

Chapter 17 – ACT 4 – The Evacuation of Sagan [v9]



HITLER'S LAST PUSH

Christmas 1944 found FDR grimly surveying Belgium's Ardennes region on "Germany and Its Approaches" (left). Overlays showed Hitler's final offensive, the Battle of the Bulge. Especially worrisome, the Fifth Panzer Army

(Fifth PZ on the map) had pushed past Allied lines at night under "artificial moonlight" created by searchlights bouncing off low clouds.

By January, when U. S. troops were photographed in an Ardennes chow line, Germany's last major push had sputtered.

Preparing for the war's end, planners at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) used "Germany and Its Approaches" to plot Operation Jubilent (above), a never used plan for paratroopers to rescue prisoners of war.

The British also relied on Society maps. The War Office reprinted 50,000 copies of "Germany and Its Approaches."



Most of the February Edition of the YMCA "War Prisoners Aid News" reported on the highly emotional Red Cross next of kin meetings with repatriated-POWs started in late January. After the D-Day invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, when Allied forces began to sweep across German territory, POWs were liberated and began the process of rejoining their units or going home. At first it was only a trickle of men but at least the logistics of repatriation were being tested.

British Aid Freed PWs
LONDON, Feb. 27 (AP).—War Secretary Grigg told Commons today that the British military mission in Russia is being heavily strengthened to assist Soviet officers in taking care of Allied war prisoners liberated from German camps.

Captive Yanks Home Quickly
(Special to The News)
Washington, D. C., Oct. 18.—American prisoners of war will be returned to the United States within 60 days after being liberated and will be given priority over other casualties, except sick and wounded, said the War Department today.
It is recognized that these men require assistance in overcoming effects of prolonged captivity, so a speedy return home is considered a good start toward complete rehabilitation.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

RUSSIA SPEEDING CAPTIVES' RETURN

Odessa Camp Set Up to Ease Problem of Americans and Britons Freed From Enemy

MOSCOW, Feb. 26 (AP)—About 1,000 Americans and 2,500 British Empire prisoners of war liberated from German camps by the Red Army will be sent home shortly from a repatriation camp set up at Odessa, Rear Admiral E. R. Archer, chief of the British military mission to Moscow, announced today.

The first group is expected to arrive at the Black Sea port Wednesday. Names of the liberated men will be sent to Washington and London. Most of the men are en route by train from Poland and East Prussia.

American, British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand teams will look after their nationals. Several tons of clothing, medical supplies, chocolates and cigarettes, mostly from the Red Cross, have been collected.

American and British Empire officers will work with the Russians in gathering many hundreds of former prisoners still believed to be in various parts of Poland and East Prussia and those who might fall into the hands of the Red Army as it moves through Germany.

The liberated prisoners are believed to include mainly ground troops.

To aid soldiers not already in contact with the Red Army, entire areas probably will have billboards telling them where to go for repatriation. The authorities also hope to make broadcasts in English, Russian and Polish directing former prisoners to collection points.

The first group at the camp will be sent home on British ships.

Some Germans have tried to pass themselves off to the Russians as Americans, British or Canadians.

LONDON, Feb. 26 (AP)—The British War Office said tonight that it had been informed that 4,000 sick American and British prisoners of war had left Stalag 344 at Lamsdorf, Germany, for another German prison camp. The War Office said also that prisoners from Stalag 8 had been divided, some proceeding toward Kassel, others to Nuremberg, and that captives from Stalag 8c were moving toward Hanover and Kassel.

The anxiety in the eyes of the attendees of these YMCA meetings - fathers, mothers, siblings and wives – and the weariness of the former POWs jumps out of the photographs still today.

WAR PRISONERS AID NEWS

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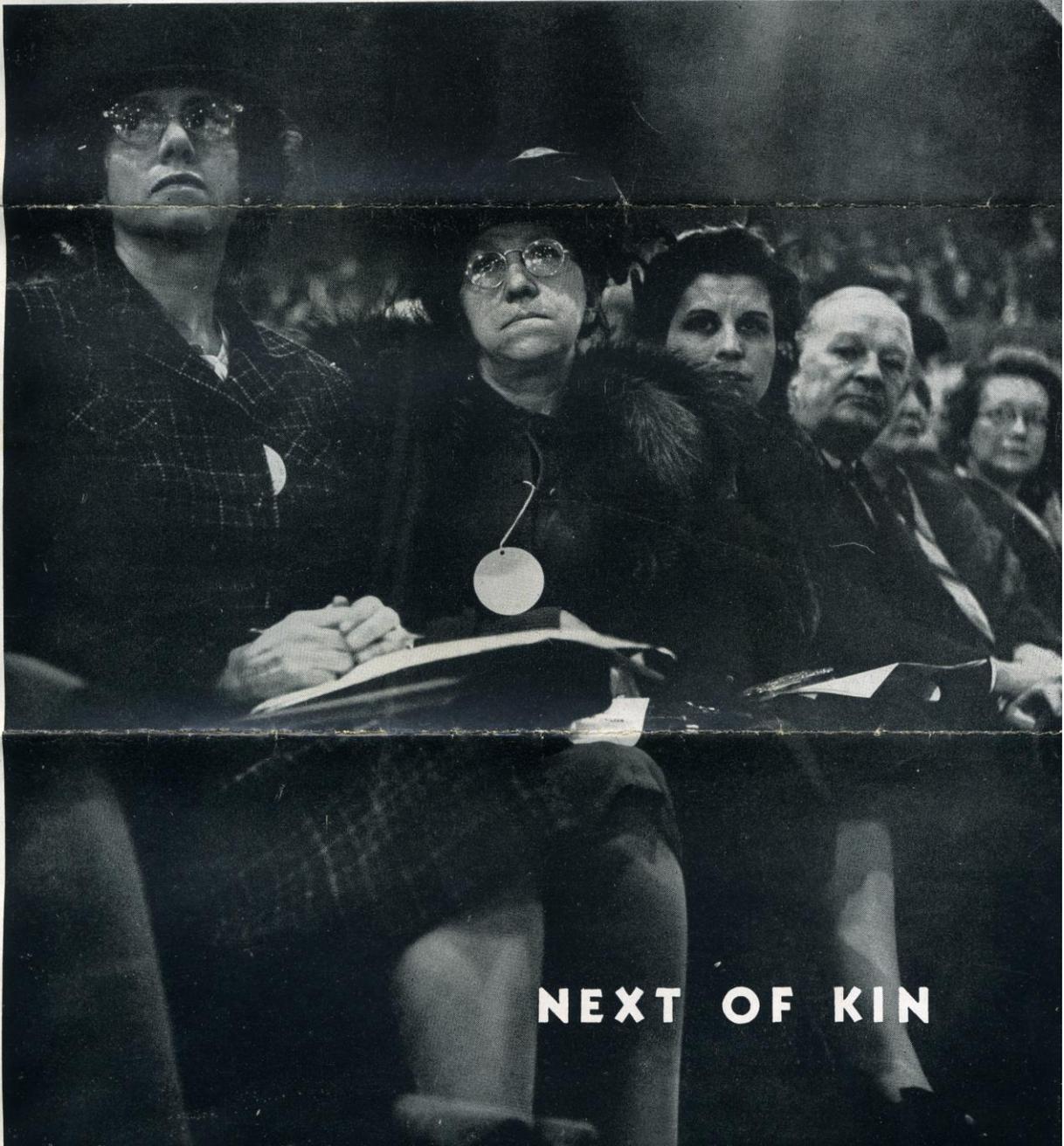
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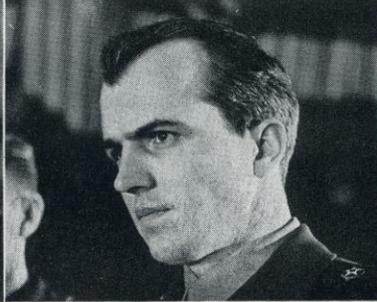


NEXT OF KIN

Dozen Purple Heart Holders Tell of Prison Life



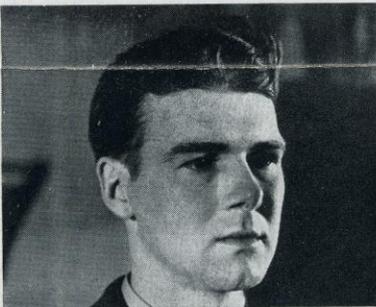
Corp. Willard W. Hall
Camps I and II, the Philippines



Capt. Ragnar Barhaug
Dulag Luft, Stalag Luft III



Staff Sgt. Ralph I. Tomek
7A, 3B, 8B, 17B, 13B, 14B



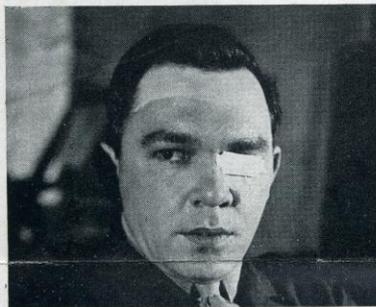
Lt. William F. Higgins, Jr.
Stalag Luft III



