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### Article Title: Still the Old Marlene: Hollywood at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp

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Article Summary: As part of their re-education program the Prisoner of War Special Programs Division created a series of films to be shown to prisoners with the express purpose of de-Nazification. The "Idea Factory" carefully chose films that would reflect a positive portrayal of American life and high ideals, while avoiding outright propaganda films which were forbidden under the Geneva Convention. Later in the program, atrocity films were shown to all prisoners. Reaction to the films varied, but some insight is revealed with excerpts from the diary of Wolfgang Dorschel.

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People Names: Oscar Wintergast; William Doerr; Jason Silverman; Hans Werner Richter; Allen Gullion; Dorothy Bromley; Archer Lerch; Edward Davison; Maxwell McKnight; Huenmoerder; Unmack; Ludwig; Arthur Blain; Karl Schlager; Russell Sweet; Howard Mumford Jones; Walter Schoenstedt; Robert Kunzig; Howard Hong; Alfred Thompson

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Photographs: Marlene Dietrich; Alfred Thompson; Arthur Blain; Wolfgang Dorschel (2); Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp; Rommel's Tenth Panzer Division Prisoners; Varista Hall, Fort Robinson

# “STILL THE OLD MARLENE”

BY MELISSA A. MARSH



# *Hollywood at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp*

*"Film tonight: Too Many Girls. Sounds like a nice one."*<sup>1</sup>

German prisoner of war Wolfgang Dorschel scribbled this comment in his diary on February 25, 1945, a year and four months after his arrival at the PW camp at Fort Robinson in northwestern Nebraska.

DORSCHEL, LIKE THOUSANDS OF OTHER PRISONERS across America, loved to watch movies, especially popular Hollywood films, and he braved the dry Nebraska heat and the icy chill of winter to pack into the camp movie house with his fellow prisoners and indulge in one of America's favorite pastimes. But there were those who had aims other than simple entertainment for Hollywood's portrayal of America, and sought to incorporate film into one of the best kept secrets of the prisoner of war program: the Intellectual Diversion Program, a top-secret endeavor to "de-Nazify" Hitler's soldiers held in American prison camps.

In Nebraska, there were three PW base camps: Camp Atlanta (Phelps County, in south-central Nebraska), Fort Robinson (Dawes County, in northwestern Nebraska), and Camp Scottsbluff (Scotts Bluff County, in the west-central Panhandle). Camp Scottsbluff was the oldest of the three, with prisoners arriving as early as June 1943. In addition, Italian prisoners were briefly interned at Fort Crook in Sarpy County near Omaha. With the exception of those at Fort Robinson, most of the prisoners worked as agricultural and contract

**German Prisoners, possibly members of the Varista theater troupe, and American prison camp staff outside Varista Hall, the prisoner of war camp theater. The name Varista is a contraction of *Variete im Stacheldraht*—Variety (vaudeville) in *Barbed Wire*.**  
NSHS RG2725-15

laborers. Of the three, only the PW camp at Fort Robinson was located near a military post.<sup>2</sup>

The War Department decided that most large base camps could not efficiently distribute the prisoners where they were needed as workers, and a network of branch camps was created to house the more than one hundred thousand prisoners in the U.S. who could be working in private industries including logging, meat packing, mining, railroads, foundries, and agriculture. Branch camps were highly diversified in both capacity and layout, and more than five hundred were built across the country. In Nebraska, Camp Atlanta had some fifteen branch camps in the southern half of the state. Camp Scottsbluff had four branch camps.

