. I was shot in the right thigh on the Russian front in 1942, and an American machine-gun bullet pierced my chest in Italy several hours before I was taken prisoner on October 13, 1944.

While my social life was expanding, my mail order book business was also prospering. On May 1, 1949, I took a three-year lease on a store at 3725 Southport Avenue, and quit my job at the Tribune.

Several months after the move to Southport Avenue, I discovered that I had fallen in love with one of my customers—a pretty blonde named Avis Melander. This unexpected development raised a momentous question. Could a man in my position marry? And for many reasons, I finally decided that the answer was "yes."

Four years had passed since my escape, and I was confident there was virtually no chance that I would be caught. Even if I were, I had committed no crime; as American ex-POWs know, it's the duty of a prisoner of war to escape if he can. Moreover, I had not entered the United States

illegally. I had been brought in as a prisoner. Technically, I figured, the only charge which could be lodged against me was that I was a foreigner living in the United States without a visa. The worst that could happen was that I might be deported.

After I decided to propose to Avis, I had a hard time phrasing the proposal. I did not want to tell her I was an escaped German prisoner of war. As an American citizen she would be obligated to expose me to the military authorities. Yet I did not think it was fair to propose without telling her there was some question about my status as a refugee. Finally I said, "Avis, I want to marry you, but there's some doubt about the legality of my visa. There's a chance—a slim chance—that someday I may have to go back to Europe."

It wasn't exactly the truth. It wasn't exactly romantic. But it got results. Avis said: "I'd like to marry you, too, and if you have to go back to Europe, I'll go with you."

To marry, I needed several documents, including a birth certificate and a baptismal certificate. I wrote to my friend in Hamburg, explaining the situation in vague terms. My friend is a perceptive man; within a month, I received copies of the documents—with the name on each changed from Reinhold Pabel to Phillip Brick.

Avis and I were married at St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Church at Paulina Street and Addison Avenue in Chicago. Our son, Christopher, was born on June 29, 1952, shortly after we moved our store to its present location, 1021 1/2 Argyle Street.

### **An Order That He Enjoyed Filling**

Business picked up steadily during 1952. One order I particularly enjoyed filling was for 20 textbooks on cooking and economics from the United States Army at nearby Fort Sheridan, Illinois (where I had spent two weeks in 1945). I made \$18 on the deal.

Then, just when I had almost forgotten that there ever was such a person as Reinhold Pabel; my past caught up with me.

I remember exactly what I was doing at 4:30 P.M., last March 9<sup>th</sup>; sitting at my desk in the rear of the store, having just written a letter to a customer in New Orleans who had asked for a price quotation on *The Human Side of Plants*, by Royal Dixon.

It was time to close the store and go home. Usually, I keep open from 9:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M., but this was a very special day—Avis' twenty-first birthday. At lunchtime, I had bought a big chocolate cake and a pink camellia corsage for her birthday party. I was sitting there thinking how pleased Avis would be when I surprised her with the camellias—when the front door opened and eight men walked in. I counted them as they came toward me, because I couldn't recall ever seeing that many customers at one time. I thought to myself: Business is picking up!

One of the customers, a tall, slender man wearing a brown topcoat, opened his wallet and produced an identification card. "Will you look at this, please?" he asked.

I looked. The card identified him as an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Just answer one question. Are you Reinhold Pabel?"

"Yes," I said. "I am Reinhold Pabel."

That is how it ended. The agents took me to their office and questioned me for three hours. The story I told them is substantially the one I have told here. It was easy to tell because I had nothing to hide. During the almost eight years since my escape, I had asked help from no one.

After being held overnight in jail, I was released on \$1,000 bond. As I write this, I am uncertain of the future. My lawyer, Carl Cipolla, believes there is a chance the immigration authorities won't press charges against me. If the charges are dropped, I will apply for U.S. citizenship.

If the immigration authorities move for my deportation, the proceedings could be suspended by a special federal legislative act, and I have heard that a member of Congress from Illinois is willing to propose the necessary legislation.

Of course, the act might not pass. But if I'm deported, I've been told, I might be placed on a preferred quota list for re-entry because I have an American wife.

No matter what the immediate future, I hope eventually to establish legal residence in the United States and become a citizen. Meanwhile, I will keep on working in my bookstore. My inner feelings have not changed since that morning in 1944 when, wounded and taken prisoner along the Volturno River, I wrote in my diary:

"I now deliver myself into the hands of God and hope the worst will be diverted from those I love."