Lt. James N. Groves
Heilag 4D/Z



Staff Sgt. Azzan McKagan
Dulag Luft, 17B, Heilag 4D/Z



Staff Sgt. Edward P. Troy
Stalag 9C



Sgt. Harold Sheahan
Dulag Luft, Stalag 17B



Staff Sgt. Martin W. Nissen
Stalag Luft VI



Lt. Stewart E. Cooper
Stalag Luft III



Lt. Cecil B. Fisher
Dulag Luft, Stalag Luft I



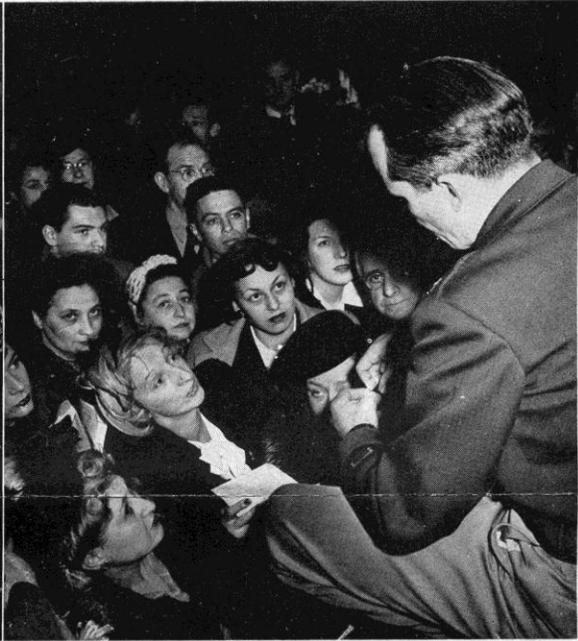
Tech. 3rd Grade Donald I. McPherson
Malay-Balay, Davao, Lansang



NOT AN EYE STRAYS FROM SPEAKERS AS PRISONERS RELATE EXPERIENCES

In an atmosphere reminiscent of a political convention, the thousands of next of kin have eyes and ears for but one thing—to get all the hope and comfort they can from the talks of the former prisoners. Because all the men have been wounded, they take turns, three or four speaking in each city. All, though,

meet with the smaller camp groups and try to answer as many questions as possible before their leader, Capt. Ragnar Barhaug (who became a father as the trip got underway) calls a halt to save their strength. As long as there is a former prisoner in sight, the relatives remain, hoping to ask one more question.



The moment all the next of kin wait for is when the former prisoners come down into the audience to meet with groups representing the larger camps. Sometimes agency representatives, such as Sadie James of the Red Cross (left, above) help answer questions when they come too thick and fast for even Capt. Barhaug (upper right) to handle. Most pressing of all the crowds are those who gather about Corp. Hall (below) or T/3

McPherson who escaped from the Japanese when their prison ship was torpedoed. Prison camp buddies, they were two of 83 Americans who survived the sinking. Separated when the ship sank, they swam to a Philippine island, and nearly got into a fight because each thought the other was a Japanese when they met on shore. They tell how the men in their camp caught huge pythons to supplement meager prison meals. Fried, they tasted like chicken.



Next of Kin Get First-Hand News:

Tears and Cheers Follow Former Prisoners on U.S. Tour

Tears and cheers of relatives of American soldiers held captive by the enemy follow the twelve former war prisoners who are touring the country to tell prisoners' loved ones of their experiences behind the barbed wire of the Germans and Japanese.

Pictured on these pages are highlights of the first meeting on the 31-city tour. It was held at the historic Seventh Regiment Armory in New York and drew thousands of next of kin from the metropolitan area. The News presents these pictures because they are typical, on a grand scale, of the dramas enacted at hundreds of places throughout the country since the fall of the Philippines.

The huge throngs attracted by the present tour are the only way to get so many former prisoners before so many people, but it is in the smaller, more intimate meetings held at Y.M.C.A.'s or Red Cross chapters that the highest values of such gatherings are achieved. In these smaller meetings the relatives of prisoners are able to exchange news about the camps and, perhaps more importantly, get that boost in morale that comes from sharing troubles and having kinship in a common cause.

The tour is being conducted by the War Department with the Red Cross handling arrangements for the meetings. At all of the meetings, representatives of the War Department, the Red Cross and the Y.M.C.A. tell briefly of the work being done by their agencies. The tour is another example of the fine cooperation that exists between these three organizations in serving prisoners of war and their next of kin.

Relatives of prisoners are seated according to the camps their men are in, and after the formal part of the meeting has been completed, the dozen former prisoners on the tour go out into the audience to meet with the camp groups. The personnel making the tour has been selected carefully to cover as many of the large camps where there are Americans as possible. Of course, the rapidly changing prisoner of war picture in Germany means that some camps in which the ex-kriegies were held have been evacuated or over-run, but their experiences remain typical and their stories continue to hold the crowds spell-bound.

Pathos and humor are mixed in the reports of the men, all wearers of the Purple Heart for wounds received in action, as they describe the way in which Yank prisoners meet the monotonous, bleak and cheerless prison life with irrepressible humor and fortitude.

Sgt. Harold Sheahan, the tour's humorist, tells how he helped make the days of his captivity at Dulag Luft more bearable by teaching the Germans to play a new tune. They

never discovered, while he was in the camp, that it was "Right in the Fuehrer's Face."

All of the repatriated prisoners pay warm tribute to the work of the Y.M.C.A. and Red Cross.



DID YOU SEE MY BOY? That is the question most frequently asked the former captives by relatives anxious to hear some word about their boys still in the hands of the enemy. Sometimes the prisoners are able to say, "Yes, I knew Bill. When I left the camp he was in good health." But more often the men must explain, "I'm sorry, there were so many men in the camp, you know." In the above picture a mother eagerly shows a photo of her prisoner-son to Lt. William F. Higgins, Jr., who was interned for 13 months with other Yank air officers at Stalag Luft III.

Somewhat lost in the coverage of these meeting, however, there were a few references to an impending change in the welfare of the men still held as prisoners. Unfortunately, by the time this edition of the newsletter was published the Death Marches of Europe were well underway.

Camp Leaders Say Supplies Combat Prisons' Tedium

Libraries, bands, dramatics, and educational courses made available to them through supplies and materials furnished by War Prisoners Aid of the Y.M.C.A. have brought relief from the tedium of camp life to the prisoners of Stalag Luft 4, Stalag 7 B and Ilag 7 Laufen, according to recent reports.

T/Sgt. Paules, the American leader at Stalag Luft 4 writes:

"On behalf of 8,600 American NCO's, I wish to extend sincere thanks to the Y.M.C.A. for the shipments received during the past six months which brought a change to the camp which we did not believe possible.

Four Sections Well Served

"Each of our four sections now has a band, library, educational facilities, and amateur theatricals. Each section had special holiday decorations for the Christmas season.

"Christian Christiansen of the Y.M.C.A. has been our most constant friend and faithful counselor from the world outside our prison camp and we were delighted that he could spend three days with us at Christmas time.

"We all want people at home to know that we appreciate the Y.M.C.A., and that our ability to have a pleasant Christmas was due almost entirely to the 'Y.'"

From Francis J. Sboril, the American leader at Stalag 7 B comes word that:

"We wish to express our gratitude for favors received during the past year. The band instruments, sports equipment, and games which were sent are giving us many hours of pleasure."

Four Libraries at Ilag 7

Herbert Gompertz, American leader at Ilag 7 Laufen sends word to War Prisoners Aid that:

"Contrary to expectations, we are still imprisoned. Nevertheless, we have some things to be thankful for. If our camp life is not unbearable, it is thanks to a great extent to the generous donations of sports, educational, and religious supplies received from the Y.M.C.A.

"We now have two fiction and two educational libraries. Our manifold sporting activities include even skating. We are lucky to have a band and are well supplied with art and craft material.

"The visits of Erik K. Berg of the 'Y' are always eagerly anticipated. We feel that he gives us sound advice."

Health, Morale at 3C Good With Camp Well Organized

Prison Camp Picture Changing Rapidly

In Germany the prisoner of war situation is undergoing rapid changes as the Allies press in from both the Eastern and Western fronts, forcing the Germans to evacuate prison camps and move the men to interior locations. Some of the best known German camps, such as Oflag 64 and Stalag Luft III, have been over-run by the Russians.

This shifting of prisoners presents many problems for the men themselves, their captors and the Y.M.C.A. and Red Cross. In all likelihood conditions in the camps will tend to deteriorate as they become more and more crowded from the relocating of prisoners and the capturing of additional ones. These changes may mean that some of the reports presented in this issue of the News no longer reflect an entirely accurate picture. Latest word from Geneva was that Y.M.C.A. aid to the prisoners was continuing under difficult circumstances.

Radio Shows Being Sent Yank Prisoners

At their request, American prisoners of war in Germany are to receive recordings of American radio programs through War Prisoners Aid of the Y.M.C.A.

Special arrangements have been made with sponsors as well as with the American Federation of Musicians and the American Federation of Radio Artists. The programs are to be recorded on twelve inch discs, with all commercial announcements deleted.

Programs now in the process of preparation include "The Hour of Charm," sponsored by General Electric; "Cavalcade of America," with Fredric March, sponsored by du Pont; "The Eddie Cantor Show" and "Duffy's Tavern," sponsored by Bristol-Myers; "The Frank Morgan Show"; Dinah Shore; "The Aldrich Family"; "The Fanny Brice Show"; Kate Smith and "The Thin Man," all sponsored by General Foods; "Miss Hattie," with Ethel Barrymore, sponsored by the Aluminum Company of America, and "Gaslight Gayeties," sponsored by Proctor and Gamble, also "Matinee Theatre," sponsored by the Vick Chemical Company.

Health and morale of American non-commissioned officers interned in Stalag 3 C in Germany was said to be good in a report made by Christian Christiansen, Y.M.C.A. worker, following a visit he made to the camp on December 19th.

The Americans who arrived in the camp during the past three months were said to have the camp life well organized and to be enjoying good relations with the other nationalities in the camp. The Americans, Mr. Christiansen said, are very popular. He reported that classes had been organized in English, French, German, Spanish, History and Mathematics.