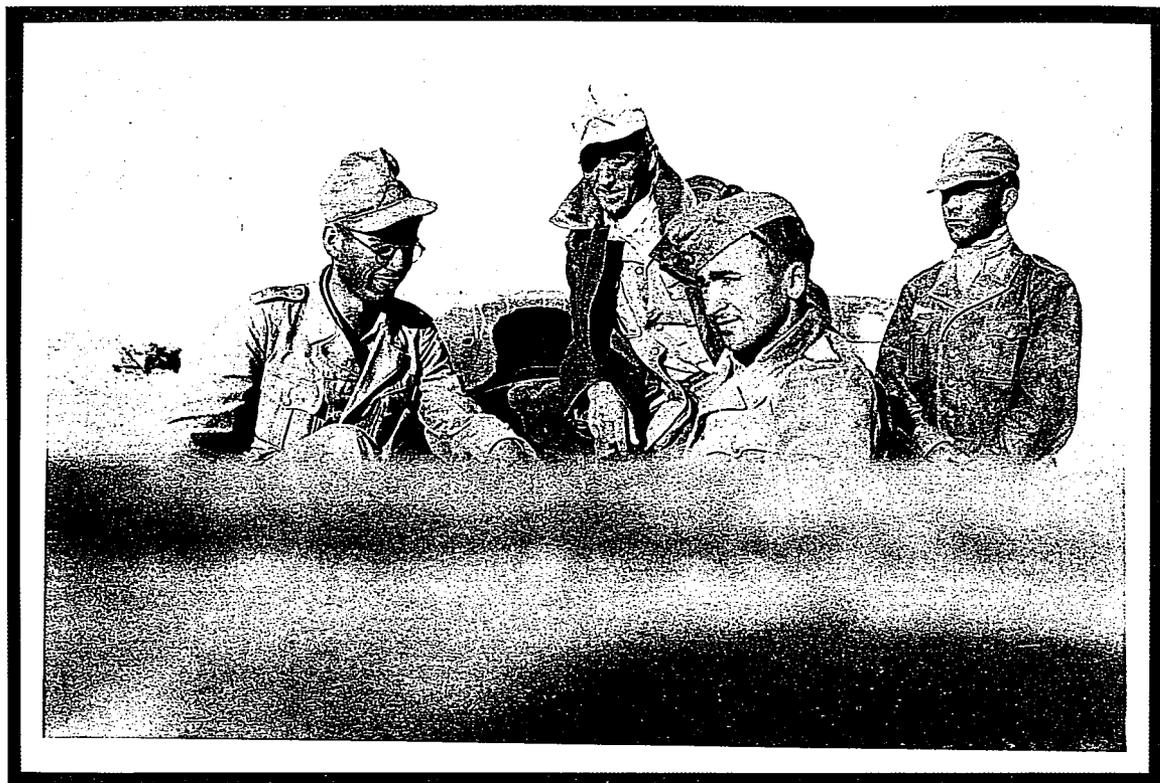
Fort Robinson was chosen as a PW camp for its adaptability to the purpose. It was isolated, it had excellent railroad connections, and there were many work projects to keep the prisoners busy. Since it was an army remount depot housing thousands of horses and had K-9 dog units as well, there was no shortage of work for prisoners on the fort grounds. All in all, it seemed a perfect place for German prisoners to wait out the war.<sup>3</sup>

The first German prisoners to arrive at Fort Robinson were members of Rommel's Tenth Panzer Division from the North Africa campaign. Captured in May 1943, they arrived at Fort Robinson on November 19, 1943. Although many

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The first prisoners at Fort Robinson were from Rommel's Tenth Panzer Division captured in Africa in 1943. A photo from former prisoner Wolfgang Dorschel's collection shows some of his Afrika Korps compatriots in Tunisia in June 1943, including Karl Schlager, left, who also was a prisoner at Fort Robinson. NSHS RG3897-17



prisoners had been conscripts with little or no loyalty to the Nazi regime, about 30 percent of the prisoners in American camps were Nazis or Nazi sympathizers.<sup>4</sup>

The value of de-Nazification in the hundreds of prisoner of war camps in the United States had become apparent as early as March 1943. Even in the quiet rolling hills and buttes of the Fort Robinson camp, far away from the battles raging on European soil, Nazism was alive and well.

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**EVEN IN THE QUIET ROLLING HILLS AND BUTTES  
OF THE FORT ROBINSON CAMP. . .  
NAZISM WAS ALIVE AND WELL.**

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Prisoner of war *Stabsfeldwebel* (Staff Sergeant) Harry Huenmoerder, a thirty-seven-year-old senior ranking non-commissioned officer, was pro-Nazi. Worse, the other prisoners had elected him camp spokesman, an important position guaranteed by Article 43 of the Geneva Convention.

The camp spokesman offered an important link between "the American command and the prisoner community." But Huenmoerder had been in the German military for over thirteen years and Hitler's rhetoric had taken root. He came to Fort Robinson in November 1943 with the first batch

of prisoners captured in Tunisia by the British. According to a Field Service Camp Survey of February 15, 1945, his character was "beyond reproach. He is honest and sincere in his dealings, commands the respect of the Commanding Officer as well as the men of the compound."<sup>5</sup> His pro-Nazi tendencies were no secret to the other prisoners. Indeed, they had elected him to his post.

But there were those who had grave misgivings about their survival if they stayed at the camp. In a letter to the War Department, a group of Austrian prisoners at Fort Robinson requested a transfer to an "Austrian camp." In the letter, they identified Huenmoerder as "the head Nazi" and also made accusations that the American camp commander had a strong dislike for the anti-Nazis and Austrians. "We have repeatedly asked the American leadership to separate the Nazis from the anti-Nazis and likewise in the American prisoner of war camps," they wrote, "but in this prisoner of war camp with this camp commander this is not possible."<sup>6</sup> They were not the only Austrian PWs to flood Washington with transfer petitions. In answer to these letters, Secretary of War Henry Stimson declared, "It is the opinion of this Department that Article 9 of the Geneva Prisoner of War Convention does not have the effect of placing on the United States the obligation to segregate prisoners of war of Austrian origin or nationality." This directive continued to hold, even by the Assistant Director of the Prisoner of War Division, Maj. Edward

