

THE KRIEGIES RETURN TO POLAND

-- 45 YEARS LATER

By Frank Diggs

It's a strange urge, and not always a very rewarding one, to return to the scene of the crime years later. But it paid off for 36 kriegies, their wives and widows this time.

The trip back to our old prisoner of war camp at Schubin was hardly nostalgic. There wasn't, in fact, much to see -- the old White House where 200 of us used to live, now upgraded as a trade school for boys; the big hospital, now closed up and crumbling; a couple of the old brick barracks, being used now as carpentry shops,; the quaint little chapel, locked up and disintegrating; the sad remains of the old greenhouse; the brick commandant's quarters and the German guards' quarters across the street, both apparently unused any more. All of the high double fence, the barbed wire and the ugly guard towers have disappeared, just as we hoped they would.

But we poked around the place a lot and held a ceremony of sorts. John Creech, now a world-famous expert on plants, brought a carefully-wrapped tree all the way from North Carolina and planted it beside the already-existing memorial statue as a living monument to all the kriegies who once lived there. Bob Oshlo and Billy Bingham placed a big wreath on the memorial and the new, non-Communist mayor of Schubin made a nice speech.

Then there was a lunch laid on at the town restaurant where we met and talked with some of the towns folk and saw a bit of what life was like outside the compound in this unostentatious little village.

Meanwhile, the five kriegies from the big airmen's camp of Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan spent the day there. The camp had been totally obliterated, the area covered with 45 years' growth of trees. But they visited the memorial created there during the war to the 50 prisoners murdered by the Germans after the "great escape," and Ted Runyon made a short speech. There they were greeted by a Polish Honor Guard and a military band which played U.S. and Polish national anthems while a wreath of flowers was presented. It was a touching scene, we hear.

What made the trip so interesting, though, was yet to come. For nearly three weeks, the ex-PoW group had a first-hand look at what is going on in the midst of a crucial period of transition in both Poland and Russia, and a truly eye-opening glimpse at how different life is like now in the Scandinavian countries next door -- Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. The contrast was almost unbelievable.

Warsaw, where the kriegies spent three days, was downright pathetic. All they saw was an endless array of shabby, gray buildings, most of them erected since the war and already disintegrating badly. The people looked glum and worried about the future. No one smiled. Stores were mostly empty. Streets and sidewalks were often unswept. The cars were nearly all little Polish Fiats, which looked like toys and broke down constantly. The water was not drinkable,

so everyone bought plastic bottles of hopefully boiled water. Some people were selling their small possessions or wartime pamphlets on the sidewalks, but there were few customers. Only the central city square, reconstructed on old 15th century plans, was attractive to Western eyes.

One evening, Henry Soederberg arranged a banquet for the group at the old, restored Jablona Palace outside of town. "Boomer" Holder acted as MC and introduced the Swedish ambassador to Poland, who spoke gravely of the Polish economy being now in a shambles, with much of the future of Eastern Europe depending on how the Poles handle the transition to democracy and a market economy. The president of the Polish veterans' organization also spoke about how grim things are in Poland now, and later confided to someone that this was the first good meal that he had had in a long, long time.

The kriegies then drove around much of eastern Poland to Poznan and back for a further look-see at the country. The towns, they found, all looked gray, unkempt and run-down. A surprising number of the houses, perhaps most of them, looked unfinished, only partially built. Nearly all needed painting. No one had mowed his lawn or trimmed his hedges. Only the fields of beets and barley looked cared for, with Polish farmers often using horse-drawn plows or, at best, old mini-tractors. Bingham, a large-scale farmer back in Arkansas, said the land seems to be all well farmed -- but on too small a scale to be very efficient. There were no service stations or toilet facilities along the highway for hundreds of miles, so our bus stopped by a wooded area from time to time to let the kriegies out "to pick mushrooms." Sandwiches and bottles water were carried along. In the far back of the bus was something called the Sid Thal Enterprises, which provided Scottish spirits for those who needed some flavoring for the unfamiliar water.

The Polish countryside, in a word, looked grim. At another dinner, this one in Poznan, this impression was reinforced when the American ex-PoWs talked with their guests, all former Polish officers who had survived German prison camps. Much of the translating, I am proud to say, was done by a young Polish fellow who is the grandson of the family who hid me out after I left the column in 1945 -- one Darek Dudziak, who was my guest that night for dinner, along with his bride and his parents, Jan and Teresa Dudziak. Was this family optimistic or pessimistic about Poland's future, we asked. Both, it seems. They are convinced hard time lie ahead, with much unemployment and far too little capitalization available. But they think that in a few years the Poles will gain an incentive to work harder and live better.