Church Services Held

Protestant church services were being held on Wednesdays and Sundays with a Sergeant Santroch serving as lay preacher.

Sports equipment, paper, games and books arrived from Y.M.C.A. headquarters at Sagan and Geneva and more equipment was said to be en route to the camp to help fill the needs, which are still great.

A Corporal Simson was reported to be the camp librarian.

A twelve piece orchestra has been organized and a theater group started. Mr. Christiansen said, adding that more musical instruments were needed for the camp.

Boxing Match in Snow

While at Stalag 3 C, the Y.M.C.A. worker attended an hour and a half boxing program held outdoors in "frost, snow and terrible wind." That evening there was a jazz concert with an attendance of 800.

Mr. Christiansen was said to be the first outsider to visit the Americans since their arrival in the camp. In commenting on the health of the prisoners he stated that there were very few hospital cases.

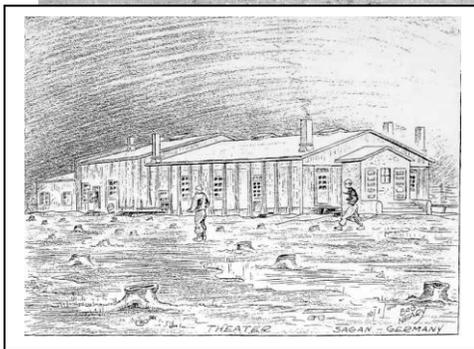
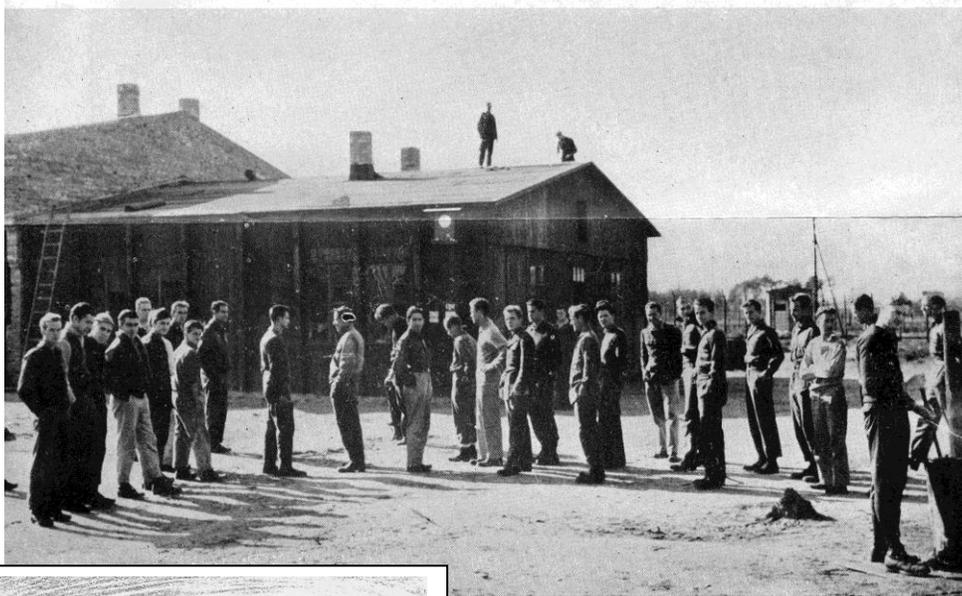
"Life in prison would have been unbearable without the help of your organization and the American Red Cross," Lt. A. L. Battalion, formerly a prisoner at Oflag 64, declared in a letter to War Prisoners Aid of the Y.M.C.A. "In Oflag 64, where I was interned, you did everything except remove the barbed wire fences and guards. The books, the more than ample supply of sports equipment, the musical instruments, the theatrical supplies and numerous other items you sent were the important factors in maintaining our morale. You kept reminding us, in so many ways, that the folks back home had not forgotten us."

Last Pictures Received from Stalag Luft III



In this issue the *News* presents the last pictures received from Stalag Luft III. Should others as good be received later they will be printed even though the camp has been over-run by the Russians, for good pictures showing life in prison camps are still

rare. In the photo above, a group of American airmen apparently are engaged in clearing a field for athletics, while the one below shows Americans standing outside the theater they built with lumber supplied by the Y.M.C.A. through facilities in Sweden



Pencil sketch of the compound theater. One of many excellent drawings by former POW Bob Neary.

By early February it was known that the Russians were closing in on the eastern German front. Although it was good news for the Allies it was confusing and brought much tension to the folks back home.



The pressure was on and by February 15, 1945, it was clear that the Germans were taking action to prevent liberation of the remaining POWs, especially the American and British flyers,.

Nazis Herd U. S. Captives Out of Russians' Path

Red Cross Reports Most Transfers Being Made on Foot

WASHINGTON, Feb. 15 (AP).—Great numbers of American and Allied prisoners of war, whom the Germans are transferring out of the path of Russian armies, are making the trip on foot. Reporting this tonight, the American Red Cross said the Geneva Convention permits prisoners to make maximum daily marches of up to twelve and a half miles unless longer ones are necessary to reach food and shelter.

Basil O'Connor, chairman of the Red Cross, said he had received a cable from Geneva designating five military districts from which prisoners are being transferred.

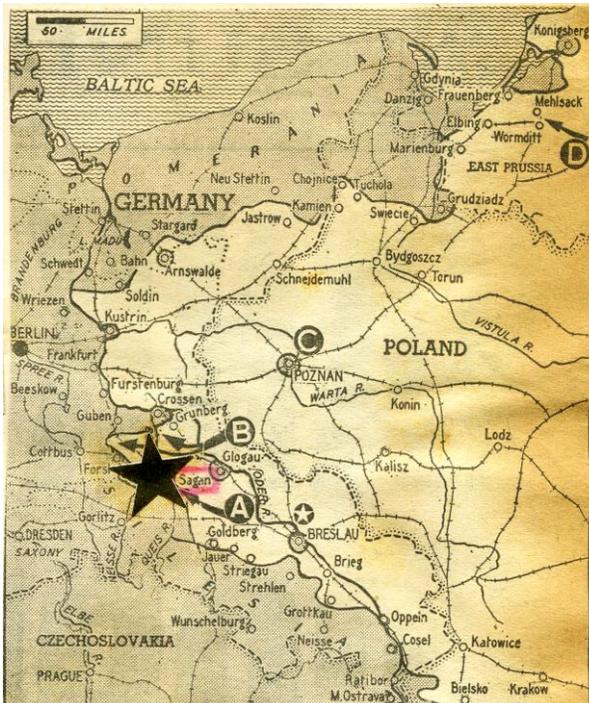
As of Jan. 1, Red Cross maps show that approximately 29,000 Americans were held in camps in those districts. Six major American camps—Stalags II B, III B, III C; Stalag Lufts III and IV and Oflag 64—were known to be in those areas, along with many other prisoner-of-war camps containing few Americans, and hospitals for prisoners.

Mr. O'Connor said that Stalags VIII B and 344, farther east, were previously reported moved. Those camps had contained fifty-eight Americans as of last November.

Until new addresses are received families are advised by the War Department to address mail to previously reported addresses.

"These movements of prisoners of war away from active military zones, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, are estimated to affect about 75 per cent of the American prisoners of war officially listed as held by Germany at the beginning of the year," O'Connor said in a statement.

Four days later more good news arrived.



(NEWS map by Staff Artist)
Soviets toppled Sagan (A) and advanced to the Neisse River midway between Cottbus and Guben (B), both reported in flames. Fall of Poznan (C) appeared near as Berlin reported Reds fighting into center of city. Soviet spearheads also penetrated encircled Breslau (starred). In East Prussia, capture of Mehlsack and Wormditt (D) was announced by Stalin.



PUSH ON . . . The narrowing Eastern Front closing in on Berlin is indicated here. The Russian siege army has broken into Breslau, the Germans report; other Soviet forces have bagged Sagan and reached the Neisse River on a broad front within a few miles of Cottbus. The fall of by-passed Poznan appeared near.

Reds Seize Sagan on Berlin Road

Reds Seize Sagan; Planes Lash Berlin's Approaches

By ROBERT MUSEL

LONDON, Feb. 17 (UP)—Red Army assault forces today toppled the medieval fortress town of Sagan, 86 miles southeast of Berlin, while sky-filling fleets of Russian planes, flying 10,000 sorties a day, lashed Berlin's outskirts ahead of advancing Soviet spearheads.

In the Sagan area, the Russians captured three big allied prisoner of war camps. It was not known whether the Germans evacuated the thousands of allied soldiers and airmen.

Loss of Sagan, last major fortress on Germany's Oder River defense line, was admitted by the Nazi command.

Marshal Stalin announced capture of Wormditt and Mehlsack, East Prussia strongholds. Red Army troops reduced to a mere 600 square miles the enemy's last hold in East Prussia. Remnants of 200,000 trapped Germans were being wiped out.

On the southeastern roads to Berlin, Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Army, sweeping far northwest of Sagan, was reported by Pravda to have reached the Neisse River line at a point about 54 miles southeast of the capital.

[Col. Ernest von Hammer of the DNB agency said nervously in a Berlin broadcast that "the most stupendous and decisive battle of the war can be expected in a few days," and predicted its full might will be experienced "in the Oder sector between Frankfurt and the Oderbruch northwest of Kuestrin."]

Nazis Apply Torch

Pravda said Konev's troops had reached the Neisse on a wide front and were 12 miles east of Cottbus, 47 miles southeast of Berlin. They were 10 miles from the River Spree.

His troops also converged on Cottbus' twin citadel of Guben, 51 miles from Berlin. That city, like Cottbus, was within artillery range.