Davison, who stated, "The segregation of Austrians from German prisoners of war will not be of special advantage to the Special Projects Program."<sup>7</sup>

Camps with Nazi spokesmen were not uncommon and often became "models of efficiency." A well-run camp would endear the Nazis to the American command. This apparently became evident to those with anti-Nazi feelings. In the letter mentioned above, the Austrians wrote, "...every other word of Colonel Blain is 'My Africans,' which, by that, Mr. Col. Blain means his Nazis."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that "the Americans seemed to have an unwritten policy of making any concession that helped keep the compounds running smoothly. . . The general aim of the American command was to maintain tranquility."<sup>9</sup>

Tranquility at Fort Robinson was a common thread weaving through the numerous inspection reports. Remarks included, "The entire camp presented a neat appearance," "The Swiss representative stated that his investigation had disclosed...the morale of the prisoners at the camp was very good. He had no complaint to make whatever with regard to the physical setup of the camp," and "the writer feels that the Camp Commander is administering this camp very

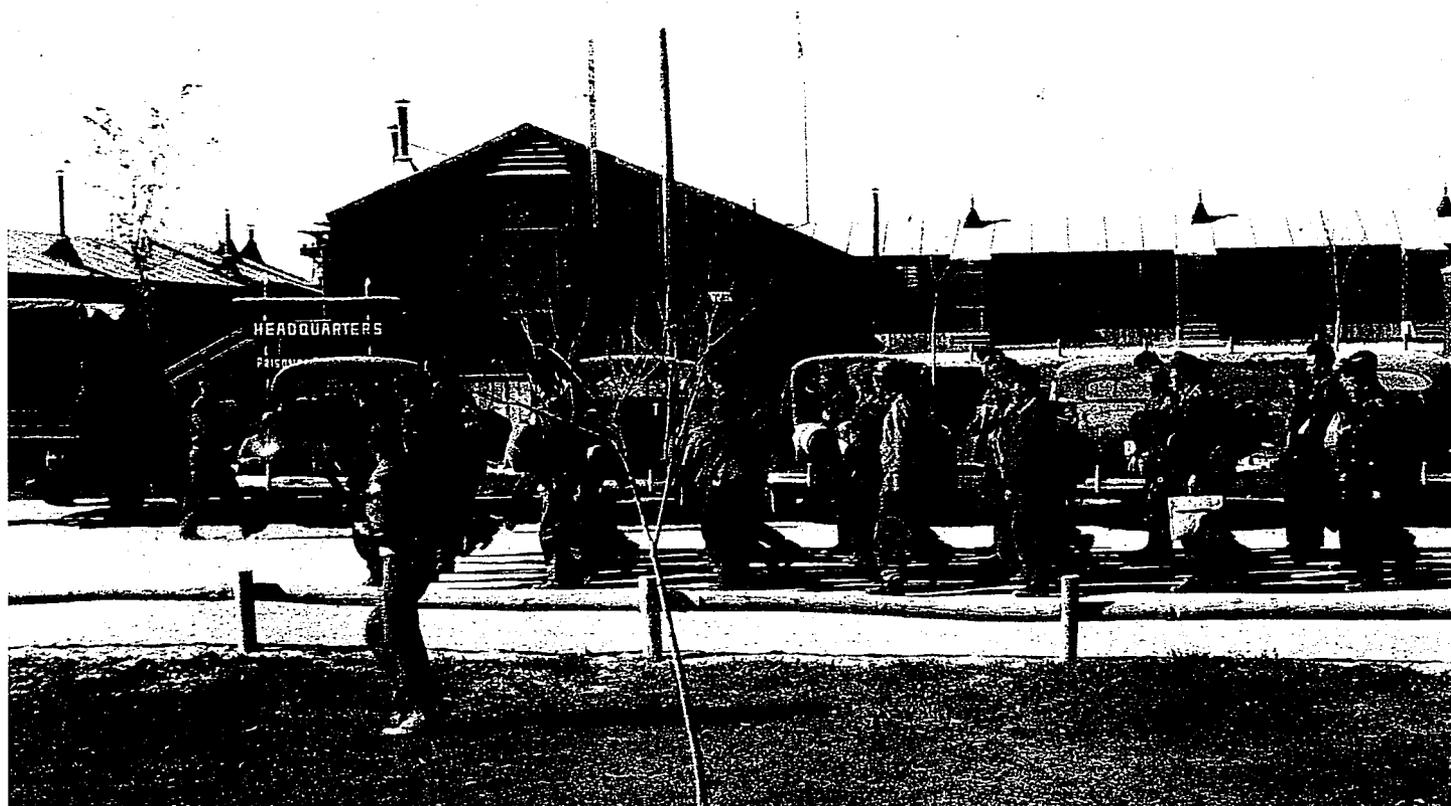
effectively and in a very efficient manner."<sup>10</sup>

Still, many incidents involving Nazism occurred at Fort Robinson. Prisoner Ernst Guenther Ummack was put into protective custody because other POWs had threatened his life. A memo to headquarters from Camp Commander Col. Arthur C. Blain detailed the reasons surrounding Ummack's situation. Because he read and translated American newspapers for other prisoners, many called him a traitor. Ummack was scheduled to be transferred to Camp Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where his "anti-Nazi tendencies may make him valuable."

