

Arts & Travel

Doc tells of German PoWs in Canada

By SHELDON KIRSHNER

Staff Reporter

The History Channel recently broadcast a one-hour documentary on a little-known but important sub-chapter of World War II.

Hitler's Canadians, co-produced by Ed Barrenveld and Ted Biggs, told the story of the 40,000 German prisoners of war who were incarcerated in Canada during this period.

Dispatched here from 1940 onward, they were housed in 26 hastily-constructed camps in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and New Brunswick.

Many of us are familiar with the legion of German Jewish refugees who were interned in Canadian camps after falsely being classified as "enemy aliens." But few of us know that tens of thousands of captured German soldiers, sailors and pilots spent a good part of the war years in Canada as prisoners.

Hitler's Canadians, which is told through file footage, re-enactments and interviews with PoWs, makes the point that they were treated humanely, certainly far better than some Allied prisoners in German camps.

"We had a good time," says one former PoW, recalling his imprisonment.

The camps, though heavily guarded, were essentially run by the prisoners themselves along military lines.

They cooked their own meals, had access to daily newspapers, libraries and athletic facilities, were permitted to form their own theatre companies and symphony orchestras, and were shown the latest Hollywood movies.

Given that Germany was persecuting and murdering its Jewish citizens, the treatment they received was nothing less than remarkable.

More often than not, the camp leaders were committed Nazis who hounded and harassed PoWs suspected of being disloyal to the Nazi cause. Indeed, two such PoWs were lynched in a camp in Medicine Hat, Alta.

Not surprisingly, the PoWs repeatedly tried to escape, and 600 such attempts were recorded. One prisoner, a pilot, swam across the icy St. Lawrence River to the United States, which was then neutral, and made it back to Germany, where he was promptly hailed as a hero. In general, however, escapees were quickly caught.

The Germans were brought here by ship from Britain, which regarded them as a potential threat to its security and could not properly feed them, given the food rationing throughout the country.

Special trains transported the PoWs from Halifax. In one re-enactment, the prisoners are marched through the Muskoka town of Gravenhurst, which was close to one of the camps.

All but two of the camps are long gone, and one, near Bowmanville, Ont., is now an Islamic school.

The jolting title of this interesting film is taken from the comments of prisoners who were imprisoned here for a lengthy time.

They included Volkmar Koenig, a U-boat crew member who was picked out of the water after his submarine was sunk; Hans Kauter, a pilot whose bomber crashed in Wales; Dietrich Heitmuller, an army officer who was captured in El Alamein, Egypt, and Karl Geyr, a pilot who was shot down near the mouth of the Thames River in Britain.

They were all repatriated to Germany between 1946 and 1947, but 6,000 returned as immigrants, part of a wave of 265,000 Germans who settled in Canada after the war.