

OFLAG 64:
As I Saw It

By Henry Söderberg

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O F L A G 6 4 A S I S A W I T

Another approach to the history of Oflag 64.
The camp seen with the eyes of an outsider.
Excerpts from the diaries, reports and letters
by a frequent visitor to Oflag 64, the Swedish
delegate of The War Prisoners' Aid of the YMCA.

A word to the reader.....

Please note and remember that this paper as far as the English language and style is concerned is presented in its original version - a direct translation from Swedish ("Henry-English" = "Swenglish), the author's mother tongue. No efforts have been made in order to "polish" the text or to correct linguistic incorrectnesses and spelling mistakes. Hopefully, in spite of this, I hope that the main part of text will be understood.

Stockholm, Sweden, November 6, 1991.

H.S.

Henry Söderberg:

OFLAG 64 - AS I SAW IT.

At the Oflag 64 reunion in Norfolk in October 1991 I was asked by John Slack to say a few words at the Saturday evening dinner - as a "substitute speaker". Since I had not prepared a speech but happened to have some of my original diary notes from the war with me I resorted to reading from the diary about my first visit to Oflag 64 in Szubin/Altburgund on August 16, 1943.

After the presentation a group of people approached me and asked for a copy of my "speech". I considered this request and consulted with John and some others. The result of all this was that I promised to make an effort to extract from my diaries some of the highlights of how I, an "outsider" delegate from the YMCA, saw and experienced my visits to Oflag 64 and the American officers, from August 1943 until the end of the war in the spring of 1945. Let me immediately confess that I, of course, did not see all sides of camp life.

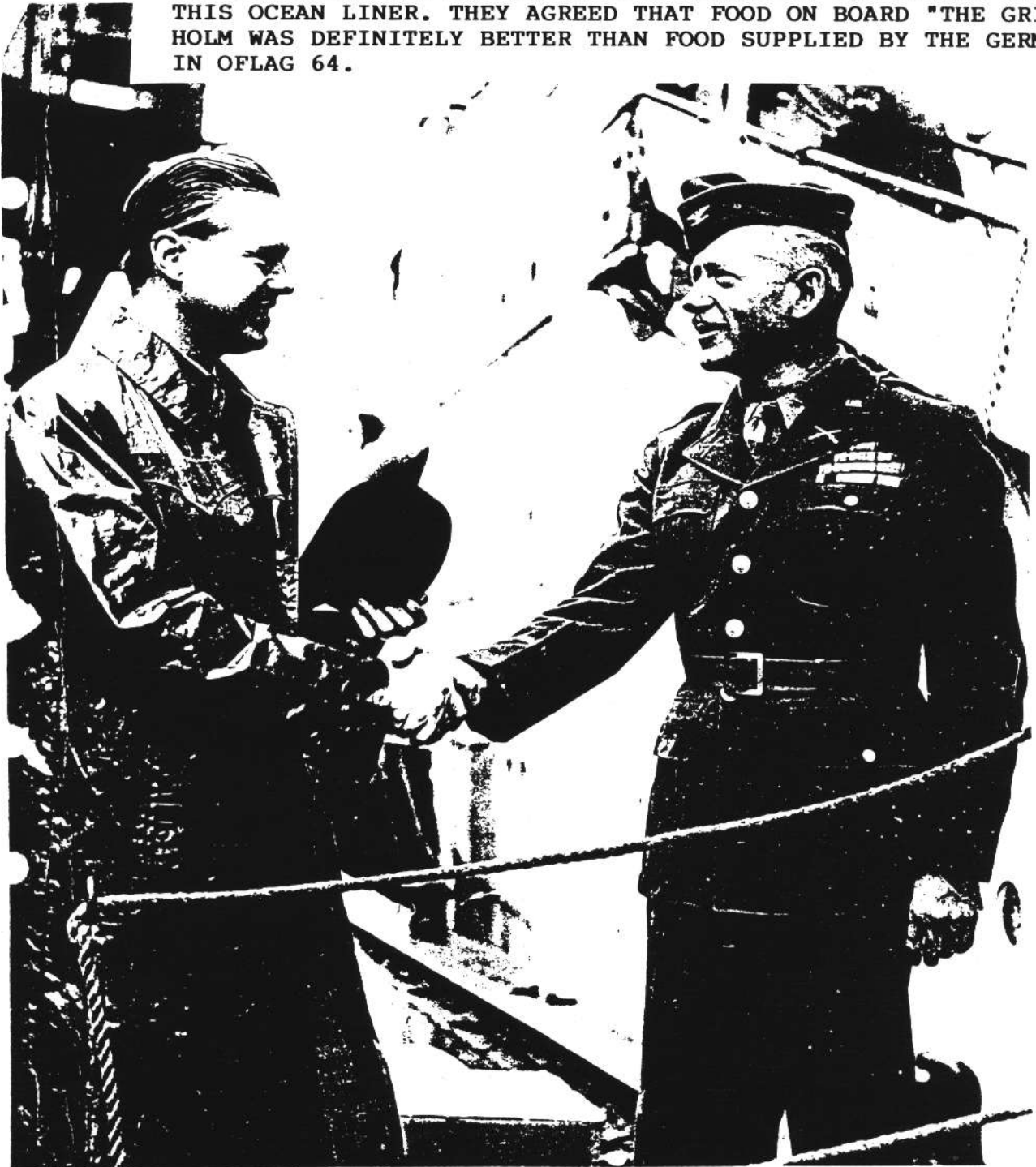
Because of Frank Digg's interest in my diaries while preparing the book "The Welcome Swede" I can resort to the transcripts (900 pages) typed and produced by Frank's secretaries - based on my 30 hours of reading into 20 tapes (in "Henry English") and which now are available in three copies, one with Frank, one with myself and one with the US Air Force Academy Library in Colorado Springs where I have deposited all my memorabilia from the work with prisoners-of-war.

Therefore, and since there apparently is an interest among the Oflag 64 group to hear and read about my visits to and adventures while visiting this remarkable camp, I promised to produce some of the highlights - "another" approach to the history of Oflag 64.

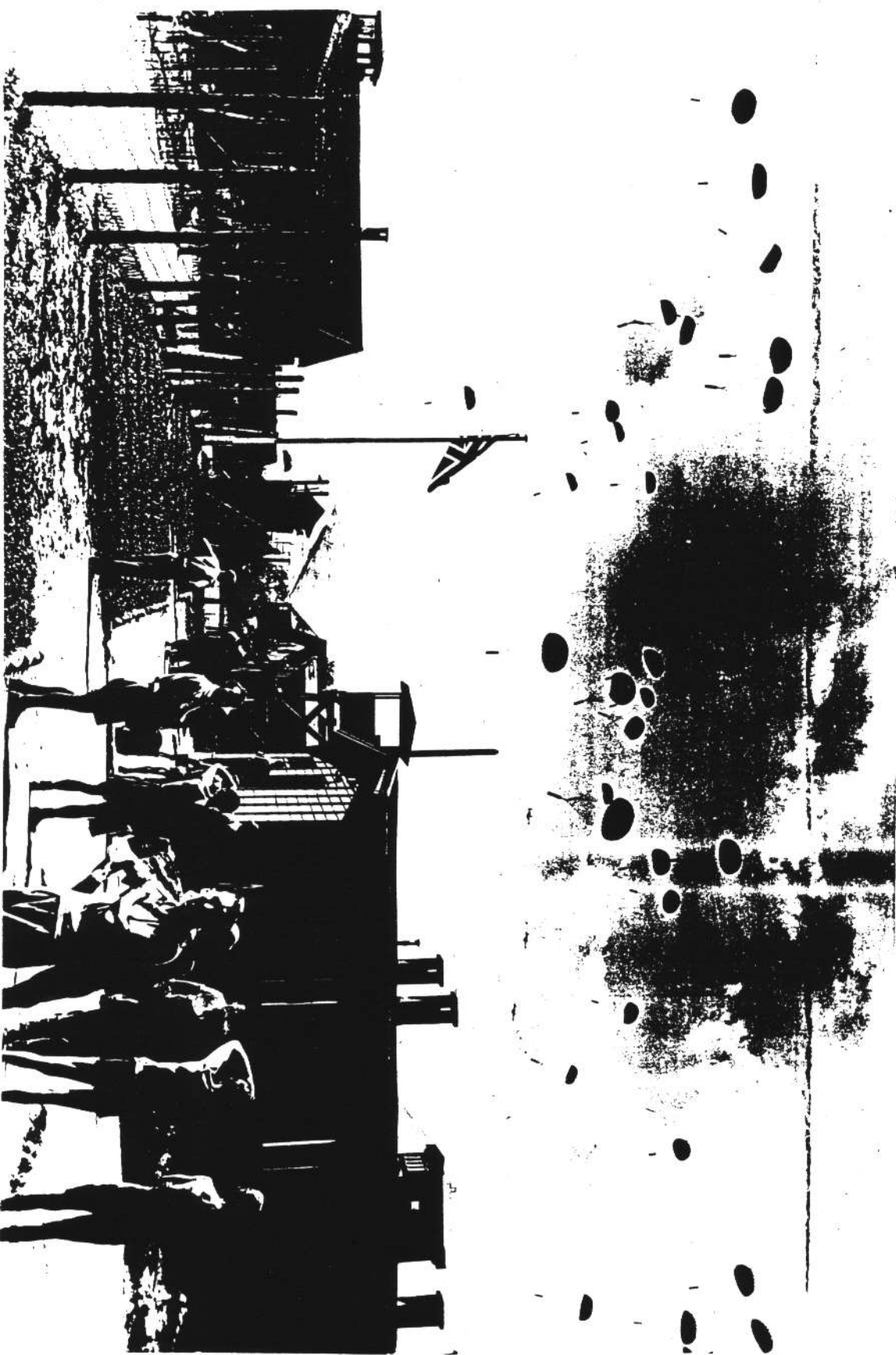
It was always a thrilling experience to come to Szubin from time to time (from Sagan in lower Silesia where we had the Y Head Office) and meet with the American officers. In addition there were the many times dangerous trips on the roads and railways in order to get there, mostly via Posen/Poznan, also the meetings with strange and, sometimes, dangerous Nazi types of German people - inside and outside the camp itself - with whom I had to live, travel and work in order to bring some assistance to the POWs.

