



Centralne Muzeum Jeńców Wojennych

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Captivity in British Uniforms
Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf

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Preface

There is a photograph in the collections of our Museum, which shows a group of several young men who were made to pause for a moment while at work (Photo 1). They are smiling, wearing worn-out shirts, with their sleeves rolled-up. People looking at the photo will not see any uniforms, be it on the men themselves or ones lying aside, and it is only the stamp on the backside which provides the information that the picture features British prisoners of war. This photo, like many other ones found in the Museum collections, allows visitors to better and fully understand the reality of a POW camp during World War 2. It would be advisable, though, to reach deeper, beyond the seeming atmosphere of a serene and normal life, which can be perceived at first sight, just upon a superficial glance.

When I began my work at the Museum, I was familiar with the name of merely one of the soldiers in the photograph – Arthur Weston. A camp cobbler, later on, a manufacturer of prostheses to substitute for the amputated extremities, he was evidently a person easily recognizable within the camp community. Then, after the War, he co-organized visits to Łambinowice of former British POWs interned in this camp during WW2. He was also the first of the British ex-POWs, whom I was able to meet personally. I am convinced that it is this acquaintance which triggered my sincere interest in the subject matter of British POWs in German captivity and was decisive in pursuing my scholarly activity.

It is again and again that I come to realize that although it is over seven decades since the end of WW2 and the last of the living participants of those events are departing, their experiences are still vivid in the memory of their children and grandchildren, who arrive in the small place of Łambinowice not only from the British Isles, but also from Canada, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand. It happens very often that they begin their visit with the words: “My father was here...”

and then the photographs which have remained anonymous until that moment have the real names of the heroes they feature restored. My book is a nod towards those to whom history is important, but also towards those who – at the same time – wish to go beyond the circle of family stories and spare a moment to study a scholarly publication. The work is an elaboration of a number of sources, many of which have remained unknown so far and which deal with British soldiers detained in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf during WW2.

The book, which was inspired primarily by meetings with the last of the living POWs, would not have materialized but for the kind support and selfless engagement of their family members. I experienced that especially during the research which I carried out in British archives. That has not only contributed to enriching the Museum's collections with precious family mementos, letters and photographs, but also allowed me to glue together chunks of individual histories to produce one complete whole.

There are also many people important to me, who were engaged in the publication of this volume. I would like to thank all and everybody for their invaluable help, patience and understanding. My gratitude is due to both whole institutions, primarily the Central Museum of Prisoners-of-War and individual persons, among others, the Reviewer, the history consultant for the volume, the translator, the editor, the Director of the Museum, my colleagues and, finally, my Family.

Introduction

During World War 2 Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf (in 1945, the place located in Upper Silesia, Poland, was renamed Łambinowice), called *Britenlager*, became the largest camp for British POWs¹ – every third soldier wearing a British uniform, who was taken captive by Germans, found himself detained here. In total, there were nearly 48 thousand British POWs staying in this camp.² They were soldiers fighting on different fronts of WW2, those taken captive near Dunkirk, Narvik, in the Balkans, North Africa, during the evacuation from Crete, or following the failed raid on Dieppe. Apart from soldiers of land force units, the camp accommodated also commandos – soldiers of special forces, a small group of seamen, and even NCOs of the British air force. The last ones were pilots of fighters and members of bomber crews, shot down and taken captive during the Battle of Britain or carpet bombings of the Third Reich in the years 1943–1944. These soldiers belonged to the RAF, RAAF, RCAF, SAAF and RNZAF. Moreover, there were members of medical personnel: doctors and orderlies, as well as military chaplains of different denominations, who were brought to the camp together with the wounded, often straight from field hospitals.

Already in the first weeks of the French campaign of 1940, which was victorious for Germany, Stalag Lamsdorf was designed as the camp to host British POWs. It was located within the VIII Military District of the Wehrmacht. For this reason the Polish soldiers, who had been detained here since the autumn of 1939 (the September Campaign), were gradually being removed from the camp and, in time, the British constituted the most numerous (between November 1941 and November 1942 – even the only one) army group here. This made the German authorities give it the name *Britenlager* – the British Camp.³

There were a few factors which were decisive in placing the British POWs in Lamsdorf. Firstly, being located far from the frontline, in 1940,

it was one of the POW camps which was functioning in the easternmost territory of the Third Reich. In this way the regulations of the Geneva Convention, which commanded the signatories to place POWs far from areas affected by military actions, were fulfilled.⁴ Secondly, the establishment of the camp close to a major railway line and in the vicinity of the industrial district of Upper Silesia was vital for the German economy to benefit from the POWs' labour. Lastly, the location in the area of the former Prussian and German military range, conveniently isolated from large cities or towns, secured discretion and – at the same time – made it difficult to undertake successful escapes. (N.B. During World War 1 the British had already been kept in the POW camp in Lamsdorf, including some cases of the same soldiers being detained here for a second time.)

