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Franz-Karl Stanzel

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German Prisoners of War in Canada, 1940–1946

An Autobiography-Based Essay

FRANZ - KARL STANZEL

“What is a prisoner of war? He is a man who has tried to kill you and, having failed to kill you, asks you not to kill him.”

—Winston Churchill

Abstract: The four years I spent in British and Canadian POW Camps offered ample time to study English Literature. This experience in particular had a decisive effect on my later career as university teacher of English literature. It also helped me to become one of the first Anglicists at German and Austrian universities, who included Canadian literature in his syllabus and a founder member of the German Association for Canadian Studies. In this essay based on my war-autobiography, I describe the experience of German POWs in Canada. I was captured in 1942 when serving as third officer of the watch on board U-331 after my vessel was sunk in the Mediterranean by a torpedo fired from a RAF Albacore. I also deal with the so-called Laconia affair and the ambiguity of Admiral Dönitz's orders issued to U-boat captains concerning the treatment of survivors of sunken ships.

WINSTON CHURCHILL'S definition of a prisoner of war echoes a certain astonishment that some laws of humanity as embedded in the Geneva Convention of 1929 relative to land warfare still held validity in this war—a war which, in part, threatened to escalate into totalitarian warfare. Building on the Hague Convention of 1907, the Geneva Convention of 1929 constituted the most recent and

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internationally ratified treaty for the humanisation of warfare, that was in force at the time of the Second World War. The principal rule of these conventions was for a soldier to refrain from exacting revenge on his enemy, whose intention was to kill him before having been forced to surrender. This idea is deeply rooted in Western philosophy and can be traced back to Hugo Grotius' *De jure belli ac pacis*, 1625. The German Reich as well as the Western powers involved in the war, had all signed the convention and respected it, not, however, the Soviet Union. In how far this caused or provided an excuse for the German and Soviet armed forces not to grant their prisoners appropriate protection on the Eastern Front lies outside the scope of this essay. However, it provides the historic and situational background for the specific subject of this paper: the special status of Canada as a captor state for German prisoners of war (POWs).

Under the government of Mackenzie King, Canada only agreed to receive POWs from Britain after some hesitation and increasing pressure from Westminster. Initially, the number of prisoners transferred to Canada was supposed to remain small. However, by the end of the war their numbers had reached around 36,000. What was significant about Canadian POW camps for German soldiers was their commitment to strictly adhere to the Geneva Convention. This might have been the result of the liberal mindset of the country's large migrant population. In addition there were two specific sets of circumstances that influenced Canada's attitude in this respect: unlike Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom, none of the Canadian provinces were directly or indirectly affected by the devastation of modern warfare on land and in the air. Secondly, the country's geographical expanse and agricultural richness enabled Canada to not only safely house but adequately provision POWs, even though towards the end of the war their number had substantially increased.

In the early 1940s, the British government increasingly pushed for German prisoners of war and civilian internees to be removed from the British Isles. The decision was triggered by mounting fears of a possibly imminent German invasion of the British Isles. In addition, highly worrying news came out of occupied Denmark and Norway. According to reports from Norway, the Quisling regime had collaborated with the German Wehrmacht on multiple occasions. This caused concern in Britain that German soldiers in British POW camps could potentially be supplied with arms via air drops and



Showing other ranks, survivors of U-331 being escorted by British Marines in Algiers harbour. Notice that one man walks barefoot, another wears too small shoes, obviously given to him on board the destroyer H.M.S. *Wilton*, that had taken them to Algiers, after a Walrus flying boat had picked them up at sea. This photo appeared in a London Daily only a week after it had been taken on Nov.18, 1942. [Author's photo]

form a kind of fifth column behind the invasion front. Thus, in early summer 1940, Britain began its pre-emptive and hasty evacuation of German prisoners of war and civilian internees. The initial lack of distinguishing between the two quite different categories, regarding their treatment, soon led to serious consequences.

Simply being German was enough to be deemed a possible threat to the state. In the early stage of deportation, German internees, many of whom were refugees or Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, were put on board ships together with POWs. Such was the case, for example, on the transport ship *SS Arandora Star*, which was torpedoed and sunk off the north-west coast of Ireland on 2 July 1940. U-boat commander Günther Prien had mistaken it for a troop ship due to its grey camouflage coating. The *SS Arandora Star* carried almost 1,200 German and Italian civilian internees and only 86 prisoners of war. More than 800 passengers died. The ship was bound for St. John's, Newfoundland.