Russia was different, but no better. From Warsaw, the kriegies flew to Helsinki and then drove by bus the long "winter war" route to Leningrad. This city, built by Peter the Great as his new capital, looks much better than anything in Poland. The buildings, often rebuilt after the war, are usually impressive, clean and painted light pastel shades. Streets are well maintained and not cluttered up by a lot of old private cars -- almost none in fact. Parks are green, clean and full of flowers. But the people looked grim indeed. Lines were long where anything was for sale. There seemed to be an extreme shortage of food. The meals served at our hotel were meager, mostly bread and beets. The tea was generally good, the coffee lousy. Meat was almost non-existent. Our experienced guide reported that both the quantity and quality of meals for tourists was down from previous trips. Lines of people sometimes a block long led to the state liquor stores, where the ration is said to be one liter of vodka and one of beer per month per person. Sid and Thurston Garrett were appalled by the whole idea.

3-Trip

The kriegies soon felt the heavy hand of central planning as well. When they reached their assigned hotel, the rooms they had reserved three months before were already taken; others were eventually located a block away. Their already paid-for tickets to the famous Hermitage art museum were nowhere to be found. Hours later, our clever guide used undisclosed methods to steal some others instead. A promised trip down the Neva River by hydrafoil to the czars' summer palace was mysteriously cancelled and the trip had to be done by bus. The planned trip to a Russian circus was called off at the last minute and a folk dance performance of sorts substituted. The water was undrinkable and the promised bottled water never appeared.

Peristroyka or not, entering and leaving Russia these days is an experience not to be forgotten. Each of the elderly Americans, all over 70, had to man-handle his heavy suitcases and carry-on luggage off the bus, through a customs line where they were X-ray'd, and back onto the bus, which meanwhile had been thoroughly searched, including a look underneath from a slit-trench affair. Purely routine on orders from Moscow, our guide explained. "You're lucky," he added, "other foreign groups get held up for three hours while their bags get opened and searched."

The last stop inside Russia was an open-air pit stop at a clearing on the side of the road where buses frequently pause. As soon as our bus stopped, a dozen or more young Russian lads jumped out of old cars parked nearby and rushed up to us, waving things they wanted to sell, for dollars only. Most had bottles of alleged champaign at \$5 apiece and vodka at 10. Some had Russian dolls, other trinkets. There were few takers and as we pulled out a Soviet police car came roaring up.

After all this, the return to Finland brought forth cries of joy. First stop was for lunch at a charming little Finnish town near the border, where the chow was a three-course delight with real seafood, not to mention beer and wine. The Finns were friendly, the stores full of things to buy, the building painted, the streets clean.

That evening in Helsinki, the kriegies boarded an amazing new, 2,000-passenger cruise ship which carried them in great luxury overnight to Stockholm, including a memorable dinner and an elaborate duty-free shop on board for replacing our dwindling stocks of booze and other essentials.

Sweden was a delight after all the economic chaos in Poland and Russia. The kriegies ate seafood feasts twice a day and herring for breakfast, sampled the joys of akvavit, and toured the neat, water-oriented capital of Stockholm for two days. Here there seemed to be no slums, no poverty, no shoddy construction, no big shortage of food or anything. Even the weather cooperated, sunny and warm.

On the last evening there, Henry orchestrated a lavish banquet at the spectacular new SAS building just out of town. The guest list included Swedish officials, two ambassadors, a brace of Swedish generals, some YMCA reps and the top brass of Scandinavian Airlines. All were treated to a slide-show of the kriegy trip so far, introductions and speeches were made, lavish food and drink served. Our friend The Welcome Swede, we concluded, had outdone himself.

But the highlight of the entire trip was probably in Norway. Two days in the picturesque, rainy capital of Oslo included visits to the famed Vigeland Sculpture Park, the Kon Tiki museum, the viking ship museum, the WW II resistance museum and the mountain-top Holmenkollen Restaurant. Then came an unforgettable train ride across the roof of Norway from Oslo to Bergen -- very likely the most scenic trip on earth in the opinion of Curt Jones, who has seen most of them. I concur. Lew Lowe took video pictures of the whole thing. At one point, the infamous navigation of Don Graul nearly lost half the group at the start, but all eventually arrived at the charming, remote town of Bergen, Norway's second largest.

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