“We at Stalag VIII B, representative of almost every part of the British Commonwealth of Nations and Empire and the allied nations [...]” were the words of the camp leader Sidney Sherriff, with which he tried to describe all the detained in the camp.⁵ Germans themselves, by using the term “British”, were aware of a great diversification of soldiers who were wearing British uniforms – ranging from “islanders” to the Indian, Muslims and Sikhs.

Who, then, are the main heroes of this publication? One of the basic methodological assumptions has been to correctly define the term *Briten* – the British, as used in the camp documents produced by the German administration. As early as in November 1939, the Australian war correspondent and military historian, Dr Charles E.W. Bean, saw the need for introducing a universal term which would serve to describe the composition of army units fighting against the common enemy. He pointed to the fact that to soldiers from outside the metropolis, like – for instance – his fellow countrymen, “British detachments” meant as much as “non-Australian”. The problem remained virtually unsolved, since during the War it was attempted unsuccessfully to introduce the term *British Imperial* detachments, in the sense of coming from the British Empire.⁶

The reason why acceptance of the broadest possible definition of the term “the British” was vital was the necessity of stressing the military effort of representatives of all nations and ethnic groups fighting in the ranks of the British Army. Responding to this requirement, everywhere this is justified and possible in the present volume, the relevant nationality of the POW will be given. The national and ethnic differentiation between members of the British Armed Forces was an



Photo 1. A group of cobblers in Lamsdorf. In the third row, second from the right Arthur Weston. Source: CMJW, Muzealia, nr inw. 2326/2009

inherent and unique feature of this formation found exclusively here and not in the case of the Red Army and the French Army. Therefore, being directed by pragmatism, Germans used the name “British” with reference to all soldiers in British uniforms who were taken captive by them. Beginning in April 1942, the headquarters of the Wehrmacht decided that all soldiers serving in the British Army or in detachments recruiting from the Dominions “should be called British POWs”.⁷ However, a year later, detailed evidencing of these POWs, which took into account their different nationalities (as many as 29), was introduced.

On the basis of the preserved POWs’ accounts and published memoir, it becomes evident that staying in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf was memoirs by the majority of the British soldiers as exceptionally traumatic. This fact was stressed especially firmly by those who had experienced time in a few POW camps and had the opportunity to compare the conditions existing in each of them. James Stedman, for instance, claimed that Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf was the worst camp in which he had stayed. Upon one of the visits paid to the camp by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the inspectors concluded that compared with other camps designed for British POWs, Lamsdorf was to be classified as the worst. Many POWs

plainly referred to it as *hell camp* and Winston Churchill publicly condemned those responsible for the scandalous conditions found in it.⁸

The problems encountered in the Stalag resulted, primarily, from the lack of suitable infrastructure which would satisfy the POWs' basic needs. The camp was overcrowded – especially from the autumn of 1943 – which was an unprecedented experience to the POWs on such a scale anywhere else. They did, however, manage to form an effectively working POWs' council, functional structures permitting to satisfy cultural, educational, sports and – first of all – religious needs. Lastly, the active group of medical personnel set up a camp hospital in Lamsdorf, which was one of the best-equipped and – according to visitors of the ICRC – the best of all throughout Germany. It is worth remembering that despite the acts of harassment and repression against British POWs, despite overcrowding, malnourishment and being forced to work hard, they were a POW group who were relatively well treated by Germans, especially when one compares their situation with that of the Soviet or Polish soldiers detained in the camps of Lamsdorf at the same time.