At the time the island was still a British Crown colony. As such it was then still more strongly tied to Westminster in matters of foreign policy than the Dominion government of Ottawa, which at that time



Survivors of submarines sunk by Allied Forces. [Author's photo]

still hesitated to accept larger numbers of internees or prisoners from the UK. Ultimately, Canada gave in to Westminster's more and more urgent requests and started to convert boarding schools, hospitals, and similarly spacious buildings into POW camps. Towards the end of the war there were 26 Canadian camps accommodating around 36,000 people, the majority of which were located in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario and Alberta. In contrast to POW camps in Germany, where British Navy, Army, Airforce POWs were kept at separate camps, Canadian camps housed prisoners from all three branches of the German armed forces, Heer, Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe. However, officers and other ranks were always kept in separate camps in full accordance with the Geneva Convention. Only for the purpose of kitchen duties and camp maintenance were orderlies assigned to officers' barracks. In the first year of the war prisoners in Canada were mainly the survivors of U-boats sunk and pilots shot down over Britain. The first larger contingent of captured army soldiers arrived after the defeat of Rommel's Afrikakorps in 1943. Camp guards were recruited from the Veterans Guard of Canada who had served during the First World War.

POW camps were secured by a double perimeter barbed wire fence, the top and bottom of the fences being reinforced with razor

wire. Guard towers were placed at hailing distance from each other. Escape attempts were almost exclusively made through digging a tunnel underneath the perimeter fence. One of the very few successful attempts across the perimeter fence was achieved by two officers from the Bowmanville POW camp in Ontario. Their elaborately planned spectacular escape became legendary. Disguised as Canadian camp workers, equipped with a ladder and all the necessary tools, they pretended to mend the fence and thus eventually managed to climb both the fences under the watchful eyes of the guards in the towers. They got as far as the US border. There they were picked up by a US police patrol. They had no other choice than to admit their true “homeland.” Though this escape-adventure of stage-comedy quality was thwarted, it ended with a satirical epilogue at the expense of the captors: When the American police called at Bowmanville to inform the camp’s administration of the recaptured escapees, they were told that according to the last roll-call no prisoner had been reported missing from the camp. To cover their absence, two couples of men carried dummy puppets between them in step while parading before the roll-call officer, apparently convincingly enough to fool the guards.

Less spectacular, yet more laborious and more risky were tunnelling escape attempts. The biggest challenge here was how to camouflage the tunnel entrance and dispose of the excavated soil. Sandy ground, as was the case at Camp 44 Grande Ligne, was a type of soil that lent itself to digging tunnels, but at the same time was prone to tunnels collapsing due to a lack of suitable material for shoring up the tunnel. Even the slightest traces of sand found somewhere out of place would alert the guards and trigger a thorough search and explorative drilling along the perimeter. The most inconspicuous option for hiding the tunnel entrance was to place it underneath a large table in the mess hall, situated on the ground floor. There it was least visible to the Canadian guards. It also provided the prisoners with a good cover for shift-changeovers of diggers during busy dinner times.

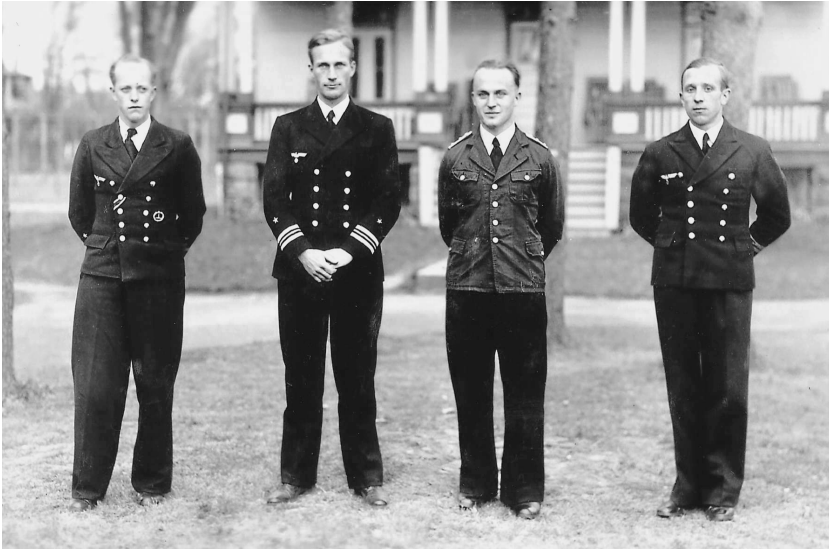
The fact that not one out of the hundreds of tunnelling attempts was successful is telling with regard to the motivation of prisoners for digging escape tunnels. Since they must have been aware of the futility of their strenuous efforts, we can assume that apart from the general desire to break free, digging escape tunnels must have been motivated mainly by some form of therapeutic drive to keep busy, thus avoiding “Lagerkoller.”