Many of these things have already been reported in Frank Digg's book "The Welcome Swede" - in general terms. But the details, what is written in my diaries, have until now been hidden to the "members" of Oflag 64. It is with this as a background that I have decided, without writing a book, to reveal what I wrote about Oflag 64, in 1) my diaries, 2) official reports and 3) letters to my folks at home in Sweden during this both traumatic and exhilarating time of the war.

IN SEPTEMBER 1944 AN EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS OF WAR TOOK PLACE VIA SWEDEN. AMONG THOSE REPATRIATED FROM GERMANY WAS COLONEL THOMAS D. DRAKE, AMERICAN SENIOR OFFICER IN OFLAG 64. HENRY SÖDERBERG ASSISTED DURING THE REPATRIATION ON THE TRAIN TRANS-PORTS IN SWEDEN BETWEEN TRELLEBORG AND GOTHENBURG, WHERE THE ALLIED PRISONERS BOARDED "THE GRIPSHOLM". IN GOTHENBURG DRAKE AND SÖDERBERG MET AND HAD A GOOD DINNER IN THE DINING ROOM OF THIS OCEAN LINER. THEY AGREED THAT FOOD ON BOARD "THE GRIPSHOLM" WAS DEFINITELY BETTER THAN FOOD SUPPLIED BY THE GERMANS IN OFLAG 64.

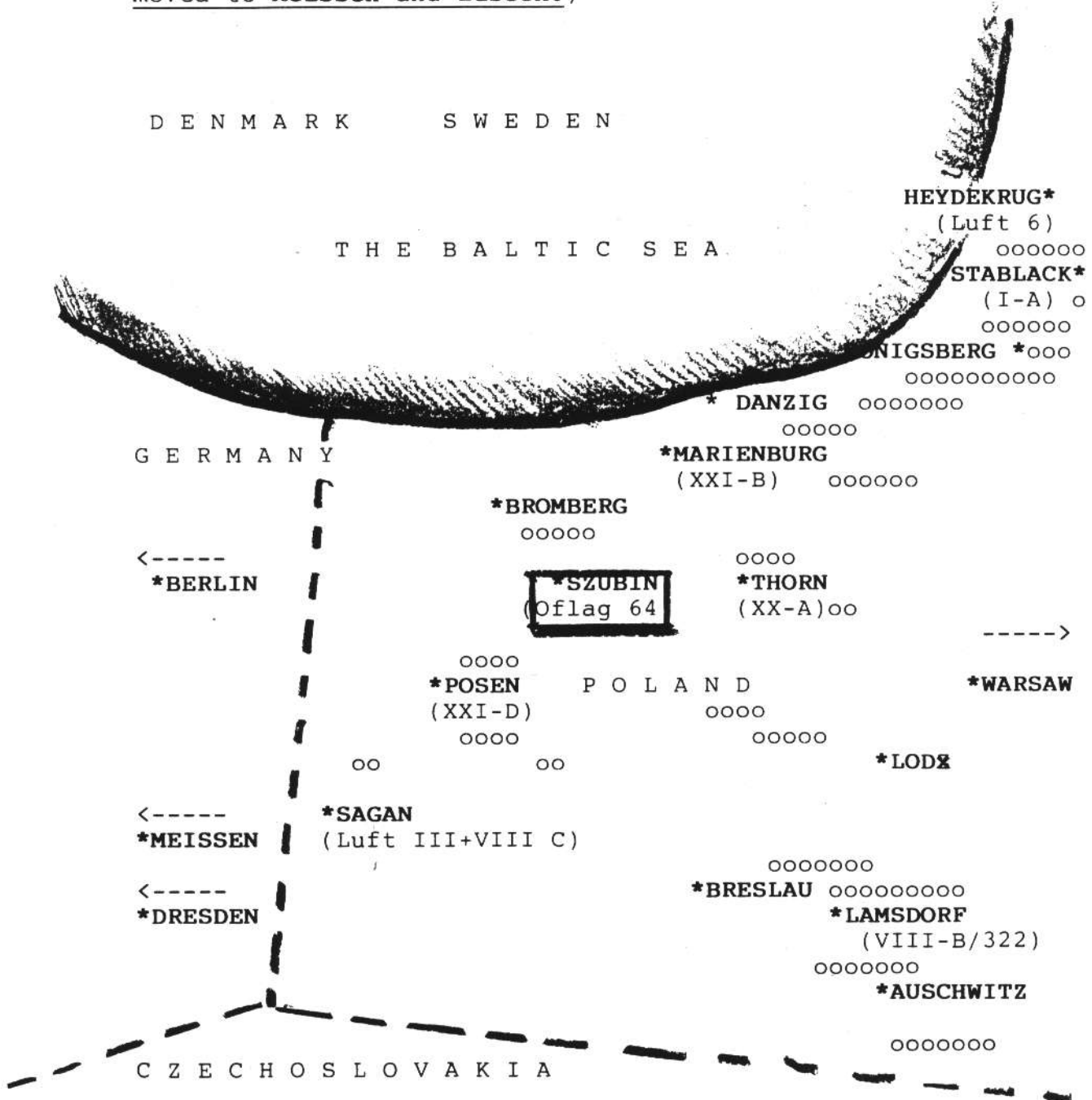


VICTORY DAY - MAY 9, 1945, HENRY SÖDERBERG SPENT WITH BRITISH INTERNEES IN THE AUSTRIAN VALLEY OF SPITTAL, PROVINCE KÄRNTEN. BECAUSE OF UNREST AND SHORTAGE OF SUPPLIES AIRCRAFT FROM THE US 5 TH ARMY CAME UP FROM ITALY AND DROPPED FOOD AND GODDIES OVER THE CAMP AREA.



MAIN CAMPS (within brackets) and
WORKING CAMPS, various size (=o)
in HENRY SÖDERBERG'S VISITING AREA
with O F L A G 6 4 in focus.

(Note; YMCA head office for Germany
was located in Berlin from 1940 and
moved to Sagan in August 1943;
In February 1945 it was split up and
moved to Meissen and Lübeck.)



THE FIRST VISIT.

August 16, 1943.

Today I have visited Oflag 64 for the first time - the camp with American officers. They are billeted in an old school where previously the Germans had kept English officers. There were several bold escape efforts made here in the past. For the time being there are about 250 officers here. Most of them have been taken prisoners in Africa at the end of the African campaign. They had been fighting against the German Field Marshal and hero, Erwin Rommel.

I am getting an overwhelmingly fine reception. I am the very first visitor from the outside world, so they say. It seems as if the joys of the officers should be more accentuated because of the fact that already, some time before my visit, a big load of YMCA material had arrived from Geneva, which was a very quick delivery. (This happened as a result of a request I had placed in Geneva for this camp after we had been informed by the German High Command that many American officers soon would arrive in Szubin. A very substantial need for equipment for cultural and leisure time activities was anticipated.)

The German commandant, Oberst Schneider, receives me well. He says that the Americans are "Schentlemen". Their chief man of confidence, Colonel Drake, has gone away for the day for a medical check-up at a nearby hospital. But the commandant says that I shall find pleasure also in meeting the stand-in, Lt. Colonel John K. Waters. He points out immediately that Waters is the son-in-law of General Patton, someone for whom the Germans seem to have the same kind of respect and admiration as they have in the reverse direction for their own Field Marshal Rommel.

The Germans are telling me this with a solemn attitude, nearly in whispering voices, and they are also letting me understand that - because of the presence of John Waters - they have had to take some extra security measures because they do not know what can happen if a man of such prominent military background is in the camp. They have to be especially on their wath, so they say.

watch

I find that John Waters and the officers whom I met today are very fine representatives of the United States. I am meeting a new kind of camp and different type of prisoners-of-war. Both the environment and the atmosphere is different to the many English camps I have visited, especially those with air men. The Americans are not so arrogant towards the Germans as I am used to in British camps. Perhaps the distance from here to home on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean is too long. The knowledge about European conditions and European geography seem to be very limited by many of those to whom I spoke. I do not think that these Americans are so much set to escape as are the British. However, I quickly find out that there is a very, very firm determination among the Americans to do the best out of captivity. The discipline in camp seems to be hard - thanks to Colonel Drake?

I get to learn that John Waters is a man from West Point, a place and a name with which I am not too familiar. I sat with Waters for two full hours. He is a very high, athletic type of officer - perhaps 35 years - with steel-gray eyes and an attitude which radiates both composure and determination, but also a deep amount of humanitarian feelings and friendliness. He tells me in well-controlled words what is going on in the camp, about the situation at large, and I get the feeling that the conditions are, on the whole, acceptable under circumstances and that the relations to the Germans are correct and harmonious. (A German security officer sits with us all the time and takes notes.)

We then made a tour of the camp, and we are meeting with various kinds of camp leaders. We are walking the stairs up to the attic; they have plenty of space there. I can see how they arranging that space for school and art classes. Many of them are sitting, far away, sunk in their studies already. The YMCA books have already arrived. They have a small library which seems to be much appreciated. In one corner a trio is playing first class dance music. The trumpeter, so I am told, is a first rate jazz musician. His name is Bob Rankin.

In one corner of the camp they are playing table tennis. They have made the tables themselves so it is not too fashionable. I promised them to place orders for the correct type of table tennis tables. In the rooms where the men sleep I find many of them sitting working with small model or hobby works of various kind.

