

World War II POWs confront their past

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Special to Maturity News Service

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SCHUBIN, Poland — They didn't know quite what to expect, these aging former prisoners of war. They were going back to see the old German prison camp, where as American officers, they had been held 45 years before. And they knew that they would somehow relive the most traumatic experience of their lives.

By the time the 36 ex-prisoners, their wives and two widows arrived by bus from Warsaw in this little Polish town, you could feel the tension rise.

Then suddenly there it was, the site of Oflag 64, where they — and I — had spent months or years, and had almost frozen and nearly starved. The place where I had been imprisoned for 18 months and where I edited the camp newspaper didn't look the same; the barbed wire, the high double fence and the ugly guard towers were gone.

The former POWs, all in their 70s, had been getting together regularly over the past 45 years. Now, though, they were quiet for a few minutes, before beginning to point out the places they once knew so well. The main building, where about 200 prisoners once lived, had been remodeled and made into a trade school. A couple of the old brick barracks remained, used as carpentry shops. The hospital, full of wounded prisoners at one time, was closed down. So were the little chapel and the greenhouse where the Americans had tried to grow tomatoes and turnips to supplement their miserable diet.

Slowly, the former inmates walked the 10-acre site, looking for signs of the tunnel that they had tried to build under the barbed-wire fence, for the location of their own barracks and for the homemade baseball diamond.

When the group finally gravitated to the old mess hall, the main topic was food — just as it had been in camp. Prisoners were always hungry. When the weekly Red Cross parcels stopped coming from Switzerland in 1944, POWs lived on German rations alone. Then real starvation set in.

The camp doctors, all captured American medics, figured that this

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ration equaled 700 calories a day. Late in the war, the men were weighed every week. The average weight loss was nine pounds. Most of the POWs lost from 30 to 50 pounds by the end of the war.

Yet in 1990, the former internees remembered their ingenious ways of stretching the ration of hot water for breakfast, thin barley soup for lunch and rotten potatoes, wizened turnips and maybe a shriveled-up carrot for dinner. They tackled German black bread, hard and full of sawdust, slicing it as thin as possible, crumbling it up and toasting it over the "smokeless heaters" made from Red Cross powdered milk cans.

"Isn't it funny that you don't see any fat kriegies nowadays when we were so obsessed with food back then? Maybe we just got out of the habit of eating," someone said. "Kriegy" was the POW term for "kriegsgefangener," German for prisoner of war.

At the old brick barracks, the ex-kriegies were reminded of the other major problem they once faced — coping with the bitter cold winters of northern Poland. In one barracks they found an old German porcelain stove like the ones used on the coldest days of Oflag 64. The prisoners had been given pressed peat bricks, which were ignited and placed inside the stove. The tiles on the outside would become slightly warm, but never hot.

"I always thought," someone muttered, "that it was the kriegies huddled around those stoves that kept them warm."

They remembered the frostbitten legs, the frozen hands and feet. One former POW is drawing 20 percent disability payments from Veterans

Affairs even now, as a result of frozen feet 45 years ago.

There were other lasting effects, too, from the trauma of captivity, the occasional brutal treatment by the Germans and the long forced march back into Germany when the Russian advance drew near. Some spoke guardedly of recurring nightmares, lingering depression, unnatural tenseness. Symptoms of hypertension sometimes appeared years later.

But there were also some, positive aftereffects. As one former camp inmate, Brooks Kleber, now a noted historian, said: "After my POW experience, I am an utterly compassionate person. I worry about people who are not getting enough to eat because I did not get enough to eat, and I saw people who got even less."

Their compassion seemed a common denominator among the men, stretching to an understanding of their former enemies, the Germans. Many of the POWs have returned to Germany as civilians and tourists.

"Why, hell," one of them commented, "most of the German people are basically as civilized as we are, and they probably suffered more than we did from the excesses of the Nazi regime during the war."

THIS ARTICLE about the return of the kriegies to Schubin in 1990 appeared in several dozen newspapers across the country. It was written for the Maturity News Service, distributed by the N. Y. Times syndicate.