

How the Game of Monopoly Saved WWII Prisoners

by Liz Gibbons

Monopoly was a popular and favorite game in my childhood. I have fond memories of playing it with my friends. Sometimes one game could last for two or more days before there was a winner. The game of Monopoly, which was introduced by Parker Bros in 1935, evolved from the The Landlord's Game, created by Elizabeth Magie. She created it to educate people about economic principles. Her game was patented in 1904.

During World War II many British and Canadian soldiers became prisoners of war of the Germans. The British Directorate of Military Intelligence section 9 (MI9) looked for a way to help them escape. Germany allowed prisoners to receive items classified as games and pastimes. So MI9 created fake charities to send escape kits with clandestine items hidden inside games. The most famous example of this scheme was the use of the Monopoly game. John Waddington, Ltd was the company that had rights to the Monopoly game in Britain. Coincidentally, Waddingtons had some years before perfected a way to print maps on silk, the only British manufacturer who was capable of doing this. If a prisoner is to escape they need maps of that foreign land to know how to get to friendly territory and the location of safe houses where they can get food and shelter. Paper maps have drawbacks. They make noise when folded, wear out rapidly, and begin to disintegrate when wet. Silk maps can be folded into a tiny wad and make no noise.

Working under strict secrecy in an inaccessible workshop on the Waddington company grounds, some employees began to produce silk escape maps applicable to each region where there were POW camps in Germany, France, and Italy. These were hidden inside a playing piece. These clever workers also created a playing piece containing a tiny magnetic compass and two other playing pieces that could be screwed together to create a file. Hidden in the stack of Monopoly money were high-denomination German, French, and Italian currency.

Soldiers were under orders to escape if they were captured and to look for special editions of Monopoly which contained an escape package. These could be identified by a small red dot that looked like a printing error on the Free Parking space. They were sworn to secrecy concerning the Monopoly game and further to never reveal how they escaped as the British might want to use this ruse if there was a future war. Of the 35,000 Allied POWs who escaped, one third were estimated to have been aided by the rigged Monopoly sets. In 2007 the British finally declassified this story, and Waddingtons and the surviving craftsmen were honored in a public ceremony.

This was a case where that Get Out of Jail Free card was played very successfully.