Moscow dispatches said the industrial towns between the Neisse and Spree—apparently including Guben and Cottbus—were in flames as the Germans applied the torch to them, just ahead of Konev's troops speeding toward Berlin in American-made armored cars.

Konev's troops officially were within 17 miles of a junction with the bridgeheads on the west bank of the Oder River which Berlin said Marshal Zhukov's 1st White Russian Army had built up.

South of besieged Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, 33 miles east of Berlin, Zhukov's artillery, by day and night, poured devastating fire on the big super-highway leading west to Berlin.

Reds Smash Ahead; 60 Mi. to Dresden

By ROBERT MUSEL

London, Sunday, Feb. 17 (U.P.)—Russian troops, smashing across the enemy's Queis River defense line, yesterday drove to within 60 miles of Dresden, capital of Saxony, while Berlin reported that the medieval fortress town of Sagan southeast of Berlin, had fallen.

Road



(NEWS man by Staff Artist)
Moscow yesterday confirmed encirclement of Breslau (A). In the Glogau area (B), the Reds were within 35 miles of the Elbe River. Other Russian forces were bearing down on the Nazis' Spree River defenses in the Cottbus-Guben sector (C). To the north, Bahn (D) fell to the Reds, according to German reports.

BULLETIN

London, Feb. 18 (U.P.)— Russian troops in Silesia have captured the towns of Sagan and Naumburg, Moscow announced tonight.



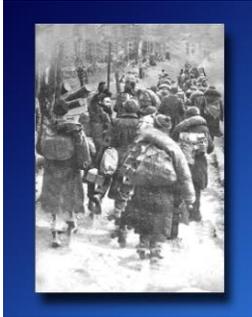
TAKE POW CAMPS.

Germany's communique announced the Russian capture of Sagan, by-passed rail center, 85 miles southeast of Berlin, but Moscow neither confirmed the seizure of that town nor the Oder River stronghold of Crossen, 63 miles southeast of the capital.

Officially the Russians were placed only one and a half miles outside Crossen, and three and one-half miles south of Sagan with the capture of Hermsdorf.

[In the Sagan area, UP said, the Russians captured three big Allied prisoner of war camps, but it was not known whether the Germans had evacuated the thousands of Allied soldiers and airmen.]

But where are they?



The evacuations of the POW camps have many names and are recollected in numerous stories. One thing was certain, however, every prison camp had its march. They are called "**The Great March West**", "**The Long March**", "**The Long Walk**", "**The Long Trek**", "**The Black March**", "**The Bread March**", "**The Death March**", but most survivors just called it "**The March**".

Some were only a few days long, some covered 500 miles lasted for months. Some ended as the evacuees and their guards were overtaken by Soviet units coming from the east, others ended in another prison camp and some ended in liberation. Each prisoner remembers his march differently, very differently!! Individuals often cannot even agree on the route, let alone the temperature, the weather, the behavior of the German guards, the German civilians, or one's fellow Kriegies. Although the specifics in these memoirs vary there is a constant theme of fighting for survival in the brutality of the event.

What follows at this point in the story is the probable route taken by George and his fellow POWs in early 1945. I arrived at it by connecting the dots of bits and pieces that he told me, his collection of memorabilia and historical records and reconstructions from numerous sources on the internet.

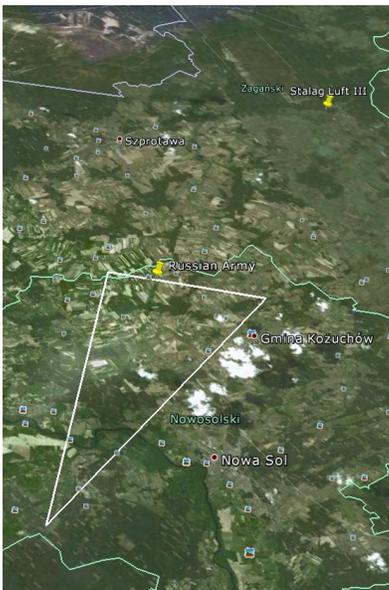
As I write the narrative behind these maps I will intersperse recollections by other survivors who have taken the time to document their memories in their own books and stories as well as a few photos taken then and today. I am confident this captures George's experience and I now understand how this experience changed his life forever.



THE MARCH

It was around January 12, 1945, as the temperature hit a new low for the winter when the Russians started their long-awaited winter offensive into Poland and East Prussia. The Krieges watched breathlessly as the Russians broke the back of German resistance and took Warsaw and Kracow and advanced on Posen and Breslau. Toward the end of the month they could hear the big guns.

On January 27, 1945, the Russian armies advancing from the east were putting Stalag Luft camps at risk. The huge Russian offensive was driving into Germany and would inevitably overrun Sagan and *Stalag Luft III*. Marshal G. K. Zhukov's First White Russian Army was advancing into Silesia and had reached the Oder River at a point only sixteen miles East of Sagan.



LtGen Clark: *"It was perfectly obvious when they got thirty miles or so away that the Germans were going to have to make an important decision – whether to let us be liberated by the Russians or whether to try to keep us. And Hitler's personal decision was 'Don't let the Luftgangsters be liberated by the Russians. I want to keep them as hostages.'"*

At his 4:30 staff meeting in Berlin that very afternoon, Adolf Hitler had issued the order to evacuate Stalag Luft III. He was fearful that the 11,000 Allied airmen in the camp would be liberated by the Russians and returned to action against him. A spearhead of Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev's Southern Army had now pierced to within 12 miles of the camp.

Speculation was rife on whether the POWs would be moving or not and betting odds were slightly in favor of not moving.

Andrew Turner: *"It was surmised one of three things would happen. The first was that the Russians would overtake the camp and the Goons [German guards]* would surrender or flee. If this happened, the Kriegies expected their liberation would come without fear. The second option may be an order from a fervent Nazi official for the prisoners to be executed. If this was the case, the Goons were sure to have a fight on their hands. The last option would be a mass march across Germany. To this option, American Brigadier General Charles Vandermann said, "In that event we will suffer many casualties and it will be a March of Death." This last option was soon to become a reality."*

* [German Officer Of Non-commissioned Status – a title never understood by the Germans to be an insult.

Nothing in Shakespeare could match the impact of the short speech delivered in the middle of the second act of [ironically] "You Can't Take It With You" at the South Compound Theater that night. Making an unscripted entrance, Col. Charles G. Goodrich, the senior American officer, strode center stage and announced, "The Goons have just given us 30 minutes to be at the front gate! Get your stuff together and line up!"

In the barracks following Colonel Goodrich's dramatic announcement, there was a frenzy of preparation -- of improvised packsacks made out of shirts and rolled blankets being loaded with essentials, distribution of stashed food, and of putting on layers of clothing against the Silesian winter. Stalag Luft III's time came in the midst of the worst European winter in decades.

Andrew Turner: *"The next forty minutes of accelerated activities surpassed all records for assembling and preparing for a mass-moving project. Closets were emptied, food divided, packs rolled, beds disassembled, kitchens stripped of food and dishes, tools and weapons were uncovered. Most of us dressed with two pairs of socks, two suits of underwear, two shirts, overcoat, hat and G.I. gloves. By ten-thirty most of us were ready and waiting to move out.*

Vernon L. Burda: *"Men rushed about making packs, bashing food, throwing away useless articles and preparing to move. Joe Doherty ran to the kitchen and started making a huge batch of fudge--it really seemed funny at the time. Everyone's bowels moved about three or four times in the first hour. Boy, what excitement!! At the last moment, I decided to make a sled and Schauer and I took four bedboards--used to as runners and two for the platform and put tin on the runners."*



This photo was taken with a clandestine camera. It shows one of the many sleds that were hastily hammered together from bed boards. It proved easier to pull a load of up to six backpacks than to carry them on one's back.



The Red Cross stores were distributed to the POWs with each taking a parcel and more if they could carry it. Some POWs chose not to take any at all because of the additional 11 pounds of dead weight. This box above contained four standard Red Cross food parcels. These shipping boxes were used for many things, including the lining of the Great Escape tunnel. (Remarkably after the liberation, the box shown here was sent to Lt. General A. P. Clark's home address by an intelligence officer. It arrived before Clark got home, and contained two of his scrapbooks and a bound volume of the Luftwaffe magazine, *Der Adler*.)

