Nazi Prisoners Are Nazis Still
By F.G. Alletson Cook
New York Times (1857-Current file); Nov 21, 1943; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2004)
pg. SM12

Nazi Prisoners Are Nazis Still

Grim, tough, sternly disciplined, they show few cracks in their self-confidence as yet.

By F. G. Alletson Cook

These Nazi prisoners have left the war 3,000 miles behind. Now they help American farmers with the chores—at 80 cents a day.

Better fed now than at any time during their lives, they receive the same rations as the American soldiers. They even get chewing gum.

Back to camp after a day's work "down on the farm." They travel in a private bus. The "P.W." on their denims means prisoner of war.

I HAVE just spent a day with the Herrenvolk. As one of the few journalists privileged to visit one of the closely guarded American internment camps for German prisoners of war I have seen more than 1,000 husky young Nazis at work and at play, inspected their comfortable living quarters and well-filled kitchens, and learned something of their attitude toward the war.

The camp I visited is a heavily wired stockade hidden away in a secluded valley in the foothills of the Alleghanies not far from White Sulphur Springs, W. Va. A mile or so distant the huge white Greenbrier Hotel is now a military hospital crammed with wounded American boys who have been brought home from North Africa, Sicily, Italy and elsewhere. On my way to the prison camp I saw two long hospital trains unload several hundred badly wounded Americans, the first to reach home from the bitter fighting around Salerno. As the ambulances drove in a slow convoy through the hospital gates a farm truck loaded with hard - muscled bronzed young Germans, clad in blue demin coveralls with the identifying letters PW painted in bright orange on their backs and sleeves, stopped to give them the right of way. The Nazis watched silently. No flicker of sympathy was visible on their impassive faces.

Most of the men in the White Sulphur Springs camp were once members of Rommel's Afrika Korps. Some were attached to other units of the North African armies. A great many were captured by the British Eighth Army, others by the Americans and the French. Some, the most recent arrivals, were taken prisoner in Sicily. They come from all parts of Germany. You can identify the Bavarians and Austrians among them by the way in which they pin up the side of their slouch hats, stick in a feather at a jaunty angle, and manage somehow to achieve a passable Tyrolean effect. The Prussians wear their hats stiffly, like tin helmets.

The camp itself is a group of Army huts, all exactly alike, save that some are on one side of the wire—the inside—and the others on the outside. In one group live the discontented American soldiers detailed to guard the prisoners—discontented, as one of them confessed, because "We'd much rather be out there taking a crack at them than sticking around here like a bunch of nursemaids." In the other group of huts, sharing exactly the life the American soldiers live, are the Germans.

THE prisoners are divided into companies, 250 men to a company, each with its own leader, an N. C. O. chosen by the men themselves. In addition there is a camp spokesman, also an N. C. O. nominated by the internees. There are no officers in this camp. When the first Germans arrived in mid-August they took over a camp formerly used for Italians.

The first thing they did was to obliterate all Italian insignia from the crude paintings with which their predecessors had tried to brighten up their quarters and from the little gardens the Italians had cultivated and which they had ornamented with the arms of the Italian monarchy. The Germans were especially vindictive about the arms of the House of Savoy. They even tore up stones set in concrete which some industrious Italian had used to reproduce the armorial bearings of Victor Emmanuel. In some cases the Nazis have substituted the shields of their home cities in Germany. In others they have let their fancy run to desert date palms, oasis scenes, camels and Bedouins. One has copied a motto he saw on a calendar in the commandant's office, which reads: "Give me Liberty or give me Death." There is no attribution!

The Germans live in two long lines of huts, about fifty men to a hut. Their quarters are clean and well lighted and heated by enormous stoves. There are comfortable beds and double-tiered bunks, all equipped with springs and mattresses and clean linen. They are allowed radio sets, but only such as are limited to the local stations. Short wave is barred. The camp is well provided with newspapers, including the German-language publications from New York. Their favorites are THE NEW YORK TIMES and The New Yorker Staats Zeitung und Herold. They get illustrated weeklies, too, with all the war pictures left in.

When they first arrived they would glance, half shamefacedly, at THE NEW YORK TIMES, and walk away silently. Pictures of devastated German cities meant nothing to them. "Lying propaganda—fakes," they said. The straight war news was equally distrusted. Germany was winning the war, they said. This news from Russia? Lies, all lies.