However, a memo from Col. Russell H. Sweet dated August 2, 1944, stated, "He is not desired at Carlisle," and it was recommended Ummack be transferred to an anti-Nazi camp. Ummack finally ended up at Camp Ruston, Louisiana.<sup>11</sup>

Prisoner Otto Ludwig had made anti-Nazi statements in the camp, one of which Spokesman Huenmoerder recorded in a letter attached to the transfer order. "Inquires [sic] made with the Company leader Co. A., reported that LUDWIG at dinnertime used in the Mess hall Co. A. the follow-

**German Prisoners arriving at Fort Robinson in October 1944. Once prisoners were processed at the camp, the German Red Cross informed their families where they were interned, and they settled into a daily routine strictly controlled by the Geneva Convention.**  
NSHS RG2725-13

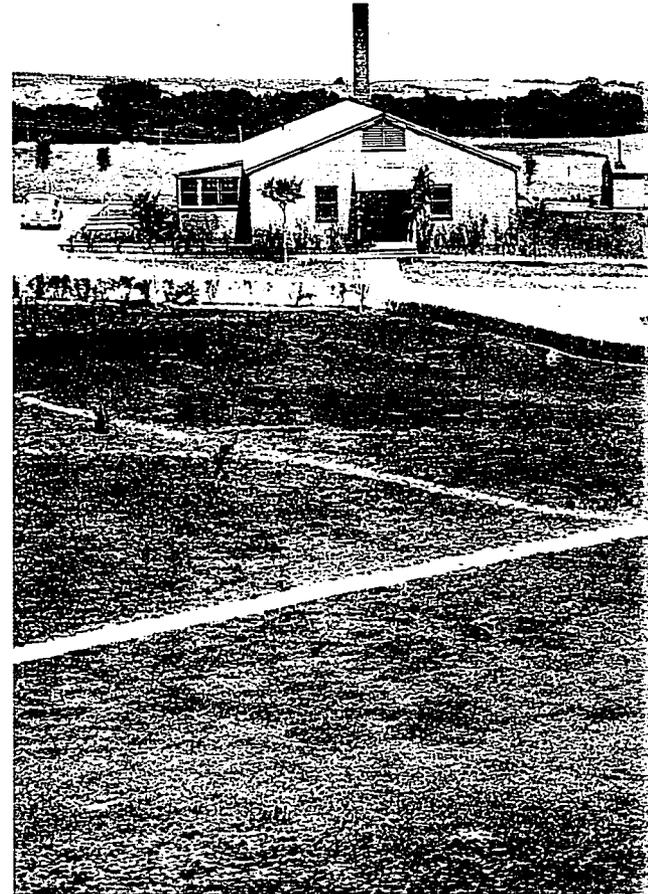


ing sentence, directed to his comrades, "If we win the war, I will never return to Germany, if we loose [*sic*] it I will 'deliver the Nazis to the knife.'" Huenmoerder went on to explain that Ludwig's transfer would be in the "interest of good order and discipline among the German soldiers in this Camp." Camp Commander Colonel Blain agreed, stating that Ludwig's "continued presence in this camp is considered dangerous to himself." Ludwig was in protective custody to "prevent harm from befalling him at the hands of the other prisoners." Ludwig's transfer to Camp McCain, Mississippi, was authorized on February 22, 1944, a mere four days after the incident was reported.<sup>12</sup> He returned to the fort in 1987 and recalled the incidents leading up to his transfer, including cold water thrown on his bed and a severe beating. "I got very bad treatment from my comrades," Ludwig said. "That's the reason why [they] sent me later to Camp McCain in Mississippi."<sup>13</sup>

Such occurrences only fueled the efforts behind the re-education program. As early as March 1943, the War Department had recognized the need to break the grip of Nazism in the PW camps through re-education. According to the proposal sent to General Frederick Osborn of the Information and Education Division through Gen. George C. Marshall, the program's goal would be such that "prisoners of war might be exposed to the facts of American history, the workings of a democracy and the contributions made to America by peoples of all national origins."<sup>14</sup>

Yet Maj. Gen. Allen W. Gullion, the provost marshal general, thought the plan unwise. "Enemy prisoners of war are, for the most part, not children. Those who have sufficient intellectual capacity to be of value to a post-war world have already built the philosophical frameworks of their respective lives. Those whose minds are sufficiently plastic to be affected by the program, are probably not worth the effort."<sup>15</sup> The plan was shelved on June 24, 1943.

