

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

OFLAG 64 - GERMANY

The general treatment of prisoners of war, covering such items as food, clothing, housing, sanitation, etc., is standardized by the "Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War" (Geneva 1929). This Convention, signed or accepted by all nations now at war except Russia, to a large extent is being observed. Through visits of the Swiss government (Protecting Power for both Germany and the United States), each belligerent country is enabled to receive official information as to whether the enemy government is adhering to agreement.

Furthermore, representatives of the War Prisoners' Aid Y.M.C.A. make frequent visits to prison camps in many countries. While the personnel and program of war prison camps is subject to change, the information given here tells something of what the situation has been in Oflag.64, as reported by our staff at the time of their visits.

Oflag 64 is located approximately 100 miles south of Danzig, west of the Vistula River. It was known as Oflag 21-B until its present number was assigned in the summer of 1943. At one time it was a camp for French officers. Then, as a result of shifting of camp population late in 1942, it became almost 90% British (including Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans). Subsequently American officers joined this international group. In the autumn of 1943 the British were transferred, and Oflag 64 became an all-American camp.

This camp has been visited not only by our Secretary who covers that section of the country, but also by our War Prisoners' Aid representative from Stockholm, Sweden. Upon arriving in the United States early in 1944 for conferences with the New York staff, he reported that the officers in Oflag 64 were quite satisfied and apparently as happy as men could be in a prison camp. During his visit in November 1943, the Senior American Officer remarked to him: "The Y.M.C.A. is the organization that reads our thoughts, - the organization which is effective. We have scarcely written a letter but what the requested materials arrive."

Certain relatives of prisoners in Oflag 64 have generously shared with us some of their letters from the camp. Here are a few quotations which will be of interest:

"We go on parole walks four mornings a week outside the wire, and occasionally through town. I'm taking accordion lessons now. The Y.M.C.A. has sent in lots of musical instruments and sports equipment." ...

"Things are going swell here now. We're all living like gentlemen, so don't worry about my becoming tough. We have one orderly per ten officers, a tailor shop, cobbler shop and barber shop." ...

"Yesterday I received some good agricultural books from the Geneva YMCA."...

"This is Monday morning and the busiest of the week, because of Red Cross weekly food parcels being issued on Mondays. At our table in the dining room we have a six man 'community mess', and two men each week draw all parcels and ration out the food and prepare the bread, butter and jam, etc. to make it last a whole week. We get along swell, and manage to save on such items as powdered milk, coffee, cocoa, etc. and keep them in the camp tin store for a 'rainy day.'"..

"The Y.M.C.A. representative was here yesterday, and spent some time interviewing certain officers. I started a 'chess ladder' last night for our room of 40 officers, and already we have 16 rungs." ...

"Don't worry about me as I'm healthy as ever again, and very happy and comfortable under the circumstances." ...

Our Secretary wrote a most interesting account of his first visit to Oflag 64 after it had become an American camp. This report has been reproduced in full in Supplement 1 attached. We have since received cabled news of later visits, and further developments of the camp program. An excellent choir has been formed, and the orchestra is increasing in size. Great interest is shown in a piano school founded by a talented prisoner. The theater mentioned in Supplement 1 has been finished, and the Secretary enjoyed a fine entertainment by the prisoners. One feature of camp life is proving to be highly popular. A Captain, who by profession is a radio journalist, arranges weekly programs of music, news, dialogues, etc., which are broadcast over the camp radio system to all the living rooms.

To give you some indication of materials furnished to the prisoners from our Geneva headquarters, Supplement 2 has been prepared which will be self-explanatory. We expect to revise this from time to time as further information reaches us. From cabled requests for materials, it is evident that the officers have a wide range of interests, and our staff will do everything possible to try to meet their needs. Since officer prisoners are not expected to work, their leisure time requirements are much greater than those of the privates and NCO's.

In addition to serving the group as a whole, the needs of the individual also have been kept in mind. Through the War Prisoners' Aid Y.M.C.A. in Geneva, the American Y.M.C.A. is supplying to each American prisoner in Germany a wooden box about 18 inches by 9 by 9, equipped with a catch and a handle. This box becomes the prisoner's private locker where he may keep his toothbrush, razor, soap and other personal items. There, too, he may store the items distributed to accompany the gift box, as described in Supplement 2.

Our organization is helping to make available to prisoners of war the textbooks and all supporting educational materials of the United States Armed Forces Institute. The men are encouraged to register their study preferences with our Geneva office. Textbooks for the most generally requested courses already have been shipped in considerable quantity to Geneva. For other courses, especially those of college, professional and vocational school levels, textbooks will be promptly sent from America on the registration in Geneva of the prisoner's own request. Frequent cables transfer these requests to New York.

On more than one occasion, the German Commandant at Oflag 64 has spoken with admiration of the remarkable discipline maintained among the prisoners there. No comment could be more indicative of the morale of both the Senior American Officer and his companions behind the wire.

Just as the foregoing was written, the following message from that same Senior Officer by cable from Geneva: "You have indeed given us utmost satisfaction in caring for our needs, and we are particularly grateful for the frequent visits of your representative, Mr. Soderberg, and the efficient manner in which he looks after things. The YMCA certainly has faithfully carried out the duties entrusted to it, and it has been a great factor in the morale and welfare of the prisoners of war. We shall never forget."

February 1944

DH