

WAR PRISONERS' AID OF THE WORLD'S COMMITTEE OF YMCA'S
347 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

OFLAG 64 - GERMANY
Supplement I

In recent mail from abroad, we received an account of the visit of our secretary to Oflag 64 on August 16, 1943. We feel sure you would like to read this report in its entirety, and so present it here:

"In a school building which formerly housed Oflag 21-B there have been recently installed 250 American Officers from two mixed British-American camps. My visit was the first YMCA visit to Oflag 64, and I met with an extremely friendly reception, especially because only a couple of days previously the first shipment of sports goods and musical instruments arrived from our Geneva office! This shipment represents the very first lot of materials to serve for entertainment in the long hours of leisure. In spite of being prisoners and so far away from home, these men all show a very good spirit, and all have firmly decided to make the best of their period of captivity. The Camp is as yet too new, and the lack of materials is too great to be able to speak of any regular programme of activities apart from study. A few weeks ago University courses in French, German, Spanish, Mathematics, Banking, Phrenology, etc. have been started. An art school has been opened, too, which is proving of the greatest benefit to the students. The teacher is a very fine artist. Accommodation offers very good possibilities for study and other activities, and the confidence in starting these activities for the coming winter is great. There is splendid cooperation with the Commandant's office, and the Commandant is doing everything possible to help the American Officers.

"The Senior American Officer, Colonel Thomas Drake, 4160, was not in Camp on the day of my visit. I began my visit by a two hours' talk with his Assistant, Lt. Col. John Waters, 4161, who gave me a good outline of the needs and possibilities of the Camp. After that I was able to talk with the responsible leaders, make many personal contacts, and finally was taken round to see the accommodation.

"High under the roof of the big school building there are very good rooms both for studies and artistic pursuits. In small attic rooms I saw men studying diligently undisturbed till my visit interrupted them. In a corner attic a trio of trumpet, guitar, and jazz set were busily practising first-class dance music. They expressed great gratitude for these instruments, sent by the YMCA. The trumpet player was a first-class musician, much admired by all his comrades. In some of these attics it would be possible to play table-tennis, but tables are not yet available, and I promised to order some as soon as possible. Up till now the officers played on several ordinary tables pushed together.

"In other rooms I saw many men occupied in drawing and sculpture. Wherever I passed, I received requests for different materials, and promised to do my best to procure them. I tried to explain that transport difficulties are great the world over these days, and that the materials ordered may have to be a very long time in coming. The prisoners showed understanding of these circumstances.

"In a house near the school building there is a very good hall which in future will be arranged as theater and recreation room. The greatest problem was how to procure wood for building the stage. I had a long talk with the Commandant on this problem, and he promised to do his best to obtain some wood.

Should this not be possible, the YMCA could supply it from Sweden. Many requests were expressed for theater decorations.

"Another bright and roomy hall serves as a lecture room for the University. It was proposed to make here several small partitions for study groups, etc., as soon as wood is available for building purposes. The Organization of Help to War Victims (in Sweden) could perhaps send this wood, as it has done for several other war prison camps. In this lecture hall the library is being installed too. It consists of about 1300 volumes of technical literature, 100 travel, 100 biographies, and 100 other books.

"The sports material is being used on a good playing field inside the Camp. At the time of my visit many men were training in American Cricket and Football. Their enthusiasm was very great. On the sides of the playing field, tracks are being made for running and jumping. There is also a possibility that this playing field will be made into a skating rink in winter. 110 men have expressed the wish to play hockey; I promised to order sets for two ice-hockey teams.

"In the hospital of the Camp, Dr. Burgeson was playing a small accordion recently arrived from the YMCA, to the great delight of the patients, none of whom are seriously ill. I too was given an opportunity to try that instrument, and was able to play some Swedish folk songs on it. By the time I visit the Camp again there will be an orchestra of 11 players.

"In conclusion I had a conversation with the only chaplain - a Catholic priest, Father Kane, 1524, and a visit to the beautiful chapel. Father Kane holds Sunday services - a Mass for the Catholics, and then a general religious service, which is usually attended by many prisoners. Satisfaction was expressed at this arrangement, and as long as the number of prisoners in Camp is not increased, there is no need of a second chaplain. In my opinion it is a long way towards a perfect Christian collaboration when men of different confessions are able to gather round a Catholic chaplain for spiritual edification.

"The gratitude of the Officers to the YMCA was very great. Their request leaflets were very long, but I told them that the YMCA would try to meet all their needs. It is up to us to give these prisoners straightaway such a good start with their various activities that they may forget their abnormal condition in wholesome and uplifting occupations."

Henry Soderberg

January 1944

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