Many of the boys are coming up to me. They are not shy at all, they are telling me what kind of requests they have. I more or less get the feeling of being a kind of Father Christmas or Santa Claus here. They have long lists - covering everything from pencils to typewriters and pianos - so I have to point out, time after time, that - outside - there really is a war going on . Germany is at war and transportation of goods is a real problem. Of course, they understand this, laughingly.

In the brick barrack; out on the yard, they are planning to build a theater. They need woods and planks and they need equipment of various kinds in order to get their theater going. I am speaking to the commandant about these things after the visit. He is promising, "on his word of honor", as he says, to do everything as quick as possible, in order to have " a good camp".

One thing which really impresses me is that they already have a university of some kind going, but, even in this "university" with extremely good teachers, there is a great shortage of material for education.

I am also visiting the little hospital ward. Here I meet Dr. Floyd Burgeson who is speaking a few words in Swedish to me immediatly. (The security officer is not too pleased.) Dr. Burgeson is an affable and friendly man from the Middle West (Des Moines, Iowa), a Swede in the second generation. He has recently got an accordion from the Y and I listen to him

playing. I do not think that he is the best amongst accordion players, but he seems to be childishly enthusiastic about his accordion. But some of the patients are making complaints that the music that Dr. Burgeson offers is not helping them to become better. Therefore, he promises me, on his "word of honor", that his accordion playing will be improved.

They seem to have big plans for the winter. They plan to play ice hockey. Several of the men have been ice-hockey players; they also have a professional "figure skater" in the camp: Bill Burghardt is his name. He wants special skates.

There is a catholic priest, Father Kane, who arranges religious services for both the protestants and the catholics. They have a neat little chapel in the backyard, an old brick building.

This was my first visit to Oflag 64.

August 16, 1943.

(Letter to my parents in Sweden)

It is evening now. I have had a most interesting and impressive day. These American boys ---they really surprised me because of their friendliness and gratefulness. I experienced so much this day that I could write about 100 books after a visit like this. I have already got an invitation to go to the USA and to visit several of them as soon as the war is over.

I really had hard working hours. It is a heavy and tiring job, not the least with all the private interviews where the one after the other came up with their very special requests. I am very tired tonight, but at the same time inspired and happy.

Here in Altburgund (former Szubin) I have a very simple little hotel room, no luxury whatsoever, but the best thing is that everything seems to be clean. I hate the German "blankets" with which you are supposed to cover your body during the night. They look like big inflated pillows. Sometimes the feathers inside are falling to the sides and you do not have complete cover. However I have got used to this, even if it is difficult to live with it.

I came very early this morning from Posen. It is only about 60 miles, but the trip by train took me over four hours. But when I looked out through the train window and saw the roads I was very happy that I did not drive a car.

I was met at the railway station by a German officer from the camp office. He brought a coach with horse which drove me to the hotel. It was generous of them to pick me up like this. Funny enough, but the Germans seem to think that I am a "very important person". (I do not know how much they know about the YMCA, but, in any case, I am an international delegate!) Three German officers took care of me for luncheon. They did not

permit me to stay and have lunch with the prisoners. They said that they wanted to get to know me more personally and to "take my pulse". But they were nice and friendly and we had a pleasant conversation. And they seemed to be very hungry. Apparently they got a better meal today because of my presence. They wanted to hear everything that I could tell them about Sweden. They, like many other German military people, seem to be very impressed by the Swedish Royal Family!

VISITING OFLAG 64 WITH ELDERLY GENTLEMEN.

The chief of the YMCA work for prisoners in Europe was Mr. Hugo Cedergren of Sweden. He was the brother-in-law of Count Folke Bernadotte and travelled for negotiating purposes during the war on both sides of the frontlines - in Germany, UK, USA and Canada. He visited our YMCA group in Germany in the beginning of November 1943. Since he was about to go to the USA he wanted to pay a visit to Oflag 64 in order to give a fresh and personal report. I accompanied him and the chief of our German unit, Rev. Eric Christensen ("Uncle Eric") to Altburgund (Szubin) on November 5 and 6. We travelled by train from Sagan via Breslau (Wroclaw) and Posen (Poznan).

November 4 - 6, 1943.

In the afternoon of Thursday November 4 we left Sagan, Hugo Cedergren (50), Eric Christensen (56) and myself (27) in order to go to Breslau, to change train there and then go to Posen on our way to Szubin and Oflag 64. After some waiting with the crowds we got on the train at Sagan railway station; we came to Breslau with lots of delays as usual (due to allied bombing activities somewhere else in Germany). Enormous masses of people were in the Breslau Central Station - soldiers, forced labor workers, prisoners of war and lots of people in various kinds of uniforms. Not many smiles. People coming and going. Trains whistling. Steam puffs. Darkness falling. Rain. Fog. Blackout. Cold and drafty. Not a chair or a bench to sit on.

Now my high "bosses" can see with their own eyes what we travelling delegates have to stand up to during our many trips. Probably they will understand how absolutely necessary it is that we are getting cars - if they want us to survive!

We are three rather tired gentlemen who finally sit down on a big heap of sand in the middle of the Breslau RR station waiting hall. Why this sand is here, I do not know - probably for repair purposes. It's stinking; the smell is horrible--urine.

I am being told (directed) by my bosses to go and purchase some beer because we are thirsty. There is a kind of bar in a corner of the station. I have to fight for about one full hour in front of the bar desk. Not everybody can buy a beer. I am

showing my passport and my permit for travel, and, finally, I get three bottles of beer. German beer in a railway station is just like a joke. You just have to tell yourself that this is beer.

We are sitting on our heap of sand and are putting the bottles to our mouths. The situation is comical, really. Hugo says: "I wish that the Archbishop of Sweden and all the other members of the 'Help the prisoners of war' committee could see me now."

We laugh in the midst of misery. It helps.

Then, after several hours of waiting, out to the platform: Thousands and thousands of people again waiting here. At 2:00 a.m. finally, there is a train rolling in, destination Posen. I am instructing the gentlemen how best we can fight ourselves to the seats we need - after all, I am experienced! Hugo takes one entry, Uncle Eric a second and myself is jumping in through a window. This plan works perfectly and I am succeeding in getting window places in a second class compartment for the elderly gentlemen. I am also successful in holding back the storming, pressing, shouting, swearing masses of people until Hugo and Eric have reached the compartment and got their seats. I get some commendments for a good fight.

We are seeing through the window how the storming of the train and the fighting for seats is still going on out on the platform. A very fat lady let herself be grabbed and lifted in through a window in the last wagon of the train - in spite of the fact that it is expressively said - over loudspeakers - that this wagon will not follow the train. Well, this is her own fault. Here is panic.

Now the train rolls, destination Posen. We are sitting down and saying to ourselves that, after all, we were lucky and that we have a good time. But, suddenly, with a bang, the window is falling down and cold fresh air is streaming in over all of us. I stand up; pulling it up; it is falling down again. The window is kaputt. It is falling down the whole time.

"Well you can stand there and try to keep the window up", says Hugo, laughingly. "We shall take our turns every twenty minutes."

Well, during these three hours journey we are changing guard as watcher of the window every twenty minutes. For my part I think it is very comical to see Hugo, the chief of the War Prisoners Aid in Europe, a man of highest standing in Sweden, a diplomat with enormously fine contacts all over the world, married to a princess - see Hugo standing there in a shabby train with his arms stretched upwards to keep a window from falling down while the train is rushing north through the dark November night over the Polish countryside. It is equally funny to see Eric Christensen, "Uncle Eric".

Finally, around 5:00 a.m. we arrive in Posen. A long walk through the town with our heavy luggage (no taxis) to Hotel Ostland. Well, we had ordered rooms, but they have already been occupied by others. I am asking the porter most seriously, I am threatening and I am even giving him bribes... And I try to explain to him who the high gentlemen are and if they do not get the rooms which have been ordered, then we shall send a report to the High Command of the German Army, the Foreign Office and Gestapo

We have to sit and wait in the hotel lobby for a couple of hours. Then, finally, a message is coming through that rooms are available. Uncle Eric and Hugo are to share one room, I am getting one for myself. The beds are still warm after the ones who have been sleeping there before us - most likely Nazi party people of very high standing, who have now left the hotel. Uncle Eric, then, before we go to bed in the rising sunlight, takes up, surprisingly, a bottle of cognac from his attaché case. "Well, I think that we have deserved a glass of good cognac now", he says. So we let the bottle go round and have a real strenghtening gulp before we go to bed. Thanks God what a glass of cognac can taste good after such a night! We get two hours sleep, then we have to take another train to Altburgund.

Finally in Szubin, an officer sent by the commandant receives us with a cart and a horse. We drive to the little hotel in the town, get another couple of hours of rest, have a very simple meal and are then walking through the Szubin streets to the camp, Oflag 64, a walk that peps us up a little bit.

The little fat, blinking commandant, Oberst Schneider, receives us with an overwhelming heartiness. His whole staff of decorated officers with medals on their coats are standing in a parade when we arrive. We are sitting down for a conference with all the glory of the German Wehrmacht.

"Well, it's now 10 weeks since you were here, Herr Söderberg" says the Commandant. "Since then we have ourselves arranged with wood and equipment for the theater stage. You can now see what a very fine camp I have. The Americans are very nice and they are also clever people." He speaks about the Americans as if they were objects in a museum that he has got the resonsibility to take care of. "Well", he continues, "they have an fine man of confidence, Colonel Thomas Drake, a good type of officer who has a good nose for discipline and cooperation".

After the introductory meeting with the Germans we are going out to see the camp. We are sitting down in a conference with Colonel Drake., Lt. Colonel Waters, Dr. Floyd Burgeson, Captain Jim Barker, Major Merle Meacham and some others responsible for activities in camp. Drake has been rather sick during the last period. Apparantly he has problems with his stomach, but, because of our visit he has got up from his bed. This is my first meeting with him. The Commandants impression of him is verified. I can see that he is a forceful professional soldier - very outspoken too.