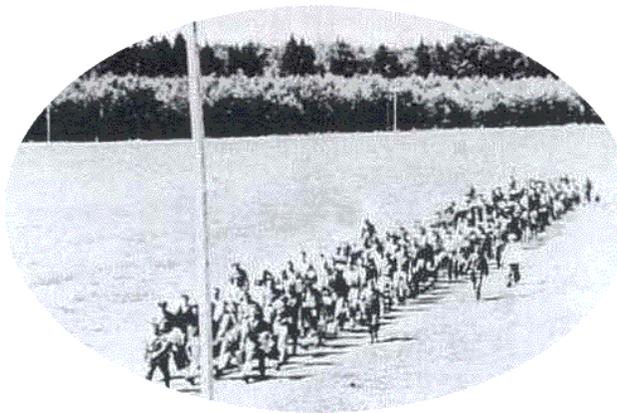
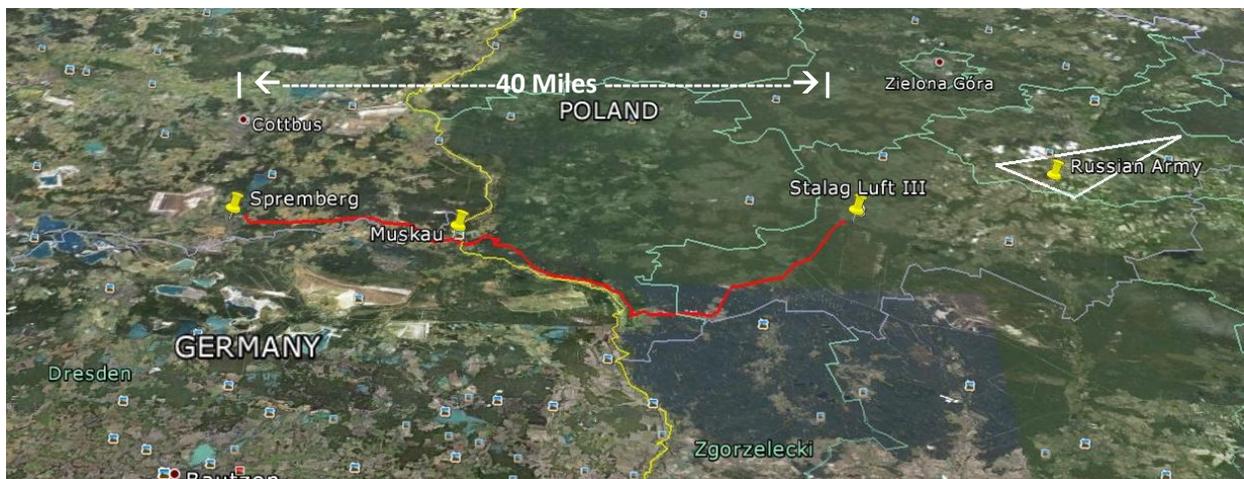
As the men lined up outside their cell blocks, snow covered the ground six inches deep and was still falling. Guards with sentinel dogs herded them through the main gate. Outside the wire, Kriegies waited and were counted, and waited again for two hours as the icy winds penetrated their multilayered clothes and froze stiff the shoes on their feet.

Finally, commanded by their senior officer, Colonel Goodrich, the first POW's groups from the American South Compound set out with the last POW leaving the camp gate at 11 p.m. in the teeth of a blizzard. Next, at 0.30 a.m. American POWs set out from the Western Compound, then at 3.45 a.m. from the Northern (Col. Wilson from RAF) and the Central (Col. Delmar T.

Spivey from USAF), and at 6 a.m. from the Eastern Compound. By the time the last compound left the camp on the 28th the column was already eight miles long.

The senior officers were in charge of prisoners of war and as their commanders mediated between their charges and the Germans. This was a fairly straight forward task while following routine procedures in camp but marching through a blizzard under armed guard was a whole other story.

George was right behind the South Compound groups with officers in the West Compound which had been opened in July of 1944, two months after he was captured and a little more than a month after he arrived at Stalag Luft III.



Some 11,000-plus soldiers went on the march from Stalag Luft III, with many hundreds of them dying in the -25°C (-13°F) temperatures along the way.



They were told anyone who tried to escape would be shot, but few really believed that.

Andrew Turner - *“The situation was even more grim for the Goons who would be guarding them than for the Kriegies themselves; there were about 8 guards for every 100 prisoners. The Goons were just as cold, just as hungry, and just as ready for the war to end as the prisoners.”*

Quentin Richard Peterson: *“When men fell from exhaustion or injury they were not, as the rumor had it, shot. Neither were they picked up on a sick-cart (another rumor) and carried on to the next destination. Rather, they were just left behind. We discussed, on the March, that freezing to death might not really be such a bad way to go.”*

At first groups were going in dense columns, which hour by hour stretched for huge distances. At the beginning, the columns were 600 feet in length but stretched out to over a mile as they moved.

Out front, the 2,000 men of the South Camp were pushed to their limits and beyond, to clear the road for the 8,000 behind them. Hour after hour, they plodded through the blackness of night, a blizzard swirling around them, winds driving below-zero temperatures. Within hours, the bitter cold along with the malnourished condition of the prisoners began to take its toll.

Lt. Richard Schiefelbusch: *“ We had strange, mixed feelings – glad to be leaving the camp, but fearful about our future in the extremely cold, snowy night. After several hours of marching the German command arranged for us to stop for rest and to receive rations. Unfortunately the stopping place was a windswept autobahn. The food supplied was black bread and white margarine. After about an hour we went on with the march, much colder and less confident than before. One of the principal aspects of our march was the excessive number of civilians, especially old people and children who were crowding the roads as we moved toward our still unknown destination. They were, of course trying to escape westward to avoid the Russian armies that were over running their villages and their homes. The estimates that were given in the historical account of this migration were 6,000,000 people. They were mainly Polish and German. It was the most abject, massive human tragedy that I have ever seen. The procession included people with small horse drawn carts, wagons, and people with sleds and people with backpacks, all trying to survive.”*

Kenneth Simmons: *“Our travel along the highway was almost paralyzed by the thousands of people moving in one direction. These civilians were bitter and demoralized, and many of them, I felt sure, would rather surrender to the Russians than continue. The civilians were, in fact, prisoners too, for the S.S. troops moved them by the*

force of rifles and bayonets. Every now and then some civilian would sit down and refuse to go on. A rifle shot allowed the civilian to sit there forever.”

Vernon L. Burda - *“The column of men was terrifically long and we moved slowly. Along the highway ... we met the once mighty WERMACHT SKI TROOPERS -- all in white-- and these "Supermen" were begging cigarettes from us as they passed. They were either 40 or 50 years old, or else young kids -- heading for the front.”*

Norman Grant: *“I think that column of personnel, POWs, from the five compounds must have totaled 20,000 to 25,000 people [ed. note – there were 11,000 POWs and 800 German guards]. To move out at midnight, in the dark of night, ill prepared for cold weather, certainly ill-prepared for survival in any way from the standpoint of foods, and moving out with all your possessions. As we went through the night ... the cold weather attacked some and they didn't make it. Can't speak the numbers or names, but there were people not in the column the morning following from the night before.”*



Tom Thomas: *“We started out in the worst blizzard that they had in Germany in about 25 years. It was cold, there was snow, it was blowing like you wouldn't believe. During the walk, once you sat down, you had to keep your feet moving your toes in your shoes, because if you didn't, they would freeze. It got so bad, a lot of the guys would start throwing all their packs away and I remember that I was one probably of those more fit than the other ones, and I would take packs from the other guys and carry them on my back so that guy could get up and start walking without his pack.”*

Milt Shalinsky: *“We walked for three solid days before we even stopped. I was in the South Compound. Well, they did stop sometimes right in the road and everybody just fell down in the snow. We were so frozen stiff, we couldn't be frozen any more.”*

Burton Joseph: *“I lay down in the snow because I was tired. I probably would have been left there and frozen to death if Junior Couch hadn’t taken a look at me and become obsessed with the fact that I was goofing off. And in whatever his condition was, he became angry and ended up kicking me good and hard until I finally, suddenly, came to, got up, and tried to hit him as hard as I could for kicking me, which was probably like a love tap, but he got me up and going.”*

John Cordwell: *“We wished we had died, sometimes. We reached the end of our physical endurance. We couldn’t survive marching like that, all the time. It’s interesting. You’re writing a story about it, you never realize what ice beating in your face will do over time. After a few days, our gums were all raw and bleeding, from gasping for air as we marched and the ice slashing in our faces. All the skin was ripped off our gums there. And our mouths were bleeding all the time.*

The cold weather resulted in frost bite and the walking caused blisters, a combination which caused some of the POW's to remove their shoes. The problem was once they had them off they could not get their shoes back on. Thus, many of the POWs never removed their shoes even though their feet felt so badly.

Quentin Richard Peterson: *“Daylight came and our path could be followed by the trail of items thrown away to lighten the packs. Even the old German guards were discarding ammunition packs to lighten their loads. At 10:00 am after marching 25 miles in a howling blizzard we reached Grosseiten [near Potok, Poland] where, after a couple of hours, and under Col. Jones' leadership, I joined many of my companions in the loft of a barn. My shoes were frozen and wet. But, I had to take them off.*

We lay together in the straw like spoons, each fart raising edginess and shouts. I slept. The bad time was waking up. Stiff and sore in every muscle and facing the shoe problem and continued marching. A horrific anticipation!

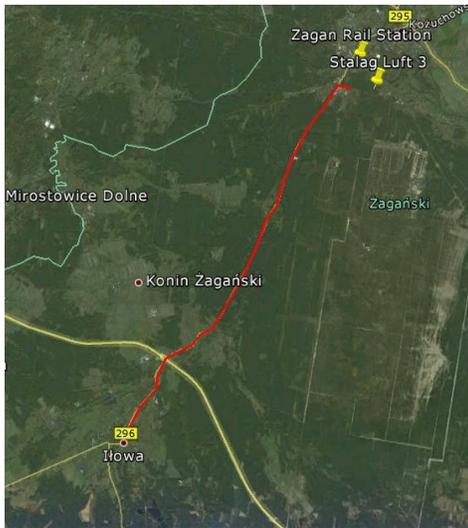
...We left the Grosseiten barn at about 6:00 p.m on January 28, just 20 hours after leaving the camp.”

Following behind the lead groups, the center compound made its first stop.

