

As a Jew, Vilém Tauský felt the Nazi influence early on when he was denied a contract to write music for a Czechoslovak film because he was not 'a suitable person to write music of this character'. He contested it in court but lost and had to pay charges.

Once Czechoslovakia was occupied, he knew he had to escape and reached France helping the son to transport costumes from Brno Opera House to the Paris Opera House. There the Russian composer Tcheréprin helped get him a job as a pianist with the Ballet Russes in Monte Carlo. In July 1939 Tauský heard that Czechoslovaks were going to form an army in exile with headquarters in Agde. He volunteered immediately for military service and enlisted on 3 September. The site was in a poor state so his first task was to help build new barracks.

Tauský was then commissioned to organise a military band to inspire the soldiers and spread Czechoslovak culture among the French. Initially they borrowed instruments from the locals which were replaced with the help of Martinů and bought by the Czechoslovak Consulate. The band practised in the local cinema that had an upright piano and by January 1940 it was ready to perform public concerts.



*Czechoslovak military band in France [Vilém Tauský Tells his Story]*

In April 1940 the Nazis had passed the Maginot Line and the Czechoslovak regiment was sent to the front, north east of Paris. The fall of France came quickly and they were ordered to retreat to the coast, covering 65km a day in army lorries or on bicycles, to Bordeaux. Tauský was in a group of 36 led by a sergeant and himself as corporal. There was no hope of escape from Bordeaux so they headed towards Spain and reached the fishing village of Arachon. In the harbour there was a neutral Yugoslav coal ship on its way back to Newport in South Wales crowded with civilians.

He and his sergeant took out their revolvers (his had no ammunition) boarded and told the Captain he must follow their orders or he would be shot. Under international law he could not carry soldiers so they agreed to change their uniforms for clothes lent by the sailors and civilians. They then hid themselves (and the uniforms) in the empty coal hold. The journey lasted several days and rations ran out after day two.

When they sighted the cliffs of England they changed back into their uniforms and continued towards Wales and Cardiff. At the port officials gave orders to sail back towards Newport, but to stay offshore. That night the Newport docks were bombed! Four years later, Vilém Tauský was to receive the Czechoslovak War Cross for this 'adventure'.

Once on land they were conveyed from Newport to Cholmondeley Park by train. There they were given a fortnight's freedom from duties to recover from the ordeal. Lord and Lady Cholmondeley were both keen amateur musicians and urged him to use the piano and organ in the castle whenever Tauský wanted. Next he organised an army band and formed a Czechoslovak army choir. Their first events were held in the neighbouring towns and cities of Whitchurch and Chester.

Dr Fischl, the cultural attaché, had set up a publicity department in which music played a large part. Distinguished Czechoslovak professional artists from civilian life joined in giving concerts including Rudolph Firkušný, Maria Lonová [Hlouňová] and Liza Fushová.

In October 1940 the Czechoslovak army moved to Leamington Spa where Tauský was billeted at 17-19 The Parade opposite a canteen run by the YMCA for Allied forces (this is where he met his future wife Peggy). There was both an upright and grand piano and lots of rooms where musicians could practise. They gave many concerts in the Midlands and army camps for which he created programmes such as 'The Czechs are Marching', 'Waltzing through Czechoslovakia' and 'Under Czech Skies'. When the Coventry Blitz took place the Czechoslovak Field Ambulance, in which Tauský served, rushed there to give what help they could. He was deeply moved by what he saw and within a few days he had written his string quartet 'Coventry- a meditation for strings'.



*Czechoslovak army choir in Bermondsey [Vilém Tausky Tells his Story]*

Throughout the war Vilém Tauský promoted Czechoslovak culture. He prepared and conducted concert versions of Czechoslovak operas and chamber music, directed the Czechoslovak army choir at the Royal Albert Hall and toured around the country. He conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra and worked with Walter Legg of the Entertainments National Service Association and Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts to give over 200 concerts for war workers. These were held successfully in factories, canteens, town halls and army camps all over the country. He was the first foreigner to ever conduct the Coldstream Guards Band at a concert held for the Royal Navy on board a destroyer.

In June 1944 Tauský developed pneumonia the night before he was due to leave for the French invasion. He remained at the army hospital in Driffield, Yorkshire for several weeks and then joined Czech Army HQ in London where he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant and awarded the Czechoslovak Medal of Merit from General Miroslav. He conducted a farewell concert at Westminster Central Hall in honour of President Benes before he returned to Prague. Soloists Liza Fuchsová and Maria Lonová played along with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Jan Masaryk gave the farewell speech.