Drake and Waters are telling us in enthusiastic words about everything that has found its way from the YMCA to the camp since my last visit -- among other things two pianos. "What you're doing for us will never be forgotten" says Drake, nearly pathetically.

We are getting glowing reports about activities in the camp. Many officers are now far in their studies. Unfortunately, fuel is lacking for the barrack where they are having classes; and since it is beginning to get cold they have had to stop education partly. We are pointing that out to the Germans and ask them most seriously to see to that they're getting wood or something to heat the barracks with.

Can't the Commandant understand how very important it is for American officers who do not go to work to complete studies in the camp? Didn't the Commandant himself tell us that his ambition is to have a real good camp? Oh yes, the Commandant understands clearly, and he promises to do a very great effort. But his situation is not so easy. What we have told him will be a help for him in his own fight with the army headquarters and local authorities. There is a shortage of many commodities in Germany now. A war is going on.

Sports life in Oflag 64 is flourishing but they need balls of various kinds. We are waiting with great tension that tennis-table tables should arrive from Sweden, at least they have been ordered. A Roman Catholic priest, father Stanley Brach - a man with a neat beard and a velvet soft voice - now leads the religious services for both Catholics and Protestants. Oberst Schneider, the Commandant, says that he is rather surprised over the activities by the Americans in the church field. He had never expected them to be that way. (Goebbels is daily telling us something else.)

There is music en masse: Fine accordions have found their ways into the camp; a piano teacher is conducting a class with several promising pupils. A choir was formed a couple of weeks ago - and the group stood up in front of us visitors and sang: It sounded fine, considering the short time they had been practicing.

There is a professional radio man in the camp, ^{Lieutenant} ~~Captain~~ Howard Holder. In civil life he is an employee of an American Radio station. He has got a regular radio programme going over the camp loud speakers. You can hear this wherever you are in the camp - music, lectures, information to the men and discussions. It seems to be a very much appreciated camp programme. I understand that such an activity must be typically American. - There are painters and model builders in full work.

Slowly, we, the visiting group, are walking with the men of confidence from room to room. Here and there we are sitting down, either for a small talk or a cup of coffee. Uncle Eric and Hugo are gladly accepting big fat American cigars offered by some men (I could never for my life smoke a cigar.) The question is being asked: "What kind of requests do you have? What can you do in captivity? How can we help you?" Laughingly

most of them answer: "Sirs, give us tickets so that we can go back home to old United States." Here we must disappoint them.

While Uncle Eric and Hugo are completing their walk through the camp, I am having a private reception hour. Around 25 officers are called upon to see me since I have special messages and greetings from their families at home. One after one they are coming, they sit down in front of me and we have a little chat. Most of the messages are of joyful nature, and I can feel how the enthusiasm is increasing in the waiting room outside.

The day's end. I think we had a good camp visit. Hugo has got many interesting impressions to take with him to the United States. We have not seen the darkest sides of camp life, true; on the other side, not everything here - in a very dark part of Nazi Germany - is misery.

The day is rounded off with a good dinner in our hotel to which we have invited the Commandant, Oberst Schneider, and some of his men. Many ingredients we are bringing ourselves - coffee, chocolate, tea, ham and cigarettes. We have also bribed the hotel owner to a couple of bottles of good German wine.

Basically I find these people very friendly and decent, but they are very much impregnated with the Hitler propaganda. They really know very little about what is going on outside Germany, just what they are being told. They do not dare to listen to foreign broadcasts, or, at least, they do not tell me that they do so. I cannot really understand the security officer, a Hauptman Zimmerman. He is a nice man in some respects, but I have noticed, from time to time, that he has a very suspicious and sneaking nature, watching every step we take. Is he a Nazi man or a professional soldier who is eager to defend his job?

November 6, 1943.

I said good bye to Hugo and Uncle Eric this morning when they left for Berlin. Myself took a train, in the middle of day, back down to Posen. I went to the same hotel (Ostland) where we had spent that remarkable night for a couple of hours two nights ago.

In spite of the fact that, as late as yesterday, I had had my hotel room confirmed through the Commandant in Oflag 64 there is no room available when I arrive! The hotel porter in the reception defends himself with the fact that there is a very important festival of high party leaders going on in Posen over the week end and that all these high members of the party should be given priority to the hotel rooms. I get damned mad. I have noticed that this porter is full of hate against Sweden and Swedes; he has mentioned this several times. The Swedes should fight against the bolschevists, he says. He seems to be doing all he can in order to make life

unpleasant for me. So, therefore, I take the telephone and ring up the Commandant of Stalag XXI-D, who was the one who originally had ordered the room for me. I regard him, Oberst von Boedeker, as a friend. He promises to make an intervention immediately.

Well, he makes his intervention, and the porter tells me that I shall get a room but that I have to wait a little while. I have to wait (in the lobby) for seven hours (!) until I get my room but the waiting so long has really paid its reward. I am getting a very nice room. It's clean, white, elegant - nothing at all to worry about. The bathroom is lovely with all kinds of comfort. In the afternoon I give Colonel von Boedeker a ring and tell him that I am comfortably settled in the hotel. I shall see him in Stalag XXI-D (British camp outside Posen) on Monday.

Finally I am enjoying life - being in a comfortable hotel room. I sleep. I read. I write. I am having a bath. In order to press every drop out of the lemon I am going down to the very fashionable barbershop in the hotel basement. I let them cut my hair. I let them give my face a massage, and - to tell the blunt truth - this is the very first time in my life that I have a manicure. They are spraying eau-de-Cologne on me. I am absolutely sure that they think that I - living in a luxury nazi hotel - am a kind of foreigner who is a great sympathizer of the Third Reich and, therefore, they are giving me all this attention. I feel like a king. Tomorrow is Sunday.

After this refreshing experience in the barber's shop, I am having a very good dinner in the elegant dining room of the hotel. The restaurant is absolutely full of nazis - SS, SA and military people. The SS with skull and cross-bones signs on the uniforms and the SAS in brown shirts and big swastika signs on their sleeves. It is a strange surrounding, a company which I really do not seek voluntarily. Even if there must be a smell of prisoner-of-war camp from me I am not aggressively looked upon as long as I keep my mouth shut about my mission to Germany - they must look at me (tall, blue eyed and blond) as a good specimen of arian origin. But I can also use their presence in order to gain some material advantages for myself too. And, why not? Everything I am doing is for the good and for the best of my prisoners of war --or?

Because of the many prominent guests in the hotel tonight the restaurant is providing the most excellent foods and wines you

could think of - to great extent "imported" from France. As an accepted guest in the hotel the menu is also available to me.

Tomorrow is Sunday, and I am looking forward to a long, wonderful day of rest with a visit to Swedish friends, the Hoerwing family, and to a German friend whom I got to know some months ago. I am finishing off this uniquely wonderful day with going to a nearby movie house where they are playing a movie with a Swedish actress, Christina Söderbaum, who seems to have sold her soul to the nazis. At the entrance of the movie house is a big poster: "Für Polen verboten" - forbidden for Poles. I am not shocked. This is a sign which I see in many places here. The Poles do not have many rights in their own country. Perhaps this sign is also something which is applicable to Swedes? But, honestly, I do not think that they have been thinking of Swedes out here in Posen!

ATTACKED AND BEATEN BY NAZI BROWN SHIRTS IN POSEN.

Posen, November 7, 1943.

(Diary)

Had a good night's sleep, ordering breakfast up to my room (real luxury for being where I am!); well, at this nazi fortress - once you have got the foot inside - you can get whatever you want. The sun is shining, it's rather fresh outside. I am putting on my trench coat (Swedish style) and hat and I take a little morning walk out in the streets. There are lots of people moving around. German officers in various uniforms are coming and going with very elegant ladies.

In order to get an hour of quietness and meditation I am going into the nearby cathedral. People are streaming out and in - typical for the Catholic Churches, so I think (born Lutheran). But what do I find? This is not a real church. The nazis have transformed the cathedral, partly into a museum, partly into an atelier for preparing and painting stage settings for the theater next door. So I really do not get much of a spiritual lift here.

I am getting out in the streets again, coming up on a broad boulevard. I am turning to somebody who is passing by. "Why are so many people out in the streets today?" "Well", the man answers, "don't you know that Himmler is here in Posen today? He is going to give a speech in the old market square in about an hour's time." Ah, so both Himmler and myself are in Posen on the same day - what a coincidence! To tell the truth, I am getting a little bit curious, so I am walking on.

The streets are absolutely full with people, Germans and Poles in a mixture, on the sidewalks. Suddenly, I hear music far away and I am finding a place to stand on the sidewalk. Then, suddenly, a parade is coming by. Brass music, brown columns, music again, groups of Hitler Jugend, banners, streamers, groups of German flags - - - new columns without end. I feel

disgusted when I see these marching masses of true representatives for the nazis, the "Herrenvolk" (the Master Race) and all the bad things it stands for, not less their humiliating attitude towards the Poles. Their faces look very fanatical.

Suddenly I can see how a brown-shirted SA-man with one of those funny saucepan caps and a stripe around his chin is jumping out here and there from the column where he is marching. He is running up to the sidewalks. Without any warnings in advance, he is at random slapping people in their faces and throwing their hats away - out in the sidewalk and out in the street. I can hardly believe my eyes - it looks absolutely crazy. The music is playing. The high leather boots are tramping and marching on. The brown man is coming closer to me. I am moving a little bit forward in the direction of the column because I do not want to stand there any longer. I am finding a place to go inside of the masses on the side walk.

Suddenly, the little SA man has come up to my position. I am getting a violent stroke over my ear from behind. Brutally, he takes my hat and throws it in over a fence into a courtyard to a house. His face is just below mine. He is looking up at me very angrily and I am looking into his eyes and I am absolutely flabbergasted.

