

EX PRISONERS OF WAR PILGRIMAGE TO POLAND
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Undated

Having organised pilgrimages to Poland since 1977, I have acquired a certain amount of knowledge about prisoners, prison camps and working parties in what is now Poland. It is therefore not surprising that I receive requests for information from all over the world.

I have recently received a request from John Ram, (13 Jenkins Street, Reservoir 3073, Melbourne, Australia). He has asked for information about his late father-in-law's working party, a sawmill at Heinrichstal, Czechoslovakia. John's father-in-law was John Stewart Anderson; he was born in Wick, Scotland. He was picked up in Crete in 1942.

John Ram visited Lamsdorf in June 1992 and then went to the Czech border. However he found that if he crossed into Czechoslovakia he could not get back – problems with the Polish travel permit. He will go again in 1993 via Prague.

Information on Heinrichstal was no problem. Bernard Collins and Don Matheson have both been back to the area recently and have been in touch with him.

Whilst in Northern Germany, John met a former typist in administration in Stalag VIII B. She is Elfriede Hannak (2953 Rhandertehn, 4 Sudwieke 45, Germany) and she has written a book called Stalag VIII B/344, describing her time in Lamsdorf up until March 1945. She was a young shy young girl living in Tillowitz and was ordered to report to Lamsdorf which she found frightening.

Up at 5.15 am. Train one station to Annahof and a walk past the POW cemetery to the camp. Most of the book is office chit chat but little bits concerning prisoners emerge. Unfortunately the book is written in German.

Elfriede appears to believe that R.S.M Sherriff was "Sheriff of Lamsdorf" and says that he was the only real sheriff that she had met. Each Christmas she handled the Christmas card from King George VI. The Kommandant handed to R.S.M Sherriff.

A nephew of Winston Churchill was in Lamsdorf. Lady Churchill wrote to the Kommandant for permission to send regular parcels to him. Permission refused.

An allied airman, shot down, was brought to Lamsdorf on a stretcher, bleeding from a wound in his back and still wearing his parachute harness. He was laid outside her door for a long time before being taken to a hospital in Neisse. She felt that this was bad. He was given a cigarette by a German soldier in her office.

She was ashamed of what she saw when the Canadians were brought from Dieppe to Lamsdorf many semi-naked.

When her typewriter broke, a prisoner was brought from the camp to repair it. She was astonished by this polished man with clean finger nails and carefully barbered red hair and moustache (she fell for you, Ginger!)

When the supply of milk for German POWs in Africa was blocked she had to type a letter to King George VI via Geneva.

Among the POWs passing her office daily was a man with striking red hair. His uniform was clean and he looked "cared for". For weeks and months he gave her a nod. She christened him "Glen the dawn". One day he stopped smiling at her. She wondered why. Which ginger was that?

Morris, a varsity student of Edinburgh, small fair and Scottish. Always polite, never personal. Are you still around, Jock Morris?

In the photographic room, a tall fair haired Tommy from London made a mug of rich cocoa. He gave her a drink. When she pointed to bits of soot in it he laughed loudly and said in good German "Never mind, dirt clears the stomach" (who was that man?).

She had to type a survey report. Southern Rhodesia seemed an ideal place for German farmers to settle in after their victory.

A German soldier, a Jehovah Witness, refused to kill and was court martialled in Neisse. He was sentenced to be shot.

On Annahof station was an old Russian. The guard said he was in Lamsdorf in 1914/18 and was working on a farm so had food. He was lucky.

Elfriede was afraid of the Sikh's with turbans and brown faces with fluid brown eyes which examined her as they passed. Negroes did not worry her. She felt that it was wrong to bury Indians in black coffins – they should have bright colours. This did not please her at all.

A big train crash occurred near Annahof station. A military train hit by the local train, so no trains that day. On her way to Annahof station a group of prisoners met and passed her. One soldier put a bar of chocolate on her shoulder. She was afraid to take it but her friend took it for her sick child.

A regular visitor was Capt Dakers, the Australian padre who wore a trapper hat with an ostrich feather. She felt her book should be dedicated to him.

In 1943, civilian internees were brought to Lamsdorf – elderly people. They were not PoWs. Was there no respect?

When she saw a guard go to strike a prisoner with his rifle butt, she let out such a scream that Major Bach opened his window and asked her why she had screamed. She told him. The guard was ordered into the Major's office. She saved the prisoner from a clout.

When they had air-raid practice, she and friend would hide in a cupboard and be locked in the office. Then her friend listened to the English news while she kept watch.

Two POWs were in the office prior to transfer to "Fortress Graudenz" for communicating with a German woman. She wondered how they got on and hoped that the words of consolation from the Australian padre, Capt Dakers, were of help. The office superintendent Friedrich said to her "as if love was not international" and shook his head.

Taking a walk across the heath she came across a gallows complete with hemp rope. Who, she asked, could it have been for? (I never heard of the gallows).

January 1945, no trains. She trudged through the snow back to Tillowitz – her last day at Lamsdorf. She finished her book “Prisoners of War in Lamsdorf, Germany. I would like fate to be kind to you at home”.

Antonina Strupitis, living in Sydney, translated the book on 54 written sheets. It appears the author was a young polite girl, directed to Lamsdorf. She was timid and did not get on well with the German officers. She was forbidden to speak to the prisoners which grieved her, as did various sights she witnessed. She said “what did Germany achieve with the sword? With its own sword it killed itself”.

It would be interesting to hear from Glen the Dawn, the typewriter mechanic, the photographic assistant and Morris from Edinburgh who met her. I was in Lamsdorf from October 1940 until March 1945 and I never met a single woman. This was not the same out on the working parties. John Ram has sent a copy of a Sydney newspaper with a photograph on John Anderson and his German wife (a widow he met on his working party) together with her two children aged 9 and 17.

There seems to be a good chance that if Elfriede Hannak was alive in May 1992 she may still be alive and could provide more information and, maybe, photographs. Although she was driven out of Tillowitz, I doubt if she carried such things with her. Maybe I will write to her and send her a photograph of Annahof station I took on a visit in 1978. Other than the fact that the sidings have gone, the platform and booking office were the same as when we 1,520 POWs left there on 3 March 1945 on route for Memmingen, Bavaria. Today the buildings on the platform have gone.