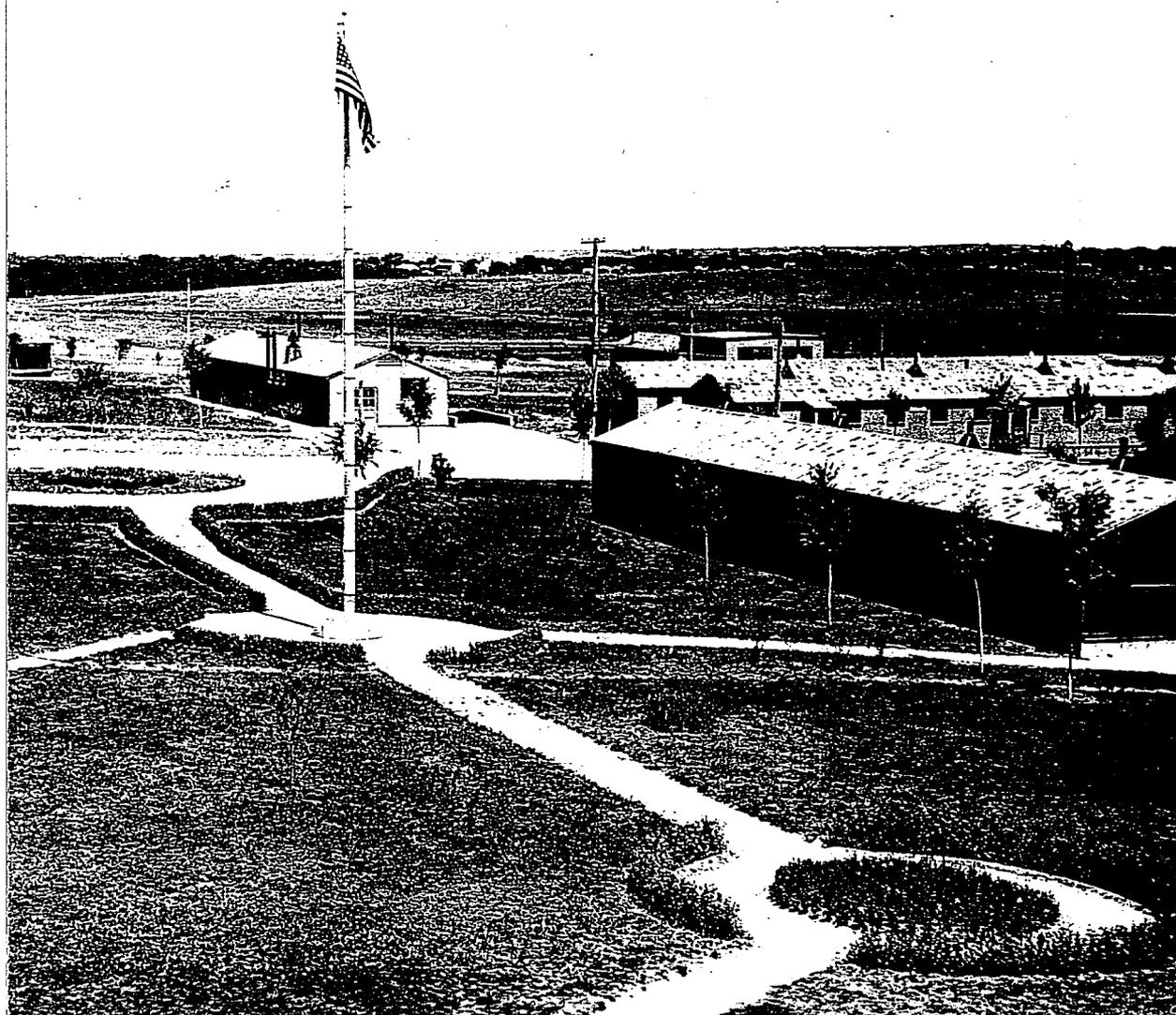
But Nazism in the camps became worse. Weeding out Nazis from the anti-Nazis eventually became the tool of choice to control the violence. On July 17, 1944, a comprehensive directive from the War Department was issued segregating the Nazis from the anti-Nazis. All German army officer prisoners were to be separated from their non-commissioned officers and enlisted men and put into either the anti-Nazi Camp Ruston, Louisiana, or to the pro-Nazi Camp Alva, Oklahoma. German NCOs were isolated at camps designated for their service command. Prisoners from the Seventh