The only successful escape from Canadian custody, which has since been widely publicised through several films,¹ was undertaken by Franz von Werra, senior lieutenant of the Luftwaffe. Rather than digging a tunnel, he succeeded by jumping off a moving prisoner transport train. Meticulously planned and closely assisted by his fellow prisoners, von Werra managed to jump to freedom at a place where the train line ran close to the St. Lawrence River and forms part of the Canadian-American border. At the time, early in December 1941, the United States had not yet entered the war against Germany, which was decisive for his success. Von Werra's adventurous escape route continued along secret paths through the US and Mexico into South America and from hence back to Germany, where he rejoined the Luftwaffe as an active pilot. After failing to return from a reconnaissance flight across the Channel, von Werra was declared missing. It was suspected that he had crashed due to engine failure: a rather unspectacular ending for the most spectacular Canadian escape story.

Only one other German prisoner out of the 36,000 in Canadian camps allegedly managed to have made a successful escape by pretending to have drowned in a lake. The poor statistics of only two successful escapes among the more than a hundred undertaken could corroborate the conclusion that the majority of detainees digging tunnels actually did not seriously want to exchange their relatively comfortable situation in Canada against a return to war-torn Germany as long as the war continued. However, sooner or later, POWs in Canadian camps were confronted with two existential problems that markedly affected their well-being: how did prisoners react to the increasingly negative official reports concerning heavy losses of the German armed forces and the suffering inflicted on their families at home by allied bombing raids? How did the individual prisoner react from day-to-day as they became aware of the apparent total defeat of the Wehrmacht after its capitulation at Stalingrad and the successful Allied landing in Normandy?

Although specific to the POW camp for officers in Grande Ligne, Quebec, the author's observations with regard to these questions are likely also to reflect the situation in other officers' camps. They are not representative of what went on in camps for other

¹ *The One That Got Away*, film directed by Roy Ward Baker, 1957. Produced by Julian Wirtle, Earl St. John.



Officers of U-331 which on Nov. 17th, 1942, 60 miles north of Algiers, was first attacked by Hudson aircraft of 500 Squadron, Coastal Command and disabled and later sunk with a torpedo launched by an Albacore from H.M.S. *Formidable*. Only sixteen of the crew of 49 survived this torpedo-attack, which the pilot of Z/500, Squadron Leader Ian Patterson, called “cold-blooded murder” (Cf. F.K. Stanzel, *Verlust einer Jugend* (Würzburg 2013), 59). On the photo from left to right: Second Lieutenant Erwin Hartwig, Lieutenant-Commander H.D. von Tiesenhausen, who in 1941 had sunk the battleship H.M.S *Barham*, Second Lieutenant F.K. Stanzel, Lieutenant Gerd Nehls. [Author’s photo]

ranks. War objectives, especially defeats and losses suffered by the Wehrmacht were never discussed publicly among POW officers. On the other hand, reports about successful campaigns of the German forces were regularly read out loud over lunch as part of the official *Wehrmachtsbericht*. Personal opinions, concerns about the future of the homeland, were generally discussed only within intimate and trusted circles. The Führer’s birthday (20 April), an official holiday in Germany, was still officially celebrated in 1944 with a ceremonial speech given by camp leader General von Ravenstein at Camp 44 Grand Ligne.

The content of von Ravenstein’s address has been completely wiped from the author’s memory. He can recall only two imposing swastika flags draped over the wall behind the general. How did they get hold of these flags? The Canadians turned a blind eye to all of this as if it were none of their concern. For the *Wehrmachtsbericht* of the day, Goebbels evidently had collected success stories from each front section. These were read out with special emphasis at lunch-

time on this day. An episode needs to be mentioned here, because it illustrates the average German prisoners sense of superiority over the Canadians: The New York Times was one of the few newspapers printing verbatim reports of all the headquarters of Allied and Axis forces. The Canadian camp interpreter had apparently been instructed to censor the German Wehrmacht report by cutting it out. Since these reports were printed in the New York Times in narrow columns on page two, simply the length of the gashes on the front page of the paper could be taken as indicators for the significance of the successes reported by the German forces headquarters on that day. Yet no later than at lunchtime the prisoners had been informed of the full stories which the censor with his penknife had taken great pains to keep from them. Radio-specialists had constructed a short-wave receiver from various kinds of material, leads and other electronic installations found in the camp. How they managed to acquire the then still necessary radio-tubes, however, remained a well-guarded secret. Most likely, they were smuggled into the camp aboard a food truck by outside supporters.