"You did not salute the German flag, you devil", he is shouting to me. The music is playing. I can hardly speak. "I have not seen any German flag", I am shouting back. What I have seen are some Hitler Jugend streamers" - I am trying to tell stuttering back: "Just think of what you are doing. You are brutal to a Swede." "You should take your hat off and greet German flags whether you are Swedish or American or English", he is shouting.

Well, suddenly there is quite a crowd gathering around me and the little brown shirted man. Another brown saucepanhatted man is coming up, and he is absolutely drowning me with curses and abusive words, telling me what a horrible fellow I am and that a man like me should not be allowed to be in a German street.

I am boiling of anger. Forgetting for a moment my YMCA background I am thinking: "You damned bastard - shall I jump on you and hit you in your dirty face and kill you on the spot". But fortunately I can pull myself together. A voice within me tells: "Take it easy, Henry! If you do a thing like that you will risk your life. They may have pistols in their belts. If I am hitting them, they may shoot me on the spot - such things they can do here, in Poland. Why? Because they think that I am a Pole, of course."

The whole show takes only a minute or two; then they are marching on and the brown men are continuing to hit and strike people along the parade. I can see hats flying up in the air. This is organized brutality, a part of the show. First 50 yards behind the Hitler Jugend streamers there is a whole fortress of German flags with the swastika slowly moving forward. Then, thanks God, I do not need to take off my hat because it is on the other side of the fence, in the

courtyard. I am very sad and angry when I am climbing over the fence to pick up my hat. Poles are coming up to me, very upset, scared and surprised. How did you dare to speak to them that way? I can feel how my ear is swollen and bleeding.

It is a sad young man visiting the Swedish-Polish family Hoerwing in the Margarethenstrasse. They have lived out here for a long time...he is in business.... and they have always been very kind to me when I have visited Posen. They are getting upset. In their home I find, like many times before, a group of their Polish friends who had been invited for lunch.

The brown shirts attack on me is a subject which is very thoroughly discussed this afternoon. "You should do something about it" they say. Now they have hit somebody who can react - we Poles cannot. We are being hit and kicked all around the clock. Look at all the posters and placards around us --- ONLY FOR GERMANS ----FORBIDDEN FOR POLES ----ONLY FOR POLES ---- in toilets, railway stations, trains, churches, parks etcetera. This is our territory, occupied by a Herrenvolk.

(So it happened that I unexpectedly started a process to have this incident cleared up which took several days - a both dangerous, thrilling and humorous adventure in dealing with the nazis and the Gestapo. In his book "The Welcome Swede" Frank Diggs has told this story on pages 69 -72 so I see no reason to repeat it here in details.

The incident was never cleared up - perhaps the best for both me and my continued work among prisoneers of war).

.....

And so the days, weeks and months were rolling on.....and 1943 became 1944. I was always on the go, travels by train (getting worse and worse) or with a little charcoalgaz driven Opel car which I got in the beginning of 1944, like my colleagues. The driving with charcoal in war time Germany was a story in itself...cannot be told here. But both my British and American PsOW friends were laughing at me when I drove up to their camps with a smkoking charcoal stove behind the car and twenty big paper bags with charcoal on the top.

I paid several more visits to Oflag 64 during the winter and spring; but even adventurous visits could become a kind of routine in the hectic life of a YMCA delegate, visiting 2 - 3 camps every week I met many new and interesting American officers at every visit. Repeated contacts with them and messages to and from their homes in the USA created a kind of special friendship between us. (They wrote their names and home adresses in my War Time Log.) I felt warmly for them - and they in their turn seemed to like my visits. A few extracts from my reports and letters to Sweden about Oflag 64 and my views on the Americans might be of interest:

"....these American officers were throughout very nice, stabilized young men with a fresh view on life. They were never stiff and stuffy, formalities were nothing for them. Their way of acting therefore - especially to me since this was my first real contacts with Americans - seemed

tracts from my reports and letters to Sweden about Oflag 64 and my views on the Americans might be of interest:

"....these American officers were throughout very nice, stabilized young men with a fresh view on life. They were never stiff and stuffy, formalities were nothing for them. Their way of acting therefore - especially to me since this was my first real contacts with Americans - seemed

to be somewhat nonchalant. They were sitting on the tables with a cigarette or a chewing gum in their mouth - what a difference to Germans soldiers standing at attention when I speak to them... There was something open in their characters which was very attractive. But sometimes they seemed to me rather naive and childish, especially when they experienced something which filled them with joy. (This was contrary to my British prisoners, who seemed to suppress their feelings as much as possible!) At various kinds of ballgames (several of them to me looking rather strange), at sports shows and arrangements, they made noise which made the whole area to shiver. They loved jazz music. When their little jazz orchestra played the theater barrack really went up and down in waves of cheers and applause - real screams ..."

"Often they complained over the lack of comfort. They were used to good comfort at home, they said. If the Germans told them than they had a better time in this camp than other prisoners-of-war in Germany the Americans answered that that was none of their business to compare themselves with other camps...."

"There were German officers who were real nice and positive and wanted to help the Americans, even behind the back of the somewhat rigid security officer (who caused me problems). But, on the other hand, it was very difficult - even if the German officers went all out to help - to have the Americans to recognize this willingness and compliance on the part of the Germans..... The attitude was rather this: we do not owe them any thanks - they are just doing their bloody duty. Colonel Drake was very tough in this respect...."

"There was a group of people of Swedish and Norwegian origin in Oflag 64. Some of them spoke Swedish, for good or for worse, and once when I was present, somebody suggested that we should form a Scandinavian club which was also made on the spot without any great formalities. The leading man in this club was Doc Burgeson from des Moines. The entertainer within the group was a Captain Harry Carlson. Another enthusiastic member was Captain Kenneth Johnson....I notice other Scandinavian names from the "club roster": Lt. Ed Sager from Minneapolis, Captain Robert Eckman from Des Moines, 2:nd Lt. Ray Holmquist from Minnesota, Captain Gunnar Anderson from Chicago, Carl Hansen from West Haven, Conn. etc. etc. - just to mention some. The Germans did not like us speaking Swedish but sometimes they seemed to be a little afraid to ask us to

refrain from this language of "true vikings and heros"....

"The camp has its own monthly news magazine. The editor is is a professional in journalism, Frank Diggs. I think that "THE OFLAG 64 ITEM" is one of the very best camp magazines I have seen - such a good variety of news and entertainment. The ITEM even has arranged with a beauty contest - the officers competing with photographs of their wives and sweethearts at home...Also mentioning the visits to the camp of the Red Cross and he YMCA representatives...."

JUNE 6, 1944, IN OFLAG 64 -
A DAY TO REMEMBER.

(Diary)

A most memorabile day. Here are now about 450 American army officers. They have been here for one year - this must be celebrated; a sports day is being organized.

Upon arrival in the camp I reassure them: "No more birthday will be celebrated in Oflag 64!" They liked to hear that - and agreed. Inside the heavy camp gates they had posted the News Bulletin of the day: ROME LIBERATED YESTERDAY BY THE AMERICAN FIFTH ARMY - reprint from the news bulletines in the German news papers of this morning. This piece of news is "legal". But the Americans already knew this through their secret wireless receiver - whoever is operating it!

Olympic games today - they seem to have everything what is needed - balls, bats, boxing gloves, ping-pong balls etc. - everything from the YMCA. The spirit and enthusiasm is high - to say the least. I have never attended an American sports festival before. They have a rather rough running track in the court yard. The sports field is being used for American football - a funny "football" game where they take the ball with their hands, running like mad and are throwing themselves at the enemies trying to hurt them as much as possible. Horrible.

The waves of emotions around the arena are very high. Here I am sitting, a Swedish visitor, in the midst of highranking German officers who are all watching both the games and me - that I do not do anything wrong. Captains Bill Burghardt, the skier and scater, and Jimmy Murphy (I am told that he is a detective froom LA) are trying to tell me the rules of American "football".

The sports events have come to an end and are followed by a sort of parade. At a determined stroke of the clock 450 American officers stand to attention before me. They have recently received new uniforms from the American Red Cross. They look smart. There is Colonel Thomas Drake from San Diego and there is Colonel Paul Goode with Scotch blood in his veins and a yearning to play the bagpipe. There is Lt. Colonel John

Waters who has recently been accorded General Eisenhower's special mention for bravery in the North African desert (something the Germans have told me). There stands Larry Allen, star reporter from the Associated Press and there is Doc Burgeson of Swedish descent who can at least say "Tack så mycket" (Thank you very much), there stands father Stanley Brach, a Catholic priest with an imperial over the collar of his uniform, there is Jerry Long, golf instructor from Washington and many, many others...all looking dapper and standing to attention in the best of spirits and eager for life. The Germans secretly admire them.

The camp orchestra plays instruments which have reached the camp from Sweden. Suddenly Colonel Drake requests silence and makes a speech in honor of - the Swedish YMCA visitor! Today, on the 6th of June 100 years ago, in 1844, the first YMCA was founded in London by a young man named George William. Thanks to the YMCA for all the books the instruments and sports equipment which made this day of festivities possible " - and a warm applause.

This day -the 6th of June -is also Sweden's National Day. "Sweden is a good country - let us give Sweden a hand". Cheers and a good round of applause for Sweden, it warms my heart.

Then comes the moment when I have to step down from the platform and distribute the sports prizes, donated by the YMCA - "The Flame of Freedom Medal", a medal with ribbon figuring a red triangle framed by barbed wires. (This has become a very popular sports prize in many POW camps in Germany.) The prize winning American officers click their heels, throw out their chests, salute, do a right-about turn and get back into line. They look very pleased with themselves, including the German camp commandant Oberst Schneider.