Service Command, which included Fort Robinson, were to be transferred to Camp Clark, Missouri.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, stories of camp violence continued to emerge. The public was frustrated by perceived government inaction, and the situation soon became fodder for editorials, columns, and letters to the editor. Even Eleanor Roosevelt became involved after Dorothy Bromley of the *New York Herald Tribune* and syndicated columnist Dorothy Thompson presented the problem to her. Mrs. Roosevelt spoke to her husband, who then spoke to the secretaries of war and state. They in turn told the new provost marshal general, Archer L. Lerch, to get out the year-old plan produced by General Marshall.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the public outcry and demand for resolution of the Nazism problem, the War Depart-



The flagpole and Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp buildings in 1944. Buildings shown here, all connected by white gravel paths, include the officers' club, left, the mess hall, and barracks. NSHSRG1517:115-5

ment knew it faced several important obstacles. The most important was the Geneva Convention's rule prohibiting captors from subjecting enemy prisoners to propaganda. This carried far-reaching overtones. If word leaked of German prisoners being subjected to propaganda, American PWs held in Germany might then be subject to retaliation. The government's desire to protect American PWs required that the program remain a closely held secret.<sup>18</sup>

But how did one get around the Geneva Convention itself? Article 17 contained the necessary loophole. The article stated, "So far as possible, belligerents shall encourage intellectual diversions and sports organized by prisoners of war." Since intellectual diversion was encouraged, it remained up to the War Department to choose

the proper subjects and media. Representatives of the War Department and the State Department concluded that "if selected media for intellectual diversion were made available in the camps, the curiosity of the prisoners concerning the United States and its institutions would provide the means for their re-education."<sup>19</sup>

The program was put under the command of the Office of the Provost Marshal General who created a subcommittee to establish the policy and procedures of the Intellectual Diversion Program. The program officially began on September 6, 1944. The American public, still unaware of the secret program, continued to criticize the War Department, but by November, when an article entitled "What To Do With German Prisoners" criticizing the "stupidity" of the govern-

ment in handling the PWs appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, personnel ready to begin the re-educations program were already arriving at the camps.<sup>20</sup>

Under the direction of Col. Edward Davison and Maj. Maxwell McKnight, the Prisoners of War Special Programs Division was formed enlisting the talents of a variety of academics and intellectuals including Walter Schoenstedt, a German novelist who had fled the Fatherland, Robert L. Kunzig, a lawyer and professor, and Harvard Professor Howard Mumford Jones. The Prisoners of War Special Programs Division staff worked at Fifty Broadway in New York City, a location chosen to avoid revealing the "intrusion of academia into military affairs," and to "avoid the scrutiny of officious military overseers."<sup>21</sup>

The core objective of the plan was outlined by the Provost Marshal General's Office:

"The prisoners would be given facts, objectively presented but so selected and assembled as to correct misinformation and prejudices surviving Nazi conditioning. The facts, rather than being forced upon them, would be made available through such media as literature, motion pictures, newspapers, music, art, and educational courses. Two types of facts were needed: those which would convince them of the impracticality and viciousness of the Nazi position. If a large variety of facts could be presented convincingly, perhaps the German prisoners of war might understand and believe historical and ethical truth as generally conceived by Western civilization, might come to respect the American people and their ideological values, and upon repatriation to Germany might form the nucleus of a new German ideology which will reject militarism and totalitarian controls and will advocate a democratic system of government."<sup>22</sup>

To fulfill such a lofty goal, The Idea Factory, as it came to be known, was born. Originally begun at Camp Van Etten in upstate New York and moved to its permanent location at Fort Kearney, Rhode Island, five months later, the Idea Factory consisted of German PWs who were carefully screened for their anti-Nazi attitudes and their responses on questionnaires. Although this selection was not foolproof, the Americans did have an advantage. Hitler's impending defeat had soured

Fort Robinson PW Camp Commander Col. Arthur C. Blain in August 1944. Described in an army inspection report as "rugged" and "courteous," Blain and his camp officers and enlisted men gave the Fort Robinson camp an outstanding reputation. NSHS RG2725-28



many Germans against Nazism. Others had never been ardent admirers of Nazism. Moreover, when the re-education program appeared, many PWs had been prisoners for two or three years, offering them ample opportunity to think about Germany's status in the world.<sup>23</sup> These prisoners were involved in the experimental phase of the re-education program. Although pro-Nazism was still a problem in the camps, this group was determined to do something about it.

The Special Projects staff then assembled a division of "specially-qualified" German prisoners—writers, professors, and linguists who were dedicated anti-Nazis. All were volunteers, all were officers, and all renounced their *Wehrmacht* rank, lending the group an egalitarian air. The prisoners enjoyed far more freedom at Fort Kearney than they had at their camps. No guards or towers policed their movements, and they even were permitted to take the ferry to Jamestown in Army trucks to pick up their supplies.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps, however, this elite group was not the most prudent choice. Although the group was happy to be among other intellectuals, Ron Robin writes, "They aided and abetted the construction of an intellectual enterprise with little acknowledgment of the cultural standards and preferences of rank-and-file POWs."<sup>25</sup> Since they were at the core of the program, many of their cultural biases would show in the program itself. Robin believes the academic, intellectual, and cultural tastes of the Idea Factory did not mesh with the tastes of the average prisoner. That ultimately would have adverse effects on the program.