Military discipline, respecting rank hierarchy, and, for instance, saluting procedure, as well as promptly carrying out orders given by the German camp leadership continued to be observed even after the war had ended. It formed a dependable basis for running the daily camp routine, allowing everyone to live together fairly comfortably despite the confined space available for the individual prisoner. The unquestioned respect for the maintenance of military discipline and order also had, however, a problematic side. Thus even military courts of honour could be convened when required. Already in 1941, still in the British POW Camp 1, Grizedale Hall, Cumberland, a court of honour presided by commander O. Kretschmer had tried lieutenant-commander H.J. Rahmlow in absentia. Rahmlow was the captain of U-570 which was captured by the British. He was found guilty of “cowardice in front of the enemy.” Although the sentence had been passed in a camp in Britain it was enforced in Canadian Camp 44, where Rahmlow was held. He was not allowed to wear his uniform jacket, was assigned a single room and all personal contact with him was forbidden.²

² For more details of the Rahmlow story, see F.K. Stanzel, *Verlust einer Jugend: Rückschau eines Neunzigjährigen auf Krieg und Gefangenschaft* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 124-128.

As far as the author is aware, the inmates of Camp 44 still continued to keep Rahmlow in solitary confinement even for some time after the Wehrmacht's surrender in 1945. After having been repatriated to Germany following the end of the war, Ramlow filed a civil suit against the chairman of the court of honour at Grizedale Hall camp, O. Kretschmer. The ruling in this case is not known to the author.

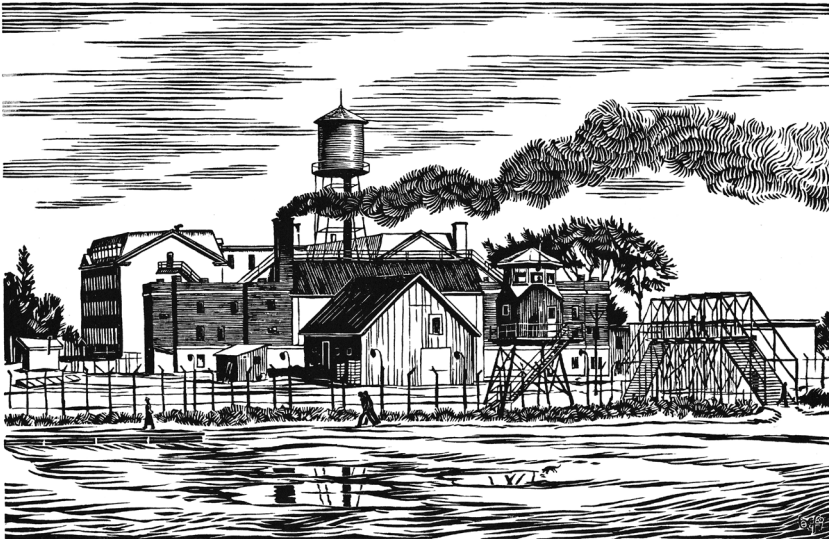
Much more severe were the judgements and punishments carried out by so-called Feme-courts, virtually lynch-courts, in camps for other ranks. In Camp Medicine Hat in Alberta prisoners attacked and strangled a fellow prisoner in his sleeping cot. He was charged with defeatist utterances and criticism of Hitler. The Canadian camp administration's investigations led to the arrest of the perpetrators of the murder. However, only after all Canadian prisoners had been repatriated from German camps were the prisoners put on trial in a regular court, sentenced to death and executed in Lethbridge Jail, Alberta.³ Cases of lynching prisoners were also reported from American POW camps. At Fort Leavenworth seven prisoners killed a fellow inmate. The victim was accused of treason which allegedly led to the loss of a U-boat. Of the seven men accused, six were found guilty of murder and executed, again only after the war.⁴

The summarising character of this essay puts perhaps too much emphasis on these lynch cases. Most of the prisoners learnt about these lynch cases only after their repatriation, for instance at one of those ex-Canadian POW reunions, which took place regularly in Germany and Austria until quite recently.

Daily routine differed greatly between officers' camps and camps for other ranks. Officers had the freedom to follow their individual interests depending on the camp facilities, whereas the soldiers' day was mostly organised around the work they could be ordered to perform in line with the Geneva Convention. In Canada, work was primarily available on farms or in lumberjack or logging camps. Working outside the camp also allowed more contact between prisoners and local residents. Such was the case in one of the lumberjack camps already established in 1940 in Espanola, Ontario, where upon meeting the prisoners, the residents realized that the Germans they met there seemed not to match the image presented of

³ David J. Carter, POW, *Behind Canadian Barbed Wire: Alien, Refugee and Prisoner of War Camps in Canada, 1914-1946* (Elkwater, AB: Eagle Butte Press, 1998).