Festivities in the camp come to an abrupt end. Large clouds which have gathered over our heads during the latter part of the ceremony break instantaneously down over the yard which now becomes a lake. Safe inside the building, dripping-wet men gather in flocks in the rooms and along the corridors. Everyone seems to be in high spirits. Suddenly hullabaloo breaks loose. The German officers look like question marks - to say the least. What has happened?

In an unguarded moment Johnny Waters gets me in a corner and whispers: "It has begun; the invasion started in Normandy during the night! All is going well. Soon we are free men. We are watching developments hour by hour".

He is panting with restrained enthusiasm. Ear-splitting shouts of joy will never cease. The Germans do not consider it worth while to try to calm them down. They also must know what has happened but don't breathe a word about it. In a gentlemanly manner they salute their American colleagues and escort me out through the gates. In the windows of the camp's main buildings American officers are sitting in clusters waving goodbye to me. "Goodbye, Mr. Söderberg, we'll be meeting you soon in the United States" are their words of farewell. Yes,

this was indeed a day to be remembered.

GRAMOPHONE RECORDINGS IN OFLAG 64.

In the early summer 1944 we received in our German YMCA office a couple of gramophone recording sets with instructions - wherever possible - to make recordings of life in POW camps. There was a demand in those countries which were contributing to the YMCA POW services to demonstrate with sounds how the YMCA equipment sent in to camps was being used. I received permission from the commandants in 4 - 5 of "my " camps in eastern Germany to make recordings, of course under supervision and subject to "censorship". I do not think that the Germans basically had anything against this; further the PsOW themselves would get a kick out this kind of activities. However, the originally given permission in Stalag Luft III was withdrawn after the Great Escape. Further, in a big British camp outside Posen (XXI -D) the British Man of Confidence (a RSM) said no - as a British regular soldier he could not allow activities which could be used by the Germans for propagande purposes (as he put it). He did not want to risk his pension after retirement. --In Oflag 64 there were not at all such misgivings, neither on the part of the American officers, nor the German commandant and his staff (although I was convinced that Hauptmann Zimmerhad secured the Gestapo consent).

Szubin, June 28, 1944.

(Diary)

This morning, on my way to Oflag 64, I visited a small British working camp on a farm outside Posen. I found something here which shocked me - the men in the camp were marking time by tattooing each other. They had tattooed themselves to such a degree that they hardly were to be recognized as human beings, the worst kind of self destruction I have ever seen. It was disgusting but, most of all, it was so painful to think that one day these young men would be returning to England looking like this. They were no professionals and they were certainly no masters in this art. One prisoner had permitted his tattooer friend to tattoo his whole body, every spot of it, with pictures of sexual parts - both male and female - and also acts of sexual intercourse in various positions. But the tattooed soldier himself was very proud of what he looked like now and his friends had a good laugh at him. Tattooing is forbidden, my German security officer says, but what could they do when it was already done?

In the afternoon I continue up towards Szubin with the recording equipment in the car. The roads are no good roads, horrible, and I get stuck here and there. My charcoal driven car is not built for this kind of roads and many parts are coming loose. I have to repair myself; several times I have to

stop at garages along the route - but these "garages" have not any ideas how it is to operate with charcoal gaz . The Germans say that "the roads are typically Polish! The Poles were never capable to look after their own country", they say. "The German occupation of Poland was really a blessing to that country!"

On the top of all these mechanical troubles it has been very dry during the last weeks. All roads are covered with a thick layer of dust which is spraying around the car. The dust is penetrating into everything, into the car and into my luggage, in the seats, in the bags, in the ears, in the nose, in the mouth, in the hair, in the clothes.....

But here, in my small but clean little hotel in Altburgund I can have a hot bath. And the German hostess and the Polish girls who are servicing the hotel are very good to me (perhaps because I smell of Nescafé, chocolate and soap?). After my repeated visits here during the last year they are recognizing "der Schwede" (the Swede). I am being served a very good meal, beefsteak, potatoes and vegetables of various kind.

Tomorrow will be a great day, I am going to make gramophone recordings in Oflag 64. I know that there are many officers in the camp who are looking forward to my visit. They have already sent over to me the recording program. We shall, with the permission of the commandant, be on the go the whole day. Some men have been telling me that they shall feel like being in the United States, in a RCA studio in Hollywood - what that means.

It is good to go to bed tonight. And finally I have reached the point when the hotel owner is giving me a woollen blanket instead of a stupid erratic giant pillow to put over the body!

Szubin, June 29, 1944.
(Diary)

Everything well prepared when I arrive this morning. Colonel Drake receives me with his staff of radio reporters and gramophone technicians. Really I did not need to do anything myself. They are taking over the whole show. The Germans accompanying me are curious and interested. They do not seem to be used to this kind of activities.

But tell the joy that lasts forever. Very soon we find out that my gramophone aggregate is working only on alternating current and they only have direct current here. We need a transformer - the one which we had sent into camp a long time ago is out of order. A German soldier is being ordered by the German officers to go out in town and try to find a suitable transformer. He comes back - without any luck. After two hours of waiting, the German commandant himself is coming in and

shouting triumphantly that they have found a transformer in the his office. We are trying it out, it functions, and the joy and expectation is very high.

Colonel Drake's room is transformed into a studio. Each one in his turn, the responsible leaders for the various activities in the camp, can come to the micropone and give his report. That turns out into a nearly endless story about sports, music, church, male chorus, studies, library, garden, theater etc. There are big crowds of curious Americans outside "the studio" trying to get a glimpse of what is going on or listen to the play-backs of the records. Everytime we play we can hear jubilant cries from the corridor.

With Howard Holder - already an experienced radio man - as technical director and commentator the show takes place. All are eager like children to have a chance to stand there with microphone in hand. Thomas Drake is speaking: "Greetings to the family and friends on the other side of the ocean. We are marking time. We will soon see you again" he says. We are recording parts of a theater performance, a little piece from "Boy Meets Girl" and we get the male voices sound really like women voices. The choir is singing "Vive l'Amour", the garden people are telling about tomatoes and green beans and an example of how an education in French is being carried out with wonderful American French pronunciation is also being recorded.

We are replaying after each record is cut. Great excitment and joy. In the chapel we are recording a part of a religious service. The atmoshpere is very solemn. Father Brach - a little bit nervous - is reading a prayer, gets stuck, and is reading it again - everything goes in on the record. The crowd sings "The Doxology"; the choir is tuning away in a quiet closure.

Representatives for all the various States represented in this camp then take their turn at the microphone. "Best regards to Dad and Mommy"....."Hi Mom, all well, keep smiling"...."Hello to Broadway"...."See you soon"...."Thanks for the parcel"..... A wind of sublime longing for home is sweeping through the hall where we are recording.

The hours are running away quickly and we are approaching the evening. It's getting a little bit dark. We are all very tired, it was a tense day. "The best day so far in captivity" says Colonel Drake. The result is 14 records (both sides) . The German commandant looks very satisfied with everything and especially with himself. Today there have been very few problems in the camp - no escape efforts!

A message is going out all over the camp hat the gramophone records will be replayed and can be listened to in the courtyard of the camp. In no time there is a big crowd of American officers gathered. Even the windows up in the big accomodation buildings are filled up with people, some of them sitting with their legs hanging, swinging outside the windows. A big loudspeaker is placed in a window. Myself is invited to sit on

a chair in the middle of the courtyard together with Colonel Drake, the men of confidence and, of course, some German watch-officers. I am looking at the Americans when the records are being played. They are listening with tense expressions in their faces. They are forgetting the outside world, they seem to be filled with a kind of childish approval, expectation and joy. They are getting absolutely quiet and you can hear a needle fall when the greetings to those at home are being replayed. Now and then, a break with a very strong laughter that gives echo out over the place, especially when somebody has sent a greeting home ending with a cheerful "Hi Mom".....

I am leaving the camp at 10 PM. I am tired but satisfied. I think many had a great experience, at least I had. In a couple of weeks, I hope, these records will have reached the United States. I know that the boys now will be waiting with great expectations to hear in a letter from home that a "Hello Mom" has arrived to the United States from a son confined to life in that mystical POW - camp, Oflag 64, in Szubin, Poland.

(Unfortunately, because of delayed German censorship, snags in the transports between Germany and the United States via Geneva and/or Stockholm and the editing and distribution process in the USA the recordings did not reach American radio audiences until the early months of 1945. At that time the officers from Oflag 64 were either on the march or living in overcrowded barracks or tents in Bavaria, some had even disappeared to Russia. And I doubt anyone received mail in captivity telling that the folks at home already had heard the recordings.....)

FALL OF 1944 - WAR'S END IN SIGHT

From the early fall of 1944 it became clear that the war would soon come to an end. The Germans were loosing on all fronts; after the invasion in Normandie, the Western allies were pulling themselves together for the final onslaught. And from the East the Russians were threatening with a 2.000 miles frontal attack.

The coup against Hitler on July 20 lowered the moral of the Germans to the point that even POW-camp commandants and officers started to see the end of the tunnel - for them an end without light - and discussing it frankly and openly with me on my perpetual camp visits. The daylight "strategic" bombings by the Americans and the strafing of the roads (both became every day realities for us YMCA delegates, always travelling) made the Germans in general to understand that their Goebbels resistance appeals were "Quatsch" (=rubbish).

The overriding question about the war's end was "WHEN?" I heard it from the prisoners of all nationalities, I heard it from the Germans - daily. No one could give the answer. It was - in my opinion - a miracle that Hitler and his gang, in spite of all odds against them, could hold out until the beginning of May 1945.

While thus the general situation in Germany became more one of disorder and disorganization, the grip of Gestapo in the field of PsOW tightened and we who were working inside The Reich for the enemy had to be more on our watch than ever before in order not to do anything illegal or provocative which could stop us from performing the work which now seemed more important to the PsOW than ever before.

September 18 - 21, 1944.

