

Cindy Burgess's Oflag 64 Living History Report

As we made our way to Szubin anticipating the Reenactment Event, we wondered what to expect once we arrived at the former prison camp site in the charming town of Szubin. Because we had visited the location 4 years earlier we had no idea how our attendance and participation would be received by the citizens of the community.

Suffice it to say, we were overwhelmed by the warm and welcome greeting we received by the many in attendance and were thrilled to witness the support of the community which included many community dignitaries, museum curators, local educators, teens, young children and their parents and a representative from the US Embassy in Warsaw and his family. We were especially happy to see familiar faces we had met 4 years prior.

We arrived in Szubin at 10 a.m. as requested by Mariusz Winiiecki. He had made arrangements to have the White House opened for us by the Administrator of the Special Education School which is located at that site. Our tour was amazing as we envisioned our fathers as they lived during their incarceration. An emotional moment for me was climbing the very stairs her father had taken many times during his 2 plus year imprisonment. We had a number of questions regarding certain locations of activities and had the wonderful opportunity to call my father, Wilbur, to ask for clarification. Again, another emotional moment as Wilbur spoke with Susanna Bolten Connaughton and Mariusz. It was great for all of us!!!

Mariusz also made arrangements through the parish to have the chapel opened for touring. A truly lovely and intimate setting which is currently being renovated.

At noon we were ushered into the school conference room and treated to a beautiful bounty of Polish food compliments of the Head of the Reform School. The scale model of the prison site (constructed by the students) was perfectly placed in the main hall of the school and looks amazing.

Outside the school a Gastronomic Area was available providing, kielbasa, kebabs, breads, popcorn, pickles and beverages. Tents and picnic tables were positioned for those enjoying lunch in that location.

I was approached by a local TV reporter and cameraman then answered a number of questions related to the event. Apparently, this was aired on Polish TV!

We observed the reenactors preparing for the day's events which were quite authentic. They were very proud of their research and looked forward to bringing history alive for those in attendance. Our daughter remarked they walked and slouched like so many Americans during that time! Their many vignettes which were begun at 1 p.m. were well performed and enjoyed by all. They included not only lounging in the camp, but the welcoming of new prisoners by the current prisoners and the roughing up by the German guards; the RAF officer who tried to escape and was shot on the spot; the drunken party; baseball game and of course the authentic bread fed to the prisoners was available for tasting (the filler was actually sawdust!)

Of special importance to me was the performance of "Brother Orchid" in which her dad, Wilbur, performed. The actors were local teens who had been coached by a local drama teacher who was quite proud of them. It appeared they were having the time of their lives. Unfortunately for us, it was spoken in Polish. I brought an original picture (to include Wilbur) of one of the scenes to share with the actors. Big smiles all around!

The dignitaries spoke and presented Mariusz with commendations and many thanks and congratulations. There was a master of ceremonies who announced all the events and of course, the opening of the day and throughout there was 30's-40's music playing and the actual Glee Club singing in the background.

The Szubin museum had a tent and tables set-up which provided items to purchase highlighting the town of Szubin; mugs, lanyards, coasters, key chains, T-shirts, books and mouse pads. We left with a bag full of memorabilia. The young girls staffing this venue were delightful, welcoming and excited by the event. The museum also provided a watercolor and photo display of the history of the camp to include the British, the French and the Americans.

The day concluded much to our dismay but on an optimistic tone. Dave Stewart presented Mariusz with an attractive plaque of appreciation from the Americans highlighting his determination and passion to keep this part of history accurate and alive in Poland. The dignitaries remained in attendance to the very end and did witness this gesture of appreciation which is so well deserved. The Americans were also presented with special gifts of appreciation by the Mayor; a true surprise!

The reenactment was more than we ever imagined it to be and we look forward to future trips to Szubin to witness continued expansion and knowledge of the Oflag 64 site and those who were incarcerated at that location.

I am so proud of my dad, Wilbur, who came out of prison a stronger and more determined man to live his life to the fullest. He continues to this day at age 95 to maintain a positive spirit and I can't help but believe his experiences at Oflag 64 influenced him to embrace that approach to life.