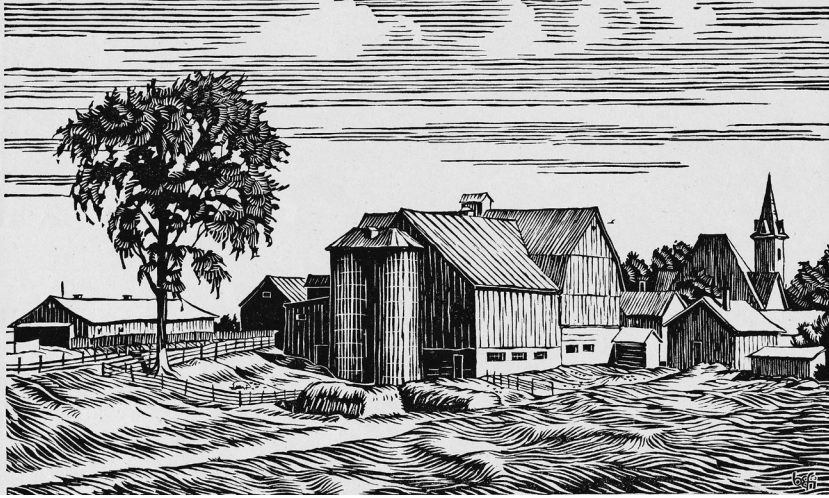
⁴ Mark P. Schock, "Summary Justice" (MA thesis, Wichita State University, 2011).



Camp 44, Grande Ligne, Que. The Rear View. [Linocut by H.D.von Tiesenhausen/Author's photo]

them by the war propaganda press, neither in appearance nor in their behaviour. Especially young women were impressed by the German men: “The girls were crazy about them and they [the prisoners] had a pretty good time. As far as wanting to escape, you couldn’t have driven them away.” But the authorities quickly put a stop to this kind of fraternisation and five girls even faced charges under the *Defence of Canada Act Regulations*. They were put on probation for their love letters that had been intercepted. In 1943, Camp Espanola was closed early. The initial laissez-fair attitude towards personal contact between prisoners and civilians at this camp obviously was not representative.

In officers’ camps—here the author can count on his own personal experience—practically no opportunity was offered for contact with the civilian population of Canada. This meant that activities offered within the camp played an even more important role. The approximately 200 inmates of Camp 44, Grande Ligne, Quebec, could be roughly divided into three categories according to their main interests: Digging tunnels, handiwork or running a small farm, and, most important of all, education. In addition sports and creative skills, for instance playing musical instruments, were carried on in some way or another by practically everyone. The education-programme was actively made use of by practically all of



The Farm run by officer POWs. The two dunghills became a local attraction: “The Prussians make even their dunghills toe the line”. [Linocut by H.D.von Tiesenhausen/Author’s photo]

the prisoners. On occasion the regular classes were supplemented by guest lecturers from the McGill University at Montreal. These lectures were exclusively on Canadian history. Canadian literature, which probably would have had a more profound effect in terms of the re-education programme, was not even mentioned. Speaking as a literary scholar, the author attributes this total absence of a Can.Lit. syllabus in the camp’s educational programme to a lack of awareness among contemporary Canadians of the existence of such a thing as a Canadian novel worth reading: “Who reads an Canadian novel except by mistake, i.e. thinking its an American novel”, was a standard joke, still to be heard among students of English at German and Austrian universities in the 1950s and 60s. One of the most influential modern Canadian authors, Margaret Atwood, can attest to Canada’s literary insecurity back then.⁵

The German Lager-Kommandantur of Camp 44, which managed all internal affairs on behalf of the Canadian camp commander, was offered the lease on a farm adjacent to the camp. The lease was paid for with contributions from the allowance officers received for their canteen needs as provided by the Geneva Convention. The farm was

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972), 29-43.

run by officers deriving from Prussian estates who had the necessary agricultural know-how. In order to perform the daily chores at the farm, a parole system was established that permitted the German farmers to leave the camp at certain times of the day for work on the farm. Parole cards were, however, also issued to prisoners for leaving the camp just for relaxing walks, “Far from the Madding Crowd”⁶ within a strictly delimited area next to the camp.

Most internees, however, devoted their ample spare time to the study of languages, literature (excluding Canadian literature), philosophy and history. These subjects were taught by competent teachers following an organised timetable. Additionally, musically inclined prisoners had the opportunity of playing in an orchestra directed by a professional conductor. Instruments and sheet music were provided by the generosity of the International Red Cross and the Young Men’s Christian Association, or were purchased by the prisoners themselves. This keen interest in art, particularly music, literature and the arts, most likely resulted from a kind of sublimation of sexual urges and desire for which, in the absence of women, there was no satisfactory relief. On the other hand, physical relief was achieved through sports activities, which many performed enthusiastically. To a football pitch outside the compound, a field secured only by a simple perimeter fence, prisoners were permitted only during the day. In winter the Canadian climate provided ideal conditions for creating an ice skating rink. Jackson skates as well as other sports equipment could be purchased from Eaton’s mail-order company and were paid for with the officers’ allowance. Skating was a favourite sport in winter as soccer was in summer.

