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German PoWs remember Canadian 'holiday'

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'WE had an indoor swimming pool, a gymnasium, five tennis courts, a sports ground, a library...'

Volkmar Konig is one of several former German soldiers, sailors and airmen whose recollections of life as a prisoner of war, Canadian-style, are more likely to bring a smile than a grimace.

Konig, who served as a midshipman on a German U-boat before being captured by the British Navy in 1940, is one of 40,000 PoWs who were shipped to Canada during the Second World War. Their not-so-tragic story is explored in the entertaining new documentary **Hitler's Canadians**, which airs tonight at 7 on History Television.

War, of course, is no laughing matter, but the German veterans interviewed in this film can't help smiling when they think of the years they spent "imprisoned" in one or more of the 26 Canadian camps that were hastily constructed in 1940 to help Britain deal with an overwhelming and still-growing PoW population.

As it turns out, Canada's effort to help the English meet their Geneva Convention commitments regarding treatment of prisoners produced a system of prisons that was quite cushily humane.

"I was a guest of the British king, behind barbed wire, for six years," Konig explains in the film. "If I tell someone nowadays that I was a prisoner for many years, behind barbed wire, they go, 'Oh, that's terrible.' It was not so terrible."

Ten camps were constructed in Quebec, another 10 in Ontario, five in Alberta and a single PoW camp was built in New Brunswick to house the prisoners that Britain feared could become a "fifth pillar" if Germany's assault on Europe spread to England's shores.

The prisoners arrived in Halifax after a trans-Atlantic journey -- for most, the most terrifying part of the PoW experience was the fear of being torpedoed by one of their own U-boats on the way to Canada -- and then boarded trains bound for the various camps.

"We got onto a wonderful train -- luxury, wide and big, with white linens and wonderful beds," says former Luftwaffe pilot Karl Geyr. "It was unbelievable."

In the camps, the Germans were allowed to control the day-to-day goings-on while their Canadian captors guarded the perimeter. The prisoners exercised, studied, tended gardens and even tiddled occasionally -- with either authorized beer rations or easy-to-make home brew -- and sometimes invited the guards to join them.

But they were prisoners, still, and many saw it as their primary responsibility to escape.

According to the film-makers, Canada's across-the-pond remoteness and the comfy quarters provided by the camps made PoW escapes more of a recreational morale-booster than a serious pursuit. In the camp at Bowmanville, Ont., members of Germany's navy and air force actually dug two tunnels simultaneously in a competitive effort to see who could escape first.

As war documentaries go, **Hitler's Canadians** is pretty upbeat stuff. The tone is light, the interview subjects are generally wistful as they remember their time in Canada, and the over-abundant use of dramatizations adds a sometimes-unwelcome sense of whimsy to the tale.

There's certainly a stark contrast between this film and the numerous news reports that outline the atrocities inflicted upon captured combatants in current global conflicts. Just consider this post-Second-World-War fact: between 1947 and 1960, more than 6,000 former German PoWs immigrated to Canada.

There probably won't be that many former PoWs booking passage to Abu Ghraib in the next few years.

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