

Some Captives Recall a War and Forget Hostilities

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They were two old men sitting side by side, one with white hair, the other making the most of what hair he had left. Each stared through spectacles as he told his war stories from nearly 60 years ago.

One spoke of losing 45 pounds in five months, surviving on a daily cup of soup and a hunk of bread that tasted of sawdust. The other recalled crawling under barbed wire to have supper with local farmers and remembered a woman who sneaked him fresh tomatoes at lunch.

They were two prisoners of war -- an American, held south of Dresden, and a German, imprisoned 200 miles from here at Camp Algona, where the American soldier served as a guard after his liberation. After they had heard each other's stories -- a long while after -- they shook hands.

"Why now should I see the Americans as my enemy?" asked the German, Kurt Butzlaff, at the meeting at a public library here this afternoon. "The person was never my enemy, but rather, the two systems were at war, he with his command, and me with my command."

Mr. Butzlaff, 82, was one of 425,000 prisoners of war, most German, held in camps in the United States, about 20,000 of them here in Iowa. He is touring Iowa this week with a dozen other Germans, children and grandchildren of fellow prisoners, as part of a local historian's project to transcend cultures and salve old wounds.

After visits next week to Camp Algona and the Scattergood School in West Branch, Iowa, which housed 186 mostly Jewish refugees during the war, the Germans will attend a three-day academic conference on P.O.W.'s in Muscatine, Iowa, sponsored by a nonprofit group called Traces. An exhibit of photographs and artifacts from Algona and other local camps will also open next weekend at the Muscatine Art Center, and Traces has recently published two books of letters and journal entries from German prisoners at Algona and Iowans held in Europe.

"The shadows of the Third Reich are very long; they reached the Iowa prairies, the edge of the world," said Michael Luick-Thrams, 39, director of Traces, who grew up on a farm in Mason City and has relatives who worked with German prisoners during the war. "These stories were our stories, but the modern generation has forgotten all about it."

Not everyone has embraced the visitors. Veterans in Charles City asked Traces to cancel a visit there, and several former P.O.W.'s showed up at the library today to protest.

"I want to talk to some of these krauts, ask them some questions," said William Mehegan, 81, who spent about a year at a P.O.W. camp near the Baltic Sea, and wore an Eighth Air Force veterans cap today. "I'm going to ask them how many of their guys got murdered when they were in American prison camps. How much did they have to eat? What kind of clothes did they wear?"

Inside the library, a high school social studies class and about 75 older people listened as Roy Olinger, who was captured in the Battle of the Bulge, and Mr. Butzlaff took turns telling their stories.

"We were in fresh snow and bitterly cold," Mr. Olinger, 79, a retired construction worker, recalled of the New Year's Eve battle in 1944 when he was captured. "They followed us first and practically decimated our patrol." Swallowing a sob, he said he was taken in a crowded boxcar across Europe and put into a hard-labor camp, adding, "We received very little if any food or water at that particular time."

Mr. Butzlaff, a retired art teacher with bushy white eyebrows, said through a translator that he had "pleasant work" on oat and sugar beet farms while in camps in Iowa and Minnesota. "During the breaks I could get to know the people I worked with," he said, recalling the kindness of one farmer's wife. "At lunch, she always gave me a few tomatoes. I'd like to see her today and thank her, but she must be 110 years old today."

On his release, Mr. Butzlaff had nowhere to go, because the town in East Prussia where he grew up was under Russian control. "Our farm had been taken away, our family fled," he said.

Mr. Butzlaff said that as a young soldier he knew nothing of the concentration camps, and he seethed on seeing his picture in today's Des Moines Register over the headline, "Nazi P.O.W. held in Iowa returns for historic tour."

"That's not right," he said. "I was not a Nazi."

Those in the crowd had their own war stories.

Doreen Meier, who was born in London, told of being sent at age 9 on a train to Wales to escape the bombing. Racheal Davis, who grew up in Bode, Iowa, remembered driving 18 miles to Algona with her family one Christmas, to see a crèche the German prisoners had carved.

"It was one cold moonlit night that we drove there and came up to this camp with the high barbed wire," Ms. Davis said. She recalled that she sat at one end of a narrow cabin, not allowed to talk to or touch the three rows of prisoners at the other end. "They sang Christmas carols to us, a capella, in German, of course. But we knew them. The melody's the same in any language."

Mr. Butzlaff was one of those singers. Today, Ms. Davis held his hand.

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