How to deal with repressed sexual energies was considered to be a strictly private problem of the individual prisoner and was never publicly spoken about. One incident in Camp 44, however, broke with this general reticence that was in line with the code of morals generally respected by officers of the Wehrmacht. One day, a lieutenant reported a captain for homoerotic advances towards him. A court of honour was convened. It outlawed the accused. Like Rahmlow before, he was not allowed to wear his uniform jacket any longer and was ostracised by the community for some time. Reports from camps for

⁶ Title of Thomas Hardy’s novel of 1874.

other ranks reveal a less harsh attitude towards homosexuality, even though it was not officially tolerated there either.⁷

In summary, it is fair to say that despite their initial hesitation to comply with the pressing pleas of Westminster to take on German POWs in 1940, the Canadian government under Mackenzie King was a fair host to its uninvited guests. Canada invariably and strictly adhered to the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Only once, when Canada was forced to make an exception, it was under direct orders from Westminster. In the autumn of 1942 the War Cabinet instructed Canada to shackle a certain number of prisoners—soldiers as well as officers. It was an act of retaliation for British POWs having been shackled by the Germans. The whole affair became known as the “shackling crisis” of 1942 in POW history. The trigger event occurred in August 1942. In order to divert German pressure from the Russian army on the Eastern Front, Allied forces attacked the port of Dieppe, where German soldiers captured were shackled due to a lack of personnel to guard them, while the action lasted. The situation was aggravated when, following a combined operations raid on Sark, one of the smaller Channel Islands, German soldiers were found dead, shot in the back and shackled, after Allied troops had left again. German public opinion was understandably outraged and the incident was reported as Britain’s blatant violation of the Geneva Convention to the Swiss Government in its role as protecting power under the Geneva Convention. The British government initially tried to deny the accusations and after Britain had let an ultimatum lapse, Germany responded by shackling 100 officers and 1000 other ranks of British troops held in German POW camps. London in turn retaliated with corresponding measures enacted on German prisoners in England and Canada. This set off a spiral of retaliations which especially affected POWs in Canada. In the end, 2000 of the 9000 POWs in Canada at that time had been shackled for most of the day. Eventually, these actions and reactions reached the limit of tenability and were abandoned on both sides.

⁷ For further investigation into the subject of redirecting or sublimating sexuality behind barbed wire see, F.K. Stanzel, “Triebafuhr und Sex hinterm Stacheldraht” in *Verlust einer Jugend: Rückschau eines Neunzigjährigen auf Krieg und Gefangenschaft* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 122-124.

Canada did not hold back its criticism of Westminster for not even having considered to consult Ottawa in advance of the action. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had been the one to instigate these measures in the British War Cabinet. The shackling affair had also led to a violent incident of protest against the shackling in the officers' camp of Bowmanville, Ontario. This became known as the "Battle of Bowmanville." Prisoners took a Canadian officer hostage and temporarily barricaded themselves in the camp. When the barricades were stormed, both sides suffered slight injuries. Ultimate responsibility for the incident, however, did not lie with Canadian but largely with British authorities. Several of the Bowmanville officer prisoners had shortly before been somewhat roughly treated while on transport aboard *SS Pasteur*, which brought members of Rommel's Afrika Korps from camps in Egypt to Canada. This can possibly explain the more explosive tension with which only Bowmanville prisoners reacted at the shackling.

After the rather hasty and uncoordinated internment of all Germans in the United Kingdom and their cross-Atlantic transfer early on in the war, the post-war repatriation of the almost 36,000 prisoners in Canada was carefully planned. Top priority was assigned to the reconstruction and democratization of Germany and Austria by first allowing those to return who would best contribute to that effort. The selection process, however, proved difficult. The initial approach followed the seemingly logical assumption that those captured later in the war, for instance, during the invasion of Normandy, were more receptive to democratic re-education than fighter-pilots taken prisoner in the Battle of Britain in the first year of the war. This system, however, caused a lot of misgivings among prisoners, because it meant that those who had been confined behind barbed wire the longest were automatically placed at the end of the queue of those waiting for their release. Moreover, putting prisoners into categories of political affiliation was no less fraught with problems. Following a procedure established by the Americans, they were roughly labelled either black, grey or white depending on their assumed status of remaining indoctrinated with Nazi-ideology as judged on the basis of interviews. Prisoners classed as white were given priority for their release.