The Idea Factory was separated into subdivisions which included: "a film section, which reviewed movies and translated synopses; a review section, which made recommendations on the suitability of material passed on by other governmental agencies; a translation bureau which translated the curriculum designed in the New York headquarters; a camp newspaper section which monitored the tone of some seventy camp newspapers, and *Der Ruf's* [the national POW newspaper] editorial staff."<sup>26</sup>

The re-education program had not yet begun when Wolfgang Dorschel and the rest of the first prisoners arrived at Fort Robinson in November 1943.

According to Dorschel's *Soldbuch* (military record book), he was born in 1911 in Tambach-Dietharz, making him twenty-eight years old at the start of World War II.<sup>27</sup> Old enough to have escaped the brainwashing attempts of the Hitler



*Unteroffizier* (Sergeant) Wolfgang Dorschel, a prisoner of war at Fort Robinson from 1943 to 1946 and camp spokesman 1945–46, has provided invaluable first-person information about life at the Fort Robinson camp. Many of the photographs reproduced here are from his collection. NSHS RG3897-7.

Youth, Dorschel saw first-hand the atrocities committed by the Nazis. He lived near the Buchenwald concentration camp and in later years described the experience. Secrecy was vital, and when convoys from the train station to the camp traveled through town, citizens were ordered to close their shutters and stay off the streets. Dorschel took supplies to the camp, but had to sign papers promising secrecy. "It's hard to explain to a free man fifty years later, why we couldn't talk. . . I didn't talk because I had signed a contract not to talk, but also, I knew the minute I talked, I would be in the concentration camp, too," Dorschel said.<sup>28</sup> Dorschel refused to join the National Socialist Party, even when he was drafted into the German Army.<sup>29</sup>

Dorschel kept a detailed diary during his years as a PW, offering an intimate glimpse into life at the Fort Robinson camp. By January 1944, the

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profits from the camp's canteen were high enough to purchase a 16mm film projector. Dorschel's first diary entry regarding a film came in late February 1944, a comment on the costume classic, *The Flame of New Orleans*, starring Marlene Dietrich: "Wonderful!" Dorschel wrote. "Still the old Marlene as 1930 in the *Blue Angel*."<sup>30</sup> It is not clear if this was the first movie Dorschel saw at the camp, or if he did not write anything about the first film shown.

Nevertheless, the decision to show a movie starring a famous German actress, by then an expatriate from Germany to Hollywood, could hardly have been an accident.

The movie house at Fort Robinson consisted of two barracks buildings. Once every five days each prisoner could attend a film program of a feature-length film and two shorts. To pay for the rental of films, one hundred dollars was withdrawn from the PW fund every ten days.

The assistant executive officer, Capt. Jason

Silverman, and the camp spokesman usually wrote a short synopsis of the film to distribute to prisoners who lacked English skills, and most American movies were subtitled.<sup>31</sup>

Films were not strictly regulated before the re-education program. Up until 1945, the camp spokesman, *Stabsfeldwebel* Harry Huenmoerder, usually selected movies. Huenmoerder made it a point to select films that "showed American life in the worst possible light."<sup>32</sup>

According to Alfred Thompson, who began as an enlisted man on staff of the re-education program, and later became its assistant executive officer, the film program was the "most influential portion" of the re-education program, and the predominant point of view was that the prisoners were "spending too much time and too much

money for films which were not of the nature as would be of benefit to them or to the United States, their keeper."<sup>33</sup> The films chosen at Fort Robinson only emphasized this point. YMCA inspector Howard Hong's report of July 31, 1944, reported a problem with the choice of films. Although there was no shortage of men attending the film programs, "they did not especially care for most of the films." Hong reported "the low quality of content left upon them a deepening impression of an inferior America that there is nothing other than whiskey, drinking, gangsters, wild women, and horse thieves." Worse, Hong said the prisoners had been overheard discussing the films: "'If this is America,' they have heard said, 'America is a century behind us.'"<sup>34</sup>

In a letter to his parents on February 13, 1946, Alfred Thompson shared his perception of the camp spokesmen's film choice. "They purchased from private companies the worst of movies one could choose, interspersed with musicals and heavy drama which appealed to the extremes. Deanna Durbin ruled the roost, with Tex Ritter and his pals on the other side of the corral fence. America became to them a land of half-naked women, fighting families, the roaring West, and the gangster East."<sup>35</sup>