Vernon Burda: *“At 2:00 in the afternoon [January 28], we reached Halbau [Iłowa, Poland], which we found containing mostly French forced-laborers. The weather was freezing and several of us already had frostbitten feet and hands. We were finally put up-- about 2,000 of us--in a church, whose capacity was about 500. It was so crowded we all*

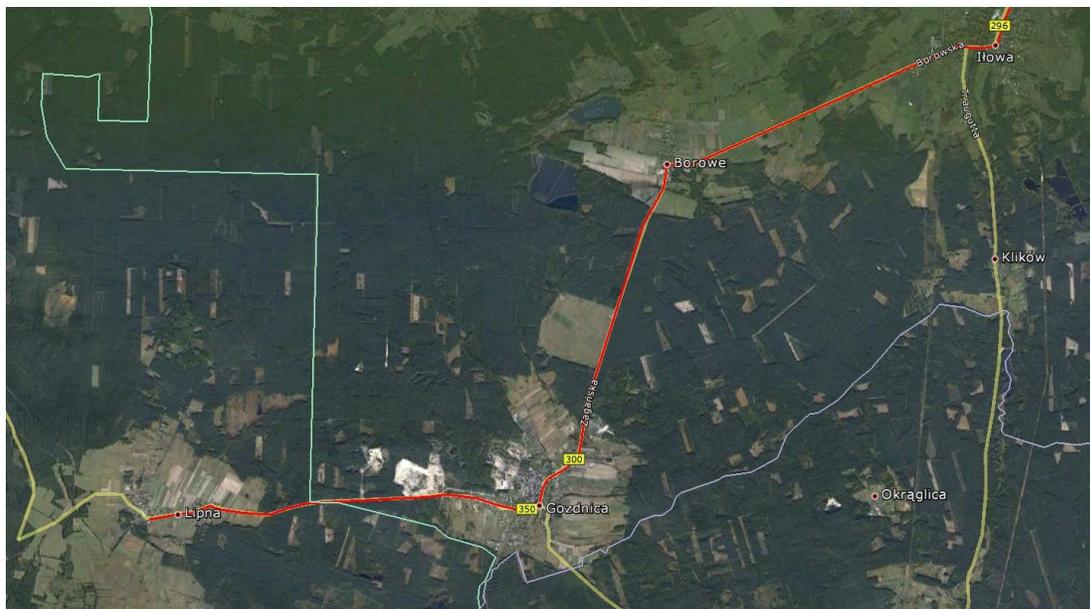
had to sleep in shifts, and it was very, very cold. We ate a late meal of cold meat and crackers.

This was where Center Compound spent its first night. 600 of the 2,000 POWs were crammed inside the church. The remainder were put in the church crypt and outside against the lee side of the church in the snow on some straw. The memorial plaque and stained glass seen at the church today were later paid for and installed by a POW organization in gratitude to the church and its German pastor who offered shelter and heat to the POWs.



Kenneth Simmons: *“The church was packed so tightly that any man who found it necessary to move more than a few feet was almost certain to step on someone else. Toilets were set up outside, and there was a continuous line to and from them. With two thousand men in one small building, lines were moving all night long. Many men became desperately sick to their stomach and were never able to reach the door. Dozens of men rushed up aisles vomiting all the way. Others with dysentery stepped on hands, feet, and stomachs, trying to get outside. Nerves were strained to the breaking point.”*

Vernon Burda: *“We left Halbau at dawn [January 29], cold and stiff and hungry. We walked past Freiweldau. It had a long hill in town and we were all so weak we had trouble making it. From there on, we hit flat farmland and the wind and cold blew through us. We finally came to a small village [“Grosselten” - somewhere near Lipna, Poland] where we were put in one-story barns--about 500 men to one barn. The only reason we got this stop was the fact that we had General Vanaman along with us.”*



POWs from South and North Compounds stayed in these barns for a night. While re-walking the path taken by their POW fathers, the mayor of Lipna came down and posed with the group in the center yard of the crumbling stone barns.



The manor house at the barns of Lipna where the German count and countess brought out water and soup to the marchers.

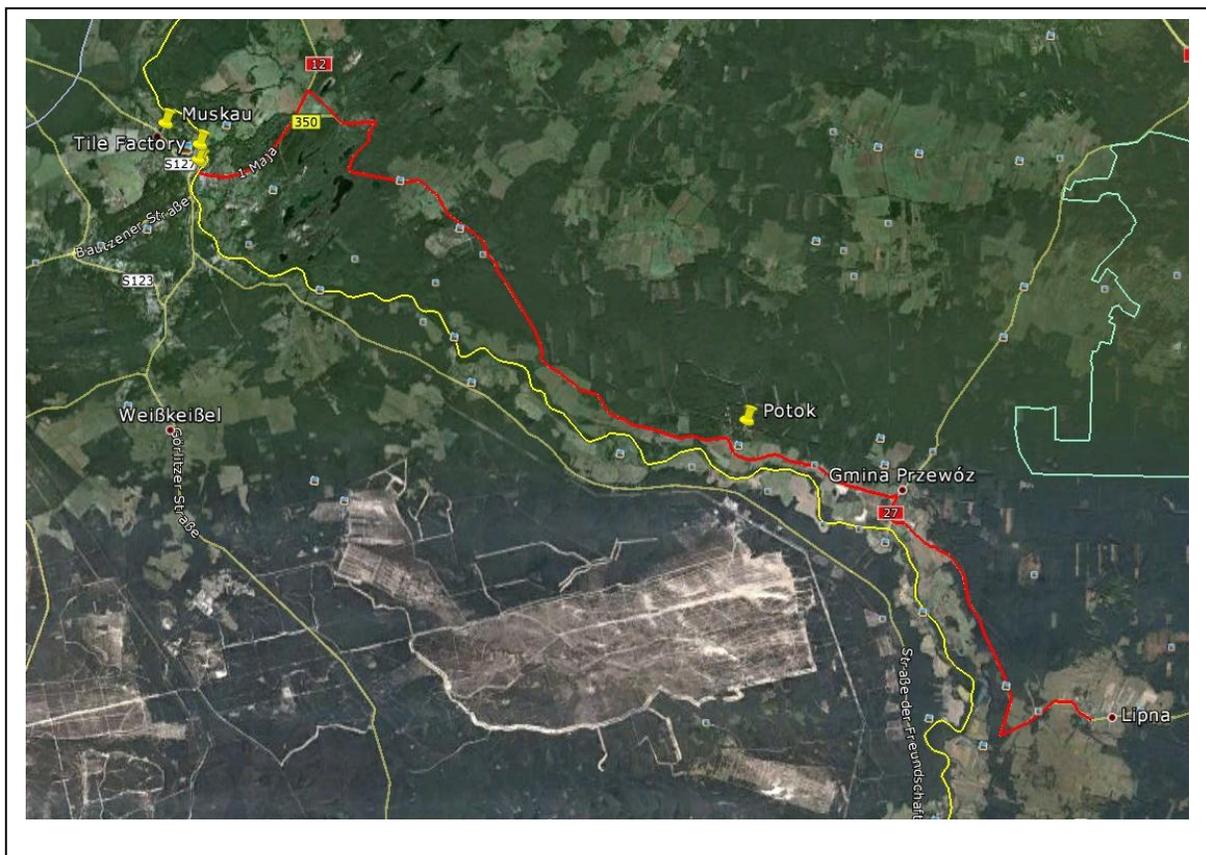
Vernon Burda: "It was so crowded that all of us could not sleep at the same time, so some would walk around while others slept. Still there was bitter cold and no German food. We were eating Red Cross food, cold, and it gave a lot of the fellows loose bowels.

The general [Vanaman] talked the Germans into letting us [ed note – POWs of the Central Compound] stay here for one extra day, in order to dry out socks and shoes and rest up. We would dry out socks by putting them next to our bodies while we slept. We

fixed our shoes, packs, and mittens here. We also did a little trading with the German civilians for onions, hot water and brew, in exchange for cigarettes and soap.”

Not everyone stayed in Lipna. The line of POWs stretched out over many miles through Borowe (Burau), Gozdnica (Freiwaldau), Przewóz (Priebus), Potok (Pattog) and Leknica (Lugknitz – near Muskau, Germany). During the march, the groups were mixing. The Western and Southern Compound groups met, and Northern and part of Eastern and Central and then the rest of Eastern Compound as well. Different groups were stopping for a rest accommodation in different places. POWs slept in barns and utility rooms in Borowe and Gozdnica and abandoned factories, buildings and empty churches if they were lucky to find one and be allowed to stop.

The final leg of this part of the evacuation turned out to be a long, long day, especially to those of the South Compound. This first group of POWs had walked, and walked and walked for 25 miles in 12 hours and, after finding shelter and only 4 hours sleep, walked another 12 miles over the next 8 hours. What made it so bad in the final push was the fact that the country was very hilly and the weather was so uncertain--it would snow one minute and then it would rain the next minute. They even had hail. They proceeded north along the Polish-German border crossing into Germany at Leknica, Poland. At 2:00 a.m. on January 29 the first men stumbled into Muskau, on German soil. They were pretty well exhausted when they arrived – and there were thousands more strung out behind them.



The Stalag Luft 3 POWs that survived the march to Muskau were to be sheltered in an industrial area, in abandoned ceramic and pottery factories and plant buildings. Across the river were glass factories. This was somewhat alarming since they would be targets for air raids, but as Simmons put it, “most of us were too tired to care”. Simmons and Burda were housed in brick buildings with heaters. Burda describes it as dry, warm and lit.... Some got grease from bearing boxes to waterproof their boots and, to their immense relief, some of the lucky ones stayed for three nights. The South Compound POWs stayed for 30 hours.

One of the stories regarding the stopover in Muskau in particular brought back very clear memories for me, both sweet and sad.

Quentin Richard Petersen: “When I awoke I realized at once that my blanket had been removed from my sitting body as I slept. I climbed up to the platform around the furnace, warmed myself and told Col. Jones, my old perimeter-walking friend, what had happened and asked him what he thought I should do.

For my entire life, I'll never forget his response, "I wouldn't leave here without a blanket!" I didn't take it from a sleeping man, but I did continue to keep my commitment to "take care of #1" and picked up another one lying free in the detritus the prisoners left on the floor of that factory. Ironically, that very blanket got home with me, but was stolen from the foot of my bed when I returned to Antioch College after the war!"