(Diary and Reports)

After some weeks of summer leave I am participating in the exchange of PsOW and civilian internees which is taking place via Sweden. This is a both interesting and moving experience.

1.715 British, Canadian and American PsOW and civilian internees are coming up by trains to Sassnitz in northern Germany from where they are transported with the three ferry ships, "Drottning Victoria", "Preussen" and "Deutschland", over the southern Baltic sea to the Swedish port of Trelleborg. From here they continue through the night by train to Gotheburg where ships are waiting for them - to take them home. The Americans and Canadians will sail the Atlantic with the big Swedish Ocean Liner "Gripsholm".

At the same time - timing is very important - 600 German civilian internees who have been living for five years in camps on the Isle of Man are coming in to Gothenburg with the

Swedish ocean Liner "Drottningholm", followed five hours later by "Arundel Castle" with about 1.000 German PsOW from "the other side".

My job, together with some of my colleagues from Germany and Swedish Red Cross, is to be at hand in the trains from Trelleborg to Gothenburg in order to serve in every possible way. We do everything we can for them. Many are handicapped and crippled; they are really looking forward to come back home. Everything is well organized and the allied PsOW coming from Germany think they are in heaven - nice nurses and orderlies taking care of them all the way.

Both in Trelleborg and Gothenburg the British, American, Canadian and German Embassies are well represented, greeting their own compatriots. Many of the returning Germans are unhappy; they know that they will go back to a country in ruins. Several of those I talk to also know that members of their families have been killed during bomb raids. Still they say; "Die Heimat bleibt immer die Heimat", ("Home is always home, in spite of everything").

I am standing on the key in the port of Trelleborg when the first ferry boat arrives from Germany. **The very first POW to leave the ship is the American Colonel Thomas Drake from Oflag 64** - my camp! He looks a little bit pale but still smart in his impeccable American Colonel's uniform - with decorations. I am the first one to grab him and let him talk to some of the journalists who are waiting on Swedish soil. On behalf of the returning PsOW Drake expressed the delight of all to be able to put foot on neutral soil - Sweden. He told that the trip so far had been rather strenuous. Most of them had left their base camps six weeks ago and had had to stay in transit camps before proceeding to Sassnitz.

I met many friends from the camps in Germany during the train ride that night. It was another kind of experience - they felt like free men. During the first hours of the train trip the spirit was very high - singing, music making, story telling and so on...and lots of food! Beer and open faced sandwiches and fruits were available in unlimited amounts all through the night. After a couple of hours everything was absolutely quiet.

"The Swedish bread tastes like cake", said one of the half sitting, half laying American soldiers packed like happy sardines on the train. At some passages I had difficulties to get through - but not in the same sense as travelling in German trains out to my camps in eastern Germany and Poland!

In Gothenburg I have a happy reunion with Colonel Drake. We arrange with a dinner together on board the ocean liner Gripsholm - his home for the next 10 days on the return trip to the USA. There are many things to talk about - the war, the remaining PsOW in Oflag 64, the future. He asks me to be remembered to Oflag 64 if and when I visit the camp again. He is standing at the rail when the ship leaves. We are waving good bye and do not know if we shall ever meet again.

THE END OF REGULAR CAMP VISITS.

I visited Oflag 64 twice in the fall of 1944. At the first visit - on October 17 - I came with my Danish colleague, Christian Christiansen, who usually served with the prisoners in the middle and northern parts of Germany. (At the end of the war Christiansen was arrested by the Russians in Berlin and had to spend a full year in various prisons in the Sovjet Union. They claimed that he was an American spy!)

At the end of October 1944 the YMCA relief unit inside Germany held a conference at our HQ in Sagan. We all felt that the war was drawing towards its end. Important decisions were made as to the continuation of our work in Germany. Contingency plans were being worked out in case the war activities would force us to split our work in small parts.

Sagan, October 27, 1944.
(Diary)

Our office here in Sagan is full of YMCA people from all parts of Germany. Very interesting to listen to all reports and the fantastic adventures of my colleagues.

In the midst of everything, by mistake, 30 tons of food, destined for POW camps have just arrived to our office here in Sagan. The reason for this is that the camps out in the eastern areas have been moved by the Germans and the post offices have no address to the marching camps. The YMCA in Sagan is a kind of solution. So we have to take care of all those parcels and arrange a distribution system. One problem is that we are waiting since about a week for ten lorries to come to headoffice from north-central parts of Germany. Without those lorries we have great difficulties to arrange distribution. On the other hand we are now well equipped for whatever may happen when the Russians are approaching this area. The immediate problem is to protect all these parcels; there are many thieves around as soon as the sun sets.

Also, in the midst of everything we got two groups of PsOW with guards - unannounced - arriving from major POW camps, sent to us by their commandants in order to secure equipment and food. We had of course to give them all possible hospitality - food and lodging. And we are not set up to be a hotel! Last night allied prisoners including British and Americans together with their German guards have been sleeping all over the place - in the office area on the floor and in the store rooms where we have half a dozen beds.

Last night we were 22 people for dinner! And our office staff has to cater to all the needs arising, including cooking. Fortunately our staff has been strengthened during the last month by two women clerks - one from Sweden, one from Switzerland. They are both good office workers but I must

admit that the Swiss girl (her name is Claire Zbinden), coming from our head office in Geneva, is one of the most efficient workers we have ever had in our German office. She is not only capable and respected, she is also very attractive.

Another difficulty is that several of the French POW who come to us every day and work in our store rooms have been forbidden to serve the YMCA. Gestapo claims that they have "misused the confidence shown in them" - why and how we do not know.

We hold the conference with Mr. Hugo Cedergren from Stockholm and some people from the Geneva head office present. The situation is very gloomy against the background of the war activities. We have also got certain hints from the German High Command that the Breslau - Sagan area soon could be turned into a battle field. The first point on the agenda is how to organize our work and where to move our head office if and when the Russians are approaching the Sagan area. Until further notice, however, this is still a comparatively quiet corner of Germany.

Another question is the work of the delegates and their independent activities in a situation when communications are broken. Everyone agrees that improvisation will be necessary. We must also be prepared that Germany can be cut in two parts and that there will be no contacts between the two. The fuel supply is also a problem. One day we may not have access to our stores of charcoal - this is especially difficult for me since most of my charcoal supplies have been stored in areas which are now occupied by the Russians. However, there is one little glimpse of hope - we have been ascertained that real gas soon will be available for our cars - American gas shipped into Germany and earmarked for the use by YMCA delegates, to be drawn from German gas stations. Hope this is true.

For my part it is decided, that, as a first step, I shall give up my camps in the northeastern area of Germany/Poland and concentrate my work on what is left of the Silesian and central parts, and, later on, southern Germany. A successor to me in the northeastern areas, including important camps like Oflag 64, Stalag I, Stalag Luft 6 and Stalag XX-A is a young Swiss delegate, Heinz- Heinrich Zürrer, who has recently joined our office in Sagan. The thought of having to give up my camps in that area are making my heart bleed - on the other hand the influx of prisoners in the more southern area, especially the air officers at Luft III, makes it necessary to redistribute the responsibilities of our delegates.

The work is becoming increasingly difficult because the Germans are getting more and more nervous and suspicious. Gestapo is to large extent taking over the reins. And the general public seem to think that something is wrong when allied prisoners have better food and shelter than Germany's own population. Successively the transportation and communication system is breaking down..

Szubin, November 20, 1944.
(Diary)

Visited Oflag 64 today with my successor Heinz-Heinrich Zürrer, who will take over this and some other camps in the northeastern area soon. We got, as usual, a friendly reception but the atmosphere in the commandants office was one of nervousness and irresolution. The question was - when can we expect the Russians?

The senior officer among the Americans was now Colonel Paul Goode from Oregon, a calm but determined soldier with a quiet humor. I could bring fresh greetings to him and the whole camp from Drake, with whom I had had dinner on board the "Gripsholm" on October 20 in Gotheburg, Sweden, and who now was home and safe. I had also a set of photographs from the POW-exchange in which many, including the Germans, were very interested.

For Goode personally our meeting became important since I brought with me new eye-glasses for him which he had asked for at my last visit. Goode reminded me of the bagpipe he had ordered at my previous visit. I had contacted Geneva for this rather unique instrument and could only express the hope that it would arrive in time for Christmas so that he could cheer up his fellow-prisoners. (He was not so certain that he to begin with could be of much inspiration. In all honesty he could not play a bag pipe, he said. But he wanted very much to learn how to do it.)

For my colleague Zürrer this visit was most interesting - his first meeting with American military men. I am sure that the people in Oflag 64 will like him; he is a friendly and very idealistic (much more so than myself!) man who is willing to sacrifice every bit of comfort in order to assist other people.

A rather funny incident occurred. From Posen I brought with me a hare which I had got the evening before from my German friend Heinrich, a hunter. I had decided to give it to Doc Burgeson. But Hauptman Zimmermann, the security officer, was very suspicious when I wanted to take the hare in to the camp. He said that "something forbidden" could be hidden inside. I asked him kindly to perform some surgery and open up the hare - which he did not do. An indication of his suspicions. So Doc Burgeson got his hare and was delighted, looking forward to his first (and probably only) hare stew as a POW.

Another real funny security incident concerning my colleague Heinz Zürrer took place after we had finished our camp visit. We had the feeling that the visit had been good and constructive. We left in the evening and went back to the hotel. Early next morning Hauptmann Zimmermann himself appeared at the hotel and said that it had been reported to him that Zürrer during the camp visit had left his attaché case in a room - yes, we could recall that at one point during our walk around the camp an American officer came running after us with Zürrers case. He had unintentionally forgotten it in a corner of a room and was happy to get it back.