Dorschel's diary is testament to both Thompson's assessment and Howard Hong's report. Movies listed in his diary included numerous Abbott and Costello's films such as *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, which Dorschel called, "very, very funny," *Hit the Ice*, *One Night in the Tropics*, *Pardon My Sarong*, and *Who Done It*, which Dorschel called "nice, a funny criminal film."<sup>36</sup> Marlene Dietrich films, such as *The Seven Sinners* and Deanna Durbin films including *First Love*, *It Started with Eve*, and the *Master of Melody*, were also offered. But Thompson suggested another reason why only certain films were available to the prisoners. He said that many private companies were out to make money by selling cheap films to the camps at a "fat profit." Thompson wrote, "They filled their shelves with trash, advertised a half hundred of good films of which they had but a few copies, and sluffed [*sic*] the bad films off on the PW camps as substitutes."<sup>37</sup>

But not all the films before the re-education film program began were "trash." Dorschel's diary entry of December 16, 1944, read, "I left the Mark Twain film—I did not like that film." January 5, 1945, read, "*As You Like It* from Shakespeare as film with Elisabeth Bergner as Rosalind, in *Old English* and [I] read the American text. A very good film."



An entry in Wolfgang Dorschel's diary in late February 1944 reports on seeing *The Flame of New Orleans* starring Marlene Dietrich at the camp theater. "Wonderful," he wrote. "Still the old Marlene as 1930 in *The Blue Angel*." Private collection.

AMERICA BECAME TO THEM A LAND  
OF HALF-NAKED WOMEN, FIGHTING FAMILIES,  
THE ROARING WEST, AND THE GANGSTER EAST.

January 21, 1945, read, "A film about settler[s] and their towns in America. The war with Indians. And the revolution war 1775 was good." His entry of February 10, 1945, read, "Film 'Follie Girls.' Not much to it."<sup>38</sup>

On March 18, 1944, Dorschel recorded a particularly interesting incident: "The film with Marlene Dietrich has caused offense. The film was showing 'Buy War Bonds.' They had to break up the movie. The film was very good. Playing somewhere in America."<sup>39</sup> The cause of the argument, "Buy War Bonds" either came from the movie itself or one of the short newsreels.

Although Dorschel does not explain precisely why the disturbance occurred, some possibilities can be inferred. If Marlene Dietrich herself were promoting war bonds, which would hardly be surprising considering the effort Hollywood put into the war cause, the fact that a German actress supported the United States instead of her home country might have offended some prisoners. But more than likely the prisoners saw the logo at the end of the film that said, "Buy War Bonds" which undoubtedly reminded them of their situation and of Hollywood's contribution to Germany's defeat.

Film, especially the popular Hollywood genre, was a sensitive subject to the Special Projects Division of the Office of Provost Marshal General. Lt. Col. Edward Davison, director of the division, had deep misgivings about the popular culture churned out by Hollywood. Davison wanted to focus more on the original reason for the re-education program—Intellectual diversion and films showing democracy in a positive light. Indeed, Davison believed in "the power of words and ideas" and thought the "scourges of modern times could be controlled if intellectual leaders of altruistic vision would take charge."<sup>40</sup>

Instead of popular Hollywood movies, Davison wanted to show government films focusing on education and science. Hollywood movies without a political theme could be shown occasionally, but certainly not often.<sup>41</sup> However, his ideas disregarded the prisoners' love for popular Hollywood movies.

Davison had undoubtedly taken such a stance after it became widely known how effectively many

pro-Nazi camp spokesmen, like Fort Robinson's Huenmoerder, had used the film program to their advantage. Before the re-education program, films were a standard part of camp recreation that had become a tool

for those bent on showing America in a less-than-flattering light. Early on in the camps, films such as *Lady Scarface*, *Seven Miles from Alcatraz*, and *Legion of the Lawless* portrayed America as ripe with "rampant gangsterism, corruption" and showed "the debilitating effect of democracy."<sup>42</sup>

In response the Idea Factory screened hundreds of films, eliminating those "depicting gangsters or prison life; those ridiculing any ally; those misrepresenting the American scene by stressing the plutocratic aspects; 'hot' musicals; films containing Depression and slum scenes, racial slurs, or strife between capital and labor; blood-and-thunder cowboy pictures; and films of unrealistic Hollywood scenes."<sup>43</sup> It would appear that after such a thorough weeding not many would survive the cut. But plenty of options remained to both entertain and educate the prisoners.

One prominent German PW active in the film section of the Idea Factory was Dr. Wilhelm Doerr. Doerr wrote a paper on American movies and German society. "American box-office hits...might prove to be politically detrimental," he stated. He recommended that "no gangsters, no horse thieves, no play-boys, no vamps, not too many millionaires. Not too much 'Society' as it inevitably provokes feelings of envy and hatred in