TODAY their officers believe there are signs of a change, though slight. Many of the men have noticed that THE NEW YORK TIMES prints the German communiqués in full, alongside the American and British. They have read with growing amazement the reports of Congressional wrangles, attacks on President Roosevelt, and recently the criticisms of the five world-traveling Senators. This is something new for most of them. For they are mainly in the 22-to-25 age group and have never in their adult years known a free German press. So the pictures from Hamburg and Bremen and Hanover are taking on a new meaning for them. Yet in the minds of the great majority—or so they profess to believe—German arms are just suffering a temporary setback.

A few express their doubts. But not too openly. One night recently one of the prisoners listened to the news from the Eastern Front. When the announcer had finished, the prisoner took a piece of paper, drew a crude map, and showed his comrades just how much ground must have been lost. In the morning the camp officers found him badly beaten up. He has never told who did the beating. All he will say is, "They say I'm not a good German." But the incident seems to be justification for the attitude of the camp's commanding officer, Lieut. Col. Frank A. Hunter, who is against indoctrination, against trying to force any sort of new opinions on his (Continued on Page 38)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(Continued from Page 12)
prisoners. As I walked through their compound under the guidance of a conducting officer, the Nazis went about their daily tasks in the shoemending shop, the carpenters' shop, the kitchen and the laundry. They worked silently and well. As the conducting officer threw open each door, a shout of "Achtung!" rang out from the company leader and every man sprang rigidly to attention until the American officer gave the command "Wiedermachen."

In accordance with international law, which protects prisoners against "public curiosity," visitors are not permitted to put questions to internees, but officers of the camp said that they were free enough with information about themselves and perfectly willing to discuss the war, always with the understanding that Germany is going to be victorious. Any remarks which indicate that the Americans are of a different opinion result in their immediately standing at attention, eyes front, and refusing to pursue the conversation further.

"For instance," said one of the officers, "a prisoner told me just the other day that he came from Hamburg. 'That's a fine city,' he said with pride. I told him, 'You mean that *was* a fine city,' and instantly he stuck his chin out belligerently and replied, 'Sir, I don't believe you. Those bombing stories are lies, propaganda.' And I'm sure he really believed it. They have been used to a faked press and constant propaganda for so long that they've lost their power to think for themselves."

Some 80 per cent of the prisoners in the White Sulphur Springs camp are professing Roman Catholics or Protestants. The other 20 call themselves "Believers in God," which is taken in the camp to mean that they are adherents of Hitler's New Paganism. One man admitted on his first day at the camp that he was glad to be able to be a Catholic again after having had to be a Nazi for so long.

ODDLY enough, there is no guard house. There was one in the days when the Italians were there. Their happy-go-lucky nature was always getting them into scrapes, sometimes serious enough to warrant three days' solitary confinement on bread and water. When it was over they walked out all smiles—with no ill will toward anybody in the world. The Germans are different. Their discipline is so deeply ingrained into their characters by this time that they learn by heart the rules and regulations that govern a prisoner's life, and never break the smallest of them. There has not been a single case of disciplinary action since the Germans moved in.

The officers of the camp have noticed other significant differences between the Germans and their former Italian prisoners. The Italians on the whole were liked. Their gaiety and their love of music, their utter inability to hate anyone in the whole wide world except the Germans—and the Germans were universally detested among the Italians—all these things made it hard for the American officers to be stern with them, try as they would.

The Italians talked of their friends and relatives in Brooklyn, they invested in United States war bonds, they cared nothing for the war but wanted only to be set free and allowed to stay, take a job, and get their first papers. The Germans are grim. They are hard, and tough, unrelenting, sometimes unapproachable. They have no time for entertainment or amusement. They study hard. They learn English. They attend classes in chemistry, geography, mathematics. They are silent, respectful, but sullen.

It is curious, too, that the name of Hitler is hardly ever heard beyond the high double barbed-wire fence. And the Nazi salute has almost disappeared, though all prisoners punctiliously salute the American officers in the American way. One of the camp United States Army interpreters, a young ex-Austrian who was himself once a prisoner in a German concentration camp (his father committed suicide to avoid arrest and his mother died of shock) told me that he has never heard any prisoner singing one of the popular Nazi marching songs, and they sing constantly, at work, at play, on the march.