The history of the British POWs in German captivity during WW2 is a subject dealt with in the English historiography (a detailed bibliographic list is attached at the end of this volume). Thanks to novels and films, such as *The Great Escape*, directed by John Sturges, or *The Password is Courage*, dir. Andrew L. Stone, certain themes have indeed become ingrained as part of mass culture and are now firmly entrenched. Hence the need for works which attempt to retain the picture of the POWs' everyday life that is compliant with historiographic establishments. Valuable complements to this are documentaries like *The Long March to Freedom*, dir. Stephen Saunders, and *Nobody's Heroes*, dir. Colin McRae. Still, the history of the British interned in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf, the camp whose history has been reflected in an exceptionally large number of scientific works, has not been presented as being comprehensively based on the ground of Polish historiography to date. In post-war Poland this subject has usually been dealt with in a broader context of researching vicissitudes of British POWs in Wehrmacht captivity, beginning with the pioneering work by Jacek Wilczur, under the title *Anglosasi, nie jesteście Aryjczykami* [Anglo-Saxons, you are not Aryans] published in 1964 and ending with that by Anna Zapalec, entitled *Druga strona sojuszu. Żołnierze brytyjscy w Polsce w czasie II wojny światowej* [The other side of the alliance. British soldiers in Poland during WW2], published half a century later.



Photo 2. Indian POWs. Source: AWM, Photographs, P10548.001

The issue of the British POWs in Lamsdorf was discussed, for the first time, in a monograph about the Lamsdorf camp complex functioning during WW2, written by Janusz Sawczuk. After another 20 years articles concerned with the treatment of British POWs detained in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf were published by Róża Bednorz and Anna Wickiewicz. However, it is primarily the individual aspects of the British POWs' everyday life experiences in the context of treatment of different nationals that raised the interest of historians. Issues concerning forced labour and living conditions were elaborated on by Stanisław Senft and Horst Więcek. A broader treatment of the question of using British POWs in the Upper Silesian chemical and paper industry was presented by Franciszek Piper, Wiesław Lesiuk and Danuta Kisielewicz. Then, the issue of employing the British in the work *kommando* (working party) at IG Farben, Auschwitz III Monowitz (Monowice) was discussed in detail by Piotr Setkiewicz. The aspect relating to the religious life in Lamsdorf POW camps was dealt with by Norbert Honka in a series of articles. In turn, Renata Wilkoszewska concentrated on the Christmases organized there. The cultural-educational activity as well as the issue of burials of the British POWs were examined by

Violetta Rezler-Wasielewska. Then, sports life in the camp was widely developed by Wojciech Pólichłopek. A few interesting works were published on the POWs' resistance movement and the escapes. The theme of treatment of war crimes perpetrated on POWs was elaborated by Stanisław Łukowski and Szymon Datner. Similarly, the problem of British POWs being subjected to specific repressive measures – handcuffing – was elucidated by Piotr Stanek. The evacuation and liberation of Lamsdorf camp was presented by Damian Tomczyk, while the fate of the British POWs interned in it found its reflection in the chapter of Janusz Sawczuk and Stanisław Senft's monograph dealing with the camps of Lamsdorf/Łambinowice.

Apart from the above-mentioned publications this book uses – in a possibly exhaustive way – archival materials deposited in the collections of the Central Museum of Prisoners-of-War (CMJW, till 2018 the Central Museum of Prisoners-of-War in Łambinowice-Opole) as well as other materials gathered thanks to the author's and the Museum workers' efforts. The materials acquired from archives based in Poland, Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain certainly require more completion with information which can be found in Russian archives.⁹ A vital role in reconstructing the fate of the British POWs interned in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf was played by extensive memoir-based literature, whose richest collection is housed by the Imperial War Museum in London. Similar collections were gathered by other institutions. They are comprised of accounts of those who took part in the War: privates, officers, airmen, seamen, who performed a variety of functions in the camps, often holding positions of responsibility, like that of the camp leader or a doctor. The most precious ones, due to their cognitive role, include recollections of POWs who were engaged in educational, sports or artistic activities, or were involved in conspiracy and preparation of escapes from the camps; also accounts of those who administered medical aid.