George brought his blanket home too. He always talked about how warm it was and how one should always have a warm blanket nearby. As a child I thought it was terribly itchy and something like the color of faded spinach, not one of my favorite vegetables at the time. He kept it very clean and always neatly folded. It was always near his bed or traveled with him in his car, especially in winter.

One day my mother sewed it into a cotton outer case, soft and colorful. I had always thought she did that for me because the itchiness bothered me. But I believe I now know the real story. She did it to preserve it for my father.

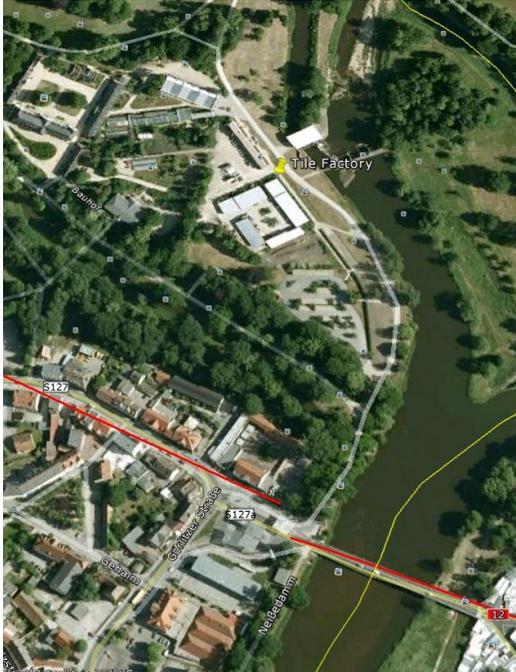
That blanket was passed down to me and unknowingly took its place in the trunk of my car for my own “emergencies.” I guess my father’s words were not lost on me after all. I remember the outer case breaking down and eventually shredding away like a child’s blanket that is tattered but kept for a lifetime. I remember little bits and pieces of the outer cover still attached to the blanket where my mother had so carefully sewn it years before. And, I remember the last time I saw it.

In 1997, one year after my father passed away, I was driving to a business meeting to make a presentation to people I had not yet met when the car in front of me went off the road at high speed head-on into the end of a center median guard rail. It spun counter-clockwise and careened backwards down the rail. I can still see the debris being thrown into the air as I think about it today. I was the first car to stop and I found the dazed but conscious driver pinned under the dashboard on the passenger side of the wreck. He was bleeding from the head and face and struggling to free himself. However, due to the collision damage there was no way out. Standing on top of the wreck somehow I was able to rip the partially opened sunroof from the car, frame and all, and reach in to help him out. I half carried him to the embankment as he was going into shock and shivering uncontrollably. No one else had yet stopped.

That's when I ran to my car and got the "itchy" blanket. I wrapped him up and sat with him until police and a rescue squad arrived. They took the man to the hospital about 20 minutes later.

The police took my statement after the ambulance had left. Apparently the man had fallen asleep at the wheel after working all night and simply drifted off the highway. The impact woke him and the fact that his body was so relaxed might have saved him. As I walked away one of the officers asked me if the blanket was mine and I wanted it back. It was muddy and bloody as were my hands and arms – and without thought I said, "no, that's ok."

I wish I had said yes, but perhaps this moment was the reason why my father carried this blanket with him from Stalag Luft III in the first place.



This location was crammed with thousands of POWs as they marched through in their various groups on their way west.



The glass factory at Bad Muskau where some of the men stayed and a mural painted on the wall inside the factory illustrating how the factory looked in 1945.

While some of the men found their first warmth in days of marching through open territory, Schiefelbusch's experience at Muskau shows the enormity of the march by the contrast in available shelter.

Lt. Richard Schiefelbusch - *"On the last phase of marching our group was on the tail end of the marching line. This meant that we would be the last group to be sheltered. After an hour we were herded into the only shelter left for us, an abandoned glass factory. A 30 x 20' massive iron slide door designed to close us off from the wind and snow wouldn't close. It was off the slide mechanism and couldn't be moved. So we tried to make the best of it. We arranged those in the worst shape into a compact group on the cement floor of the huge enclosure and found blankets to put over them. We searched through their*

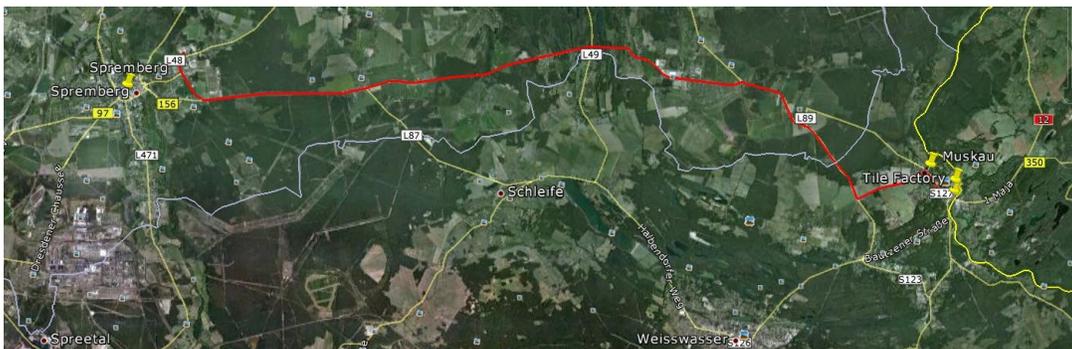
clothing and back packs to find something for them to eat. We reasoned that their bodies had simply run out of heat and that we must help them to replenish it. Sleep for most of the helpers was out of the question until we got those in shock or those convulsing stabilized so that they could rest. We lit fires, but the smoke became so thick and dangerous that we had to put the fires out.”

During the first few days of marching and the stopover at Muskau the men relied heavily on the Red Cross food parcels they had carried with them; however, water was always big problem and water along the way was of poor quality. The stage was being set for a major outbreak of dysentery. This will drain a person's energy big time!

Dysentery was not the only cause for discomfort as another POW recalled on a much longer march west from Stalag Luft IV in northern Poland:

John Wranesh: *“We had to relieve ourselves, squatting by the roadside and yet had to maintain our position in the marching column or maybe a threat by the guards to "rouse" with a rifle pointing at you. The small supply of toilet paper did not last very long and then it was tearing the lining out of the overcoat for clean up and ultimately the cleanup was of the animal variety-squat and hurry back in line.... . How we ever got through that episode, only by the grace of God.”*

After their 30 hours of recuperation in Muskau the South Compound group made the 16-mile march to Spremberg, Germany on the morning of January 30 arriving late in the day. All of the others would follow in stages over the next several days. The first arrivals were unaware that a second phase of this nightmare was about to begin.



In Spremberg the POWs were marched into a permanent camp that had good brick buildings and was really nice relative to what they had in the previous days. It was a former German Panzer camp. They stayed in garages and got some salty barley soup – but at least it was hot. On the following evening, January 31, 1945, the South Compound POWs went on a short march into

town to the marshalling yards. This march was described by Burda a few days later when he also walked it with his group.

Vernon Burda: *“We saw plenty of signs that reminded us of home -- Shell, Standard, Esso, Mobiloil, Kodak, Agfa and others. The town looked as if it were in fairly good shape.”*

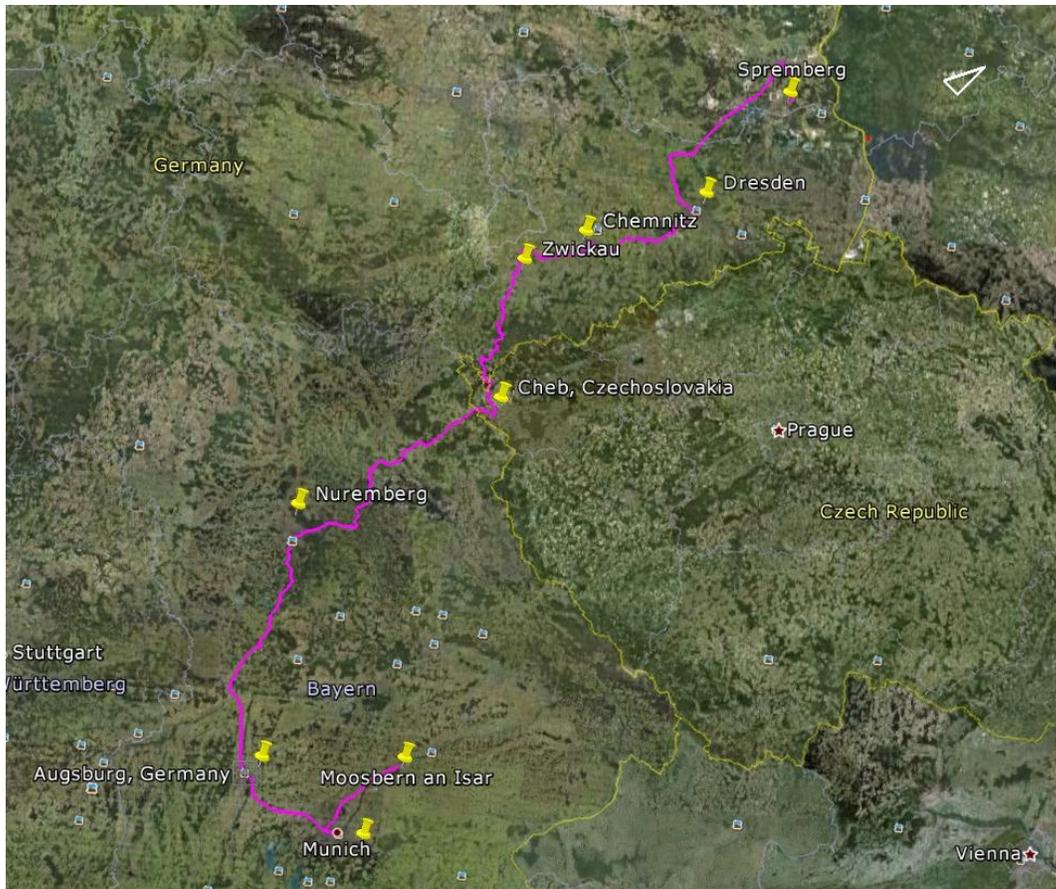
Once at the marshalling yards, however, the Germans crowded the South Compound men plus 200 men from the West Compound into French “40 and 8” boxcars identical to the ones that brought the new prisoners across Germany to Stalag Luft III over the past two years. These cars had been recently used for livestock and had not been cleaned. There were 50-plus men and 1 guard in each boxcar. Each man was given a Red Cross parcel, and the doors were closed. They were so crowded that they could not all sit or lie down at the same time.



