

Doc focuses on German POWs

SCHULTZ! OFFICE! This Sunday at 8 p.m., History Television is debuting a documentary about the 40,000 German prisoners of war that were interned in prison camps across Canada during World War II. Hitler's Canadians was inspired by an incident that happened to co-producer Ted Biggs in the late '50s, when Biggs' father was stranded in a train station in Germany — he was roused awake by a policeman who demanded to see his papers, but when the Politist examined his passport, he smiled and began a two-hour reminiscence about the happy years he spent as a POW in Canada, with paeans to the beauty of the Canadian Shield, the rigours of lumber camp labour, and his dream of returning there one day.

German prisoners were initially housed in Britain when the war broke out, but when the threat of

invasion became real during the Battle Of Britain, they were shipped overseas to camps all across Canada for the duration of the war to prevent the threat of a potential third column within an embattled England.

They were also a strain on Britain's scant resources while interned there, so Canada was given the responsibility of housing the men according to the strict rules of the Geneva Convention. While working on the documentary, Biggs and writer/director Douglas Williams discovered that German ex-POWs had a generally positive memory of their time behind barbed wire in Canada, and that 6,000 former POWs emigrated to Canada in the decade and a half after the war ended.

It's a fascinating story, full of more details than the 48-minute

documentary can give adequate room to explore.

There are the hardcore Nazis who often ended up ruling the barracks in the camps, and who lynched at least two fellow prisoners who rejected Hitler in the camps, which led to a war-crimes trial that ended in the execution of several of these men after the war.

There were multiple escape attempts, and a famous riot at a camp near Bowmanville, Ont., where the guards, many of them World War One veterans, put their guns down in the spirit of fair play and battled the prisoners with fists and bats, with both sides merrily congratulating each other for putting on a good fight when the rebellion was exhausted.

One can't help but speculate that another country, with a better

track record for exploring — and exploiting — its own history, would have turned any of these incidents into a movie or a TV show by now; there's probably even a comedy in the Battle Of Bowmanville, an updating of Stalag 17 or Hogan's Heroes, that would have the added virtue of actually being true. Going one step further, I'd like to challenge the fragmented creative community in this country to watch Hitler's Canadians, find those stories and transform them into whatever comedy, drama, or combination of the two they can mine from the inspiration. If we can spin comic gold out of the trailer parks of Dartmouth, N.S., or the tedium of Saskatchewan's featureless wheat fields, why can't we do something with the damn Nazis?

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