Hauptmann Zimmerman now came to the hotel in order to find out what Zürrer was going to bring with him from Szubin in his attaché case - the day after the visit to camp! (Typical example of nazi logic!) Heinz-Heinrich had nothing to hide. When the security man opened up the attaché case he found - to his great surprise - that it was fully packed with nazi propaganda literature. Zürrer, having arrived a short time ago in Germany, had collected as much as possible on this subject, books and brochures, since he - a glowing anti-nazi himself - wanted to study as much as possible about the fanatical nazi environment in which he would work from now on. There was not a single item in his bags which could be related to the camp visit during the preceeding day. There was no blame neither on the YMCA delegates nor the American officers.

"I hope, Herr Haputmann, that you will be more than satisfied over what you found", said Zürrer in a serious voice to the somewhat ashamed German.

Hauptmann Zimmerman stretched out his arm and said farewell to us with - "Heil Hitler". He then left the hotel.

(This was my last visit to Oflag 64 under "normal" circumstances. Heinz-Heinrich Zürrer continued the work in the northeastern area and came back to Oflag 64 a couple of times before the camp had to break up and the prisoners had to leave. Regular activities had then stopped. This good Swiss colleague had a rough time when the Russians were running over the Danzig district and he was "caught" on the Russian side - saved his life by putting a frenchman's beret on his head, told the Russians that he was a French foreign worker and spoke nothing but French - one of his mother tongues. This he told me when we met again - 38 years later!))

COLONEL GOODE'S BAGPIPE.

February - April 1945.

(From diaries and reports)

My own activities during "The Last 100 Days" have been dealt with in Frank Digg's book "The Welcome Swede" and I see no reason to repeat my story here.

Regular camp visits were out of question. The YMCA delegates served the prisoners on the roads - wherever we could find them. Myself was assigned to Bavaria and Austria. Here and there, especially during the middle and latter part of April, when Germany had been divided in two halves, I found men who had been in Oflag 64.

Around April 20, I found, in a tent in Bavaria, outside the Moosburg camp, a group of officers from Oflag 64, who had been on the go for three months. It was, under circumstances, a happy reunion. I am quoting from my dairy notes:

"... Here I also meet American officers from Oflag 64, my friends from June 6 1944 when we succesfully celebrated various memorable anniverseries - the same days as the invasion started in Normandy. It was refreshing to meet them, but they have been through very rough happenings during the last three months. They have been marching on the roads, travelled in box cars and, finally, confined to the POW camp Oflag XIII-B at Hammelburg (between Würzburg and Kassel). They had been "liberated " at the end of March by a tank column from Pattons Third Army but immediately recaptured by the Germans. Now they are standing and sitting in groups around me, asking questions.

"Where is Johnny Waters?" I ask. They tell me that a German soldier had shot at him when he went out with a white flag at Hammelburg and that he had been badly wounded. The last thing they had heard was that Waters had been taken to a German hospital. Over the German radio I heard about the unsuccessful Patton assault on Hammelburg, but what I now heard about John Waters was news to me.

On a straw sack I find Colonel Paul Goode who had marched with his men and shared their sufferings - still carrying his bag pipe. The men say that his bag pipe has been of great inspiration and a moral boost to them all. Himself assured me that he now really knew how to use it."

(When visiting Portland, Oregon, in December 1946, I met Colonel Goode at an Ex-POW-reunion. He told me that he had carried the secret wireless set in his bag pipe all through the march from Szubin to Moosburg, where they were finally liberated - also during the "Hammelburg incident", as he put it. Through this arrangement his group could follow, day by day, the current events as reported through the BBC. It was not before our meeting in Portland 1946 that I fully understood how important that bag pipe had been to him and the men from Oflag 64 during the long march, something they could not reveal to me when I met them outside Moosburg in April 1945.)

When the main part of the officers from Oflag 64 were liberated in the Moosubrg area at the end of April 1945, I was still working with what was left of PsOW and internees in the southern valleys of Austria - there were tens of thousands living in camps along the Italien border. Myself was a "voluntary inmate" of a camp for civilan internees at that time with the right to go out and in of the camp. As far as I could find out there were no ones from Oflag 64 in that area. We were not "liberated" until Victory Day - the 9th of May. But this is another story.

POST-WAR MEETINGS WITH "CLUB 64".

Tour in the USA September 1946 - February 1947.

During 1945 - 1946 I served with the YMCA for a year among German PsOW who were kept in camps in Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and Northern France, waiting for repatriation to Germany. It was an interesting and rewarding job from many points of view.

My allied POW friends in camps in Germany had been looking forward to go back home as free men to families waiting for them and homes which were intact. Not so the Germans in Western Europe; they suffered from war fatigue, they were socially insecure and politically disoriented and, above all, they knew that they were going home to a country in ruins and that many of them would not find their family members and friends alive.

Early in 1946, while stationed in Brussels, I received an invitation from the North American YMCA to come over in the fall of that year and tour the United States, revisiting with many American Ex-PsOW and telling the story about the work among allied "kriegies" in Hitler's Germany. So, in September 1946, I boarded "The Gripsholm", the ship on which Colonel Drake and myself had had dinner in September 1944, came to New York and toured the country, criss-crossing from coast to coast, for five months. American hospitality nearly killed me. I gave about 250 speeches and talks about our work in Germany in all kinds of civic clubs, churches and institutions and enjoyed an equal amount of lunches and dinners with chicken and apple pie, turkey and ice cream. (I did get giant steaks too - in Texas!). I survived - but put on 14 pounds!

During my tour over the United States, from the first day until the last, I met friends from Oflag 64. I met Bill Burghardt and Dick Roosbach in New York, John Waters in Washington, John Jones, Amon Carter and Ted Roggan in Texas, Don Waful in Syracuse, N.Y., Russell Bissman and Henry Bowman in Chicago, Doc Floyd Burgeson and his "Swedish Club" in des Moines, Iowa, Max Medame in Los Angeles, Tom Drake in San Diego etc. etc.....really, I cannot mention all the names, so many Szubin friends turned up.

(In the impressive scrap book which I received from the American YMCA after completed tour you will find all news paper clippings with pictures and names of former "Oflag 64 club members" who attended our meetings. They appear practically on every page of the scrap book - a wonderful souvenir, now permanently kept in the US Air Force Academy Library in Colorado Springs, Co.)

My own report 1947 from this tour, a kind of "USA as I saw it", based on my meetings with former prisoners of war, has also been deposited in the USAF library.

A chain of reunions.....

Over the years I have attended many reunions of former prisoners of war, in the USA, United Kingdom, Germany and Belgium. During the first decades after the war those reunions were scarce and - some times - arranged on a basis of improvisation and without prearranged programs; nonetheless they filled the purpose of keeping friendship and camaraderie in arms - and prison - alive.

What I especially remember from those earlier years is that, after dinner, many small parties were held, with bottles, glasses and much talking. Not seldom noisy but happy voices could be heard from hotel rooms until the early morning hours.

Over the years the style and programs of ExPOW-reunions have changed somewhat (even if the basic ingredients have remained) in a more solemn and ceremonious direction. The wives have turned up more and more and have added splendor and warmth to this original and basic friendship between men. And with the advent of the wives - and perhaps also manly wisdom and maturity - noisy voices from parties on hotel rooms have died away quickly or have not been heard at all...

As far as I can judge, the officers from Oflag 64 belong nowadays to the world's most frequent and ardent ExPOW - reunionists. And having been invited to share with them so many times over several decades the festivities at these occasions, I am getting very nostalgic when I hear and read and think of New York, Washington, Chicago, Miami, Houston, Las Vegas, Dubuque, San Diego, des Moines, San Antonio, Orlando.....and many other places. Not to mention reunions on the old "battle" grounds, the tours and visits to Poland - Szubin, Warsaw, Poznan, Berlin, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Lenin-grad, Stockholm...yes, even Linköping (my birth town in Sweden) and Ulvesund, our summer cottage, where in 1985 we experienced a peaceful invasion of the US Army, Club 64

"OFLAG 64, IN WAR AND PEACE, AS I SAW IT" -
A POSTSCRIPT.

I hope that the above collage in words, with extracts from diaries, reports and letters have conveyed how "The Welcome Swede" has seen and experienced Oflag 64 and its men over the years. Even if I have tried to present this in an objective way, subjectivity cannot be completely excluded. In reporting from a country led by political madmen, in turmoil and chaos and under the permanent strain of bombing and where the sympathies and feelings of the visiting YMCA delegate were entirely on the side of the prisoners-of-war, I may unintentionally have made mistakes because of lack of information or misunderstandings. There is definitely one subject which I may not have been presented in such a way that it has reflected its true dimension, namely the lists of requests which I carried along with me after each visit to Oflag 64! The span of the requests was impressive indeed, from safety pins to complete big jazz band instruments. If the YMCA could supply only 10 % of what was asked for, that might be regarded as a good result!

As I said in the introduction, I did not see every side of camp life - especially not the darkest sides. I hope you will apologize for this and trust that those things which I did not see have been duly recorded and reported by the Red Cross and the Protecting Power, and, above all by yourselves.

I shall always feel grateful for the opportunity given to me to meet and work with the officers in Oflag 64 and to cultivate the friendship with them in many places during various circumstances after the war. The hospitality shown to me and my wife Claire (the Swiss girl from Sagan!) - some times including also our children - has been more than great. It is impossible to mention all involved. But I cannot in this context refrain from expressing special warm feelings and thanks to couples like **John and Bee** (later **Anne**) **Waters** in Washington and West Point, **Frank and Tracy Diggs** (later **Elizabeth**) in Arlington, Va, and Montserrat, BWI, **Floyd and Helene Burgeson** in des Moines, Ia, **Tom and Quincey Drake** in San Diego, Ca, **Roy and Helen Chappel** in Kaufman, Tx, and - last but not least - **John and Mary Slack** in Gladwyne, Pa.

We regret that several of the persons mentioned have left us, but they will always be remembered with gratitude.