"WHAT they usually sing," said the interpreter, "is the old-time songs about women and wine, beer, the Fatherland, the beauties of fall, and so on. They love the old student songs. I've never heard the Horst Wessel song here, or even 'Deutschland ueber Alles.'"

One of the most popular songs in the camp was written during the Thirty Years' War. In the prisoners' version it goes like this:

A penny and a dollar
Both I owned them once
The penny turned to water
The dollar into wine

And there was great joy
When God created me
A boy of silk and velvet
It was too bad he drank

All the innkeepers and the girls
They shout Oh, Oh, Oh,
The innkeepers when I come
The girls when I go

My shoes are torn to pieces
My stockings are in two
But out among the willows
We still are always free.

In the main, the German prisoners seem to accept that for them the war is over. There has never been an escape, and only one incident that looked like an attempted escape. The officers are not sure yet if it was. Fifteen feet on the inside of their high wire fence is a line of white stakes known as "The Deadline." Beyond those stakes prisoners must never go. During ball games if the ball passes beyond the stakes they must stand still, raise a hand, and draw the attention of the guard in his high lookout tower to what has happened. One man is then permitted to go, at a walk, to get the ball while the guard keeps him covered. The other night, during a football game, the ball went beyond the stakes suspiciously frequently. At last several players ran in a bunch to get it. Instantly a shot rang out. The guard had fired over their heads.

"We'll probably never know for sure," said the compound commandant, "but it looked as if they were trying to find out if we really meant it."

A better test of the Germans' desire to escape came a few days later when 200 internees were ordered out to fight a forest fire. They were given axes, long knives, picks and shovels, and sent out into a dense piece of deserted woodland, where they worked invisible in thick smoke for hours. Some stayed on long after nightfall, but none tried to make a break. One of them told an officer on the way back to camp, "What's the use? It's 3,000 miles to Germany even if we reached the coast, and even then we can't swim that far."

The prisoners' day starts at 6:30 reveille. Breakfast is at 6:45, and the men who are detailed to work parties get on the way between 7 and 8 o'clock. The last of them are in for supper at 5:30. There is a recreation period from 5 to 7:30. Taps is at 11.

Apart from their work in and about the camp, the hospital and the huge military reservation on which both are located, they are hired out to local farmers, usually without complaint from their employers. They have husked corn, harvested peanuts and done general farming of all kinds.

Whether they work or not they receive an allowance of 10 cents a day. If they work outside (they are not paid for work in the camp from which they themselves draw the main benefit, such as path-laying) they get 80 cents a day in addition, half of which is banked for them until they are released, and half given to them in the form of canteen checks with which they can buy cigarettes, soft drinks, candies and other small items.

IN the matter of food they are certainly better off than the average citizen "on the outside," for they have no rationing troubles and no shortages of anything. In their modern kitchens I saw piles of juicy hams, plenty of butter, steaks and sausages. No margarine is served to them. They get exactly the same rations as the American soldier, but cook what they get in the German way. The only characteristic American food they dislike is breakfast cereal. They take it, however, and mix all brands together, pulp it, soak it with milk and serve it for breakfast.

There is only one limit on what the men eat—their individual capacity. They get absolutely all they can stow away of whatever dish is on the menu, rationed on the outside or not. And occasionally parcels sent by the folks at home reach the prisoners through the International Red Cross. They are mute testimony in themselves to the state of affairs in Germany, and as such are welcomed by the officers of the camp. A typical package will contain a little black bread, a few hard cookies (usually unsweetened) and perhaps an ounce or two of coarse tobacco. No jams or jellies, no candies.

I asked one of the American officers just how he felt about the Germans after weeks of close association with them.

"You've got to let them know who's boss around here," he said. "If I come into the compound in full uniform I get ten times the respect I do if I wear service kit. They are well trained, excellently disciplined automatons. As individuals they don't exist; as a team, magnificent.

"And make no mistake about it, most of them are pretty sure Germany is still going to win the war. It'll be just the same as last time—yes, I was there. They will never believe they're licked unless we follow through properly—all the way through, right into Berlin."

LEE SIMONSON'S ARTICLE

The article "Prescription for an Ailing Theatre," by Lee Simonson, in last Sunday's Times Magazine, was based on a chapter in Mr. Simonson's new book, "Part of a Lifetime," published by Duell, Sloan and Pearce. This credit was inadvertently omitted.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.