The present book is structured around individual problematic areas, and maintains the chronological order of events. It consists of seven chapters. The first presents basic data with reference to the number and nationalities of the British POWs who were brought to Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf in the successive years of the War. The second chapter is devoted to the conditions existing in the camp, that is to accommodation, board and health care. The third chapter deals with issues connected with the functioning of the POWs' Council, attitudes presented by the detained in the camp, their mutual relations or the attitude



Photo 3. British POWs in Lamsdorf. Source: CMJW, Muzealia, nr inw. 2297/2009

towards the camp authorities as well as broadly understood manifestations of resistance activity. The fourth chapter deals with the treatment of the British POWs by the German authorities, with a special focus on retaliatory actions. The fifth chapter provides characteristics of the living conditions and conditions of work encountered by the POWs in working parties. This is followed by a presentation of the religious, cultural-educational and sports life in the sixth chapter. Finally, the last chapter focuses more closely on the question of the POWs' returning home. Each chapter includes illustrations (the majority of which are photographs unpublished so far). Due to the fact that the data available from the existing sources are incomplete, some of the POWs' first names or even initials can be missing; so can their army ranks. For better clarity the references contain abbreviations which are explained in the list at the end of the volume.

The CMJW is an institution of international character, primarily due to its role as a depository of resources which are fundamental in conducting studies on the problems relating to POWs during WW2. One of the main functions of the Museum, which has been in existence for over 50 years now, is taking care of the former camp complex located within the area of present-day Łambinowice. The necropolis found here contains graves of nearly 50 thousand people of different nationalities and affirms the isolation in this place of around 400 thousand soldiers

during the Franco-Prussian War and both World Wars. Additionally, in consequence of the latter, there was also established the German repatriation camp (1921–1924) and the Labour Camp in Łambinowice (1945–1946), which was organized for civilians who were verified as Germans and were resettled into the heart of Germany.¹⁰

The year 2015 saw the publication of the book *Przystanek Lamsdorf. Powstańcy warszawscy w obozie jenieckim Stalag 344 Lamsdorf* [Stopping at Lamsdorf. Warsaw Insurgents in the POW camp Stalag 344 Lamsdorf] by Piotr Stanek, which launched a new series under the title “Jeńcy Lamsdorf” [POWs of Lamsdorf]. The present volume is the third publication in this series, based on the Polish version of the publication under the same title, which came out in 2016. It aims to present to a broad circle of interested persons a synthetic elaboration concerning soldiers of the British Army detained in Stalag VIII B (344) Lamsdorf, who left their distinct mark on the Site of National Remembrance in Łambinowice. The book is, moreover, a form of commemoration of their fates and – at the same time – makes a special response to the requests from families of the British POWs, who have kept visiting the Museum for many years now.

Endnotes

¹ J. Sawczuk, S. Senft, *Obozy jenieckie w Lamsdorf w latach II wojny światowej*, [in:] *Obozy w Lamsdorf/Łambinowicach (1870–1946)*, ed. E. Nowak, Opole 2006, p. 140.

² CMJW, M., sygn. 1, R-III i R-IV, Raporty o zmianie statusu jeńców wojennych w Stalagu VIII B Lamsdorf i Stalagu 344 Lamsdorf z lat 1940–1945; J. Banik, R. Ciasnocha, *Jeńcy wojenni różnych narodowości w obozach jenieckich w Lamsdorf w latach II wojny światowej*. Przyczynek, *ERM* 2005, vol. 28, p. 71–87.

³ CMJW, M., sygn. 1, R-I, kl. 208; J. Sawczuk, S. Senft, op. cit., p. 140.

⁴ Konwencja dotycząca traktowania jeńców wojennych, podpisana w Genewie 27 lipca 1929 r., Dz.U. RP z 1932 r. Nr 103 poz. 866, art. 7.

⁵ *Stalag VIII B Sends Greetings. “Loving Thoughts and Best Wishes”*, “The Times” 1943 of 24 XII, p. 2.

⁶ G. Long, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, vol. 1: *To Benghazi*, Canberra 1961, p. 73.

⁷ CMJW, M., sygn. 19, R-II, kl. nn., Rozporządzenie OKW nr 12 z 8 IV 1942 r.

⁸ J. Stedman, *Life of a British POW in Poland*, Braunton 1992, p. 22; S.P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth. British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, Oxford 2004, p. 100; TNA, WO 224/27; R. Pape, *Boldness Be My Friend*, London 1953, p. 138; TNA, FO 916/22, p. 223.

⁹ E. Nowak, *Dokumentacja obozów jenieckich w Lamsdorf w archiwach rosyjskich*, *ERM* 1993, vol. 16, p. 145–157.

¹⁰ V. Rezler-Wasielewska, *Muzeum w Miejscu Pamięci*, Opole 2015.

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