The “40 and 8”s at Spremsberg Rail Station



Although some of the POWs including my father would disembark and be detained at Stalag XIII-D in Nuremberg 220 miles to the south, the final stop for this group would be Stalag VII-A in Moosburg, Germany, 80 miles past Nuremberg – a total of 400 rail miles and 2-3 days of travel in a boxcar.



With 50 to 60 men in a car designed to hold 40, the only way one could sit was in a line with others, toboggan-fashion, or else half stood while the other half sat. It was a 3-day ordeal, locked in a moving cell becoming increasingly fetid with the stench of vomit and excrement. The only ventilation in the cars came from two small windows near the ceiling on opposite ends of the cars. The train lumbered through a frozen countryside and bombed-out cities.

Vernon Burda: *“We finally allocated space to each man, but as soon as they would go to sleep, the men would try to stretch out. I lay on the floor and several times I woke up with four men laying zig zag across me so that I couldn't even move.”*

Norman Grant: *“... Somewhere around Dresden, they stopped the train and let us down, out to stretch. It must have been an awful sight to see all those bare buttocks of thousands of prisoners relieving themselves because of the dysentery.”*

Tex Shields: *“The conditions were foul. If animals had been in there before us, they didn't bother clean them out, so we were right in the manure. I guess while the train was taking on water for the boiler, we were permitted to evacuate our bowels. There must have been hundreds of Americans lined up, dropped their drawers and had a bowel*

movement, and it didn't matter if there were German women, children, civilians watching. We were treated like animals. We were treated like sub-humans."

Dysentery from bad water was followed by other suffering from no water.

Quentin Richard Peterson: *"The salty [barley] soup [at Spremberg] soon reflected itself, felt in my body as a devastating thirst. Of the tortures to which my body has been subjected to over the years, pain, hunger, physical paralysis, attack by insects, incontinence, thirst would certainly have to be judged the most unbearable! Conditions in the boxcars were truly Stygian. At first we tried to urinate or defecate in Klim tins [ed. note - powdered milk cans], but by the time the vomiting started we headed for the corners if we could get through. Kriegies died, locked with their companions, in these cars.*

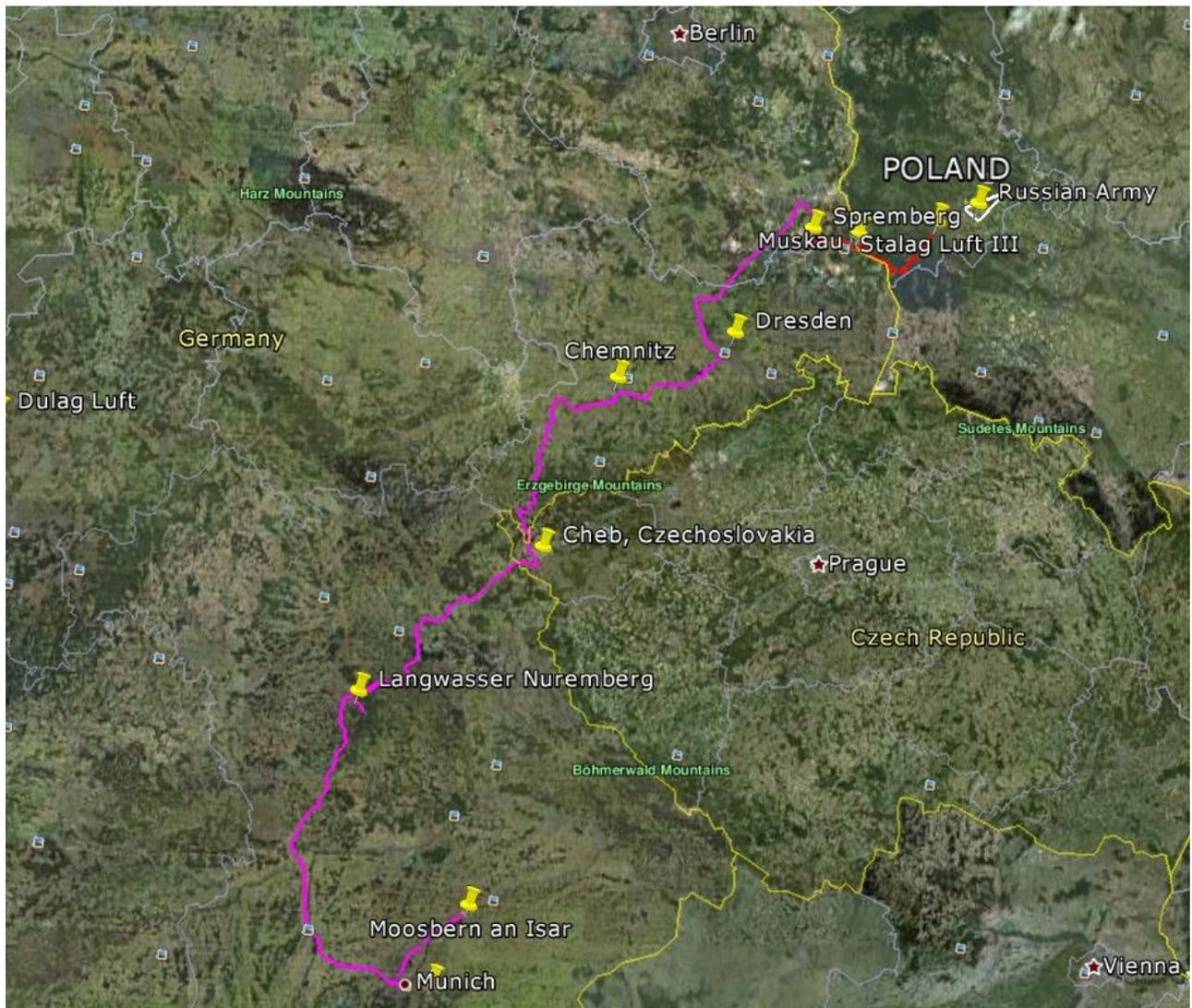
The train stopped once in the open countryside and the doors were opened. Corpses were removed. Prisoners were permitted to leave to stretch and relieve themselves. I was already painfully constipated and could make no sanitary use of this break."

The train arrived at Moosburg at about 9:00 pm on February 2nd for the first group from the South Compound. The POWs remained locked in the cars until 6:00 am the next morning at which time the Kriegies from the South and West Compounds were processed into Stalag VII-A.



The trip had taken more than two days and two nights.

Although spread out all the way back to Spremberg, over the next two weeks many of the Stalag Luft III Krieges arrived at Moosburg many while 2nd Lt. George Hofmann and many others were interned at Nuremberg in Stalag XIII-D . They would all eventually end up in Moosburg.



One of the later arrivals at Moosburg kept a diary of his experience.

Vernon Burda - "February 5th--didn't make much progress all day, but towards evening we made good time. In Dresden about midnight, and there were a lot of German troops going to the Russian front near Berlin. It seems like they are moving a lot of troops from the West front to the Russian front.

One Jerry kidded with us--said he had fought at Moscow and Paris, and now to Berlin. He would catch the girls nearby and kiss them--he seemed happy and slightly drunk. We

didn't blame him. In Chemnitz, we almost were in the middle of an air raid. They locked us up in the boxcar when the sirens blew. Luckily, the train took off like a bat and we left.

February 6--arrived at Zwickau at dawn and finally got something to drink--German coffee. Boy was it lousy. The guys all were sick by now and they were having bowel movements all over the place. The civilians were sure peeved and they screamed to high heaven. We made better time after Zwickau--heard the West camp went to Nurnburg and that we were going there too. The cars were still awfully crowded and the Germans would not give us any water. We went through air raid in the afternoon--we saw the forts and the libs this time.

On February 7, soon after dawn, we were in Augsburg. Still we were not given any water and we were thirsty as the devil. Finally we hit Muench [Munich], and we were put in a railroad yard--the place was really bombed out. We saw American P.O.W.s fixing it up. We got so thirsty that Downey got a Trinkwasser of steam water out of the locomotive.

In the afternoon, we traveled to Moosburg and we got off at Stalag VII-A. We went over to the North Lager, which we called the "Snake Pit". They put 600 of us in a shack with nothing for beds or fuel or anything. We were all sick by this time--cold, damp and everyone was covered with fleas and lice. Morale was really low. There was not enough room to have everyone lay down at once, and many did not sleep. There was no heat and no hot food. On February 8th, 9th and 10th, we stayed in the "Snake Pit". I used a blanket and slung a hammock and got some sleep--everyone was really sick."