One day all Ostmärker, as Austrians were still called by the Germans in the camps, were asked to report. They were subsequently transferred to a separate camp further north. It was the middle of winter

1945-46 and the barracks were poorly heated. There, everyone received the medically required immunisations, which were administered in an apparently rather high dosage. After receiving vaccinations in both arms simultaneously a few prisoners fainted briefly. The somewhat rough treatment was accepted in the knowledge that the home-bound journey obviously lay ahead, although it turned out to take longer than anticipated. The next stop in fact was not Austria but England, and here one of the harshest mass camps, Lodge Moor near Sheffield. The camp commander in charge welcomed the new arrivals from Canada with the announcement that they would have to learn to contend with the post-war food rations of people in Britain.

Finally the day came when the ex-Canadians, now somewhat slimmer than when they arrived, were directly transported by ferry and train to the British release camp in Austria, Paternion, Carinthia. However, the eagerly awaited final release was delayed once again by another stay in poorly heated barracks for several weeks, while evidently our war records were checked again. It was just before Christmas in December 1946 and the country was covered with snow, when the day finally came at last. Those who wanted to be repatriated to the provinces of Salzburg and Upper Austria, both at that time belonging to the American occupation zone, because they had their families there, were put aboard a northbound train. Yet at Bockstein, the border station of the American zone, an American MP-patrol removed them from the train, and sent them back to Paternion. Their discharge papers were considered to be incomplete by the Americans. When on my advice the British discharge officer had stamped every empty box on our release papers in order to comply literally with the demands of the American Border-MP, we were finally admitted to the American Zone. Despite this last delay, I was able to return to my family just in time for Christmas. It was my first Christmas at home again after six years spent on active service, the last year on a submarine that was sunk by the British Air Force, and four years as a POW in British and, most of the time, Canadian captivity.

Canada is the country to which former prisoners of war emigrated to in large numbers after they had been repatriated to Germany. Many of those former prisoners who stayed in their home country remained in contact with each other by organizing reunions of ex-Canadians in Germany and Austria for many years as long as they felt fit for travel. The memories shared at these meetings about



Ex-Canadian POWs and their wives at their last reunion in 2014 near Salzburg, Austria. The author is the first man on the left. [Author's photo]

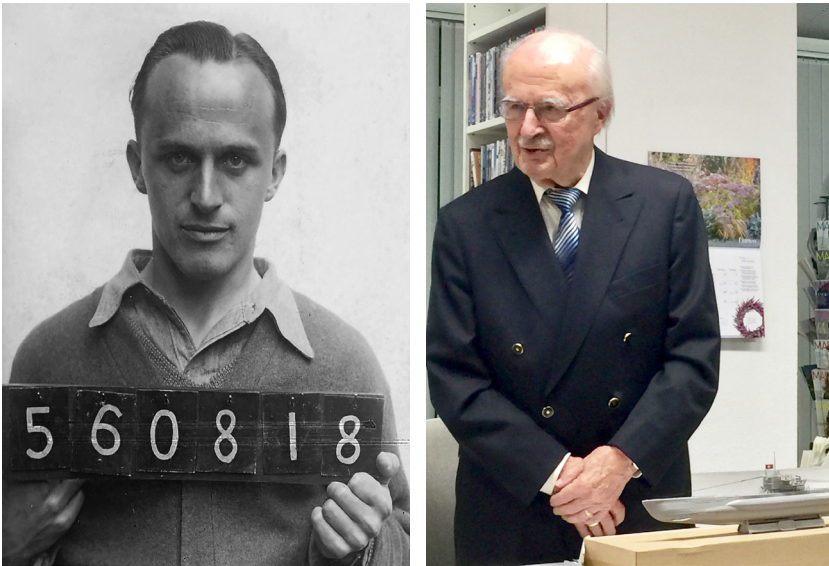
their time as POWs were mostly positive, which bears testimony to Canada's overall fair treatment of their "guests." A few ex-Canadians later felt inspired by their involuntary stay in Canada to learn more about the country, its people, its institutions and culture, including Canadian literature. Thus, the author of this essay became one of the founding members of the Association for Canadian Studies in the German-speaking countries of Europe. Together with Waldemar Zarachasiewicz, Vienna he organized the first Austrian symposium on Canadian Literature at a small resort town near Vienna in 1985. Margaret Atwood was one of the distinguished guest speakers there. The conference papers were published as *Encounters and Explorations: Canadian Writers and European Critics*, 1986. The organisers of the symposium also invited students interested in Canadian Studies from Austria's neighbours Hungary, and what was then Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. This in turn led to the establishment of Canadian Studies at universities in all of these countries.. Thus, the fact that Canada agreed to take in POWs in 1940, although at first somewhat reluctantly, contributed decisively to the spreading of an interest in Canadian studies in the German speaking countries of Europe.

Surprisingly it was a Canadian journalist, James Bacque, who, in his book *Other Losses* uncovered the appalling circumstances in which up to a million of prisoners in camps along the Rhine river, the so-called Rheinwiesenlager, had to endure immediately after the war. Many of them did not survive the harsh conditions of having to camp outdoors without shelter for months. The German translation of James Bacque's book *Der geplante Tod*, insinuated that the mass death of German internees in these camps was planned by the headquarters of General Eisenhower.⁸ That such a plan existed has been denied by serious historians that have closely analysed the case, among them Günther Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose. Their investigations have shown that Bacque's figures of "nearly one million" deaths in Rheinwiesenlager camps are unsubstantiated.⁹ Despite these discrepancies in casualty numbers the book has undoubtedly brought attention to the fact that mass deaths of prisoners occurred under the Allied occupation on German territory, weeks and months after fighting had ceased. This deserves to be remembered whenever the consequences of modern warfare are being discussed. Whether these deaths of prisoners of war in huge numbers after a cease fire had come into effect could have been avoided through better logistic planning in time remains an open question. Evidently the Geneva conventions, which on the whole were strictly observed as long as fighting went on by both sides on the Western fronts, had become ineffective. As a matter of fact the Allies did not revoke or cancel these conventions but found a way to circumvent their application. How this was possible deserves further study in particular of competent linguists.

According to the Allied high command (SHAEF Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces), the protective rights guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions no longer applied to the Rheinwiesenlager camp detainees, a decision which had fatal consequences for thousands of them. The SHAEF officially replaced the term "Prisoner of War" (POW) as used in the Geneva Conventions by the term "Disarmed Enemy Personnel" (DEP). By this change in the official nomenclature Allied forces evidently believed to

⁸ James Bacque, *Other Losses: an Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners of War* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1989).

⁹ Günther Bischof & Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts Against Falsehood* (New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).



Left: The author of this article. The photo was taken at an interrogation camp near London in December 1942, two or three weeks after he survived the total destruction of disabled U-331 by a torpedo dropped by an Albacore from carrier H.M.S. *Formidable*, which killed two-thirds of the crew. Squadron Leader Ian Patterson of 500 Hudson Squadron, who disabled the boat by depth-charges, called this attack “cold-blooded murder.” (See S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, Vol. II, 336). [Author’s photo] Right: the author with a model of U-331, seventy-five years later. [Author’s photo]

have found a way to operate outside the Geneva Conventions in dealing with this admittedly extremely demanding logistic situation. It meant that DEPs were deprived of their right to appeal to the protective power exercised during the war by the government of Switzerland. In fact it is even reported, according to James Bacque, that representatives of the International Red Cross were barred from inspecting the Rheinwiesenlager camps. Also according to James Bacque, the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King was the only head of government who protested against this kind of treatment of POWs. It is not intended to repeat here what historians have already, and often highly controversially, discussed regarding this post-war incident. But it might be of some interest to point out that competent linguists, for instance pragmalinguists, should have further examined to what extent this change in terminology from “Prisoners of War” to “Disarmed Enemy Personnel” has facilitated the acceptance or toleration of the catastrophic situation in the Rheinwiesen camps.

In this context the author would like to point to another example referred to in his wartime autobiography: the question of whether the ambiguity of one word in an order given by Admiral Dönitz, “*Besatzung*”—meaning crew members on board ship, but possibly also crew members who had taken to their lifeboats—could have been judicially helpful. The Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, 1946, had many interpreters working for them, none of them however, was a specialist of pragmalinguistics. Such a specialist could perhaps have been able to provide arguments for the proper interpretation of the intended double meaning of the so-called Laconia-Order of Admiral Dönitz in September 1942. This order, issued only to captains of U-boats, dealt with the treatment of survivors of ships sunk. Could the ambiguity of the word *Besatzung* in this order possibly be understood to encourage captains of U-Boats also to eliminate survivors of ships torpedoed when no longer on board of their ships? Would this order have been implemented by U-boat captains, as Dönitz seems to have insinuated, though somewhat ambiguously, the British Admiralty would most likely have retaliated by instructing its submarine hunting units to no longer rescue the survivors of U-boats that they had sunk. Had this scenario been implemented, the present author would possibly not have been picked up by the British pilot of a Walrus flying boat, after an Albacore plane from the aircraft carrier *Formidable* had torpedoed the U-boat on which he served.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franz-Karl Stanzel is a professor emeritus of English literature at the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz in Austria. During the Second World War he served as third officer of the watch on board U-331, sunk in the Mediterranean in 1942. He spent four years in British and Canadian POW Camps, which offered him ample leisure to study English Literature and ultimately determined his career as professor of English at German and Austrian universities as well as visiting-professor at British, Canadian and US universities.