

GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN WYOMING*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1942, Julius Algermissen was drafted into the German army. He was a family man, employed in a large appliance factory in Hanover. Shortly after his induction, Mr. Algermissen was assigned to the coast of Normandy. From there he was sent to Russia, where he was wounded on July 26, 1942. After convalescing in various field hospitals, he was moved to Warsaw, Poland. When released from a hospital there, he was declared fit for battle, placed in the infantry and transferred to Sicily. From Sicily he went to Tunisia.

While in northern Africa, Mr. Algermissen was captured by the Americans. He was interned briefly at Oran, Algeria, then at Casablanca, Morocco. After three months at Casablanca, he was shipped to the United States. Julius Algermissen thus became one of more than 300,000 German soldiers who were interned in prison camps in the United States during World War II.

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Of the more than 3,000,000 prisoners captured by allied forces during the war, approximately half a million were sent to this country. Judith M. Gansberg, in her book *Stalag: U.S.A.*, places the total number of German prisoners at nearly 372,000.¹ According to the Associated Press, as of January 1, 1945, there were 361,631 prisoners in 425 camps in the United States. Of these, 307,931 were Germans, 51,071 were Italians, and 2,629 were Japanese.² Six months later more than 100,000 additional prisoners had been added.

Regulations prohibited American fraternization with the prisoners, who were kept in guarded, fenced compounds. Aside from those who employed them, few elements of the general populace had contact with the prisoners. Nevertheless, these German "visitors" had enormous emotional, cultural, economic and even deeply personal impact upon Americans. Within individual citizens they aroused curiosity, hatred, envy, disgust, outrage, fear, sympathy, friendship, bestiality and even love. A few stark examples will illustrate this point.

In February, 1944, two German prisoners escaped from Camp Hale, Colorado. Pfc. Dale Maple, a graduate of Harvard University, had planned the escape and fled with the prisoners. When captured in Mexico with the pair, Maple said that he had intended to go to Germany with them and enter the German army. In the ensuing scandal, eight other enlisted men were charged with complicity in the escape plot, and five WACs were court-martialed for writing love letters to the prisoners.

Some civilian women also had amorous involvements with German prisoners. On February 13, 1945, two young Michigan women were sentenced to prison for helping two German prisoners escape. In November, 1945, while on trial for aiding two prisoners to escape from a camp at Geneseo, New York, Alice Fisher informed the court that it was "not uncommon for girls living in the camp vicinity to stroll arm in arm with German war prisoners in Letchworth park."³

A more humorous case involved a romance between a prisoner and a lonely middle-aged Girl Scout leader who worked in a cheese factory. When some German prisoners from a camp at Monte Vista, Colorado, were assigned to work

in the cheese factory at Del Norte, Miss Adele Weiler became acquainted with one of them, and a "friendship" developed. Later, Miss Weiler drove to Monte Vista in the evenings, picked up her German lover, who had somehow eluded the military police, and took him home for the night. Each morning the prisoner was back in camp. Although the arrangement was eventually discovered, investigating authorities could never learn how the prisoner left his compound. No charges were ever filed against Miss Weiler.

In many cases supervision of the camps was not especially strict. By February, 1945, 1,301 axis prisoners had escaped from United States camps. Most were soon recaptured, but not all. A major escape occurred at Papago Park, Arizona. On Christmas Eve, 1944, twenty-five prisoners made their way to temporary freedom. All were eventually returned to the camp, but two weeks after the escape, more than half of the prisoners were still at large.

In some compounds prisoners built and operated moonshine factories. At Camp Hale, Colorado, soon after the escape collaboration scandal broke, several stills were found in the walls of the Camp buildings, and fifty gallons of brandy was confiscated. Officials investigating the incident reported that the quality of the liquor was "very good."⁴

Not all incidents involving the German prisoners were as harmless as the love affairs, the brief escapes and the bootlegging. By February, 1945, a number of violent deaths had occurred in the camps. Eight murders and forty-three suicides had been committed. Fifty-six prisoners had been shot while trying to escape. Others had died in various accidents.

One of the most tragic events occurred in Salina, Utah. On July 8, 1945, a tower guard at a side camp there, sprayed a belt of .30 caliber machine gun bullets into a row of tents full of sleeping prisoners. When questioned about this actions, the guard showed no remorse and said that he had planned the mass murder for some time. Six of the Germans were killed outright and two died in the hospital. Twenty others were wounded.

The Salina tragedy was one extreme of American reac-

tion to the prisoners. Other negative responses were bitter but non-violent. Politicians railed against the prisoners. Labor leaders protested that they were taking jobs from American workers. Newspaper editors decried the "soft" treatment that the prisoners were receiving. And when the prisoners were sent home, American soldiers in Europe voiced their disgust "at the sight of former German prisoners of war returning from the United States with luxury items impossible to obtain in Europe."⁵

Happily—perhaps even against the will of the people involved—the experience as a whole was not as negative as the above situations seem to suggest. The presence of German prisoners of war in the United States did have positive results. In humanistic terms, cultural exchange took place, even under the negative circumstances of the war situation. Respect, understanding, even admiration for former enemies developed to an otherwise impossible degree.

Obviously, German prisoners gained insight into American society and culture, both through direct exposure and through systematic re-education. What is truly remarkable, however, is the amount of exposure to German culture that was given Americans through the actions of the prisoners. Among the wretched and bedraggled German soldiers who were brought to the United States, there were many artists, musicians, actors, writers and artisans. One camp even housed the entire 47th Grenadier military band for a time. These prisoners gave much of themselves to their captors. They played music. They created works of art from scraps and refuse. They made their own tools and used them to make violins, and fix watches, and paint, and carve, and build. Many Americans still treasure paintings, carvings and other mementos that were made and given to them by German prisoner friends.

The mark made by German prisoners of war upon America and its citizens is still visible, not only in the souvenirs, but in statistical records and the last crumbling ruins of abandoned compounds. It exists in lives and memories—of prisoners who immigrated to this country after the war, and of former prisoners who returned to visit the places of their in-

ternments and the people who became their friends. It is present in the face of a woman who spends part of each Memorial Day at the grave of a German uncle who died in Utah and is buried at Ft. Douglas with forty other German soldiers. And it is part of the life of a man who wrote poetry about his prisoner of war experiences in Wyoming.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS IN WYOMING

In January, 1943, plans were announced for the construction of a prisoner of war camp near Douglas, Wyoming. Specifications called for the erection of 180 buildings, including a 150-bed hospital, to provide complete, self-contained accommodations for approximately 3500 men.

Construction was completed in June, 1943, at a cost of more than \$1,000,000, and the first group of prisoners, 412 Italians, arrived in Douglas on August 17. By early October, the Italian prisoner population had increased to more than 1900 men.

During the autumn of 1943, Italian prisoners from Douglas were used extensively as laborers in several side camps. Two hundred of them helped with the beet harvest in Worland. Other side camps were established at Pine Bluffs, Veteran and Wheatland, as well as at Greeley and Ft. Lupton, Colorado. Italians from the Douglas camp were also used in the Wyoming timber industry, at Ryan Park near Saratoga.

Employment of prisoners for farm labor rapidly became a viable part of the wartime economic pattern in Wyoming. In the fall of 1943, Douglas prisoners harvested 3,685 acres of sugar beets, 141,400 bushels of potatoes, 15,000 bushels of small grain, 310,000 pounds of beans, and 2,000 tons of hay.

When Italy surrendered, the status of the Italian prisoners changed, and they were moved out of the Douglas camp. It appeared then that the camp would be closed, a fact that distressed local farmers, who had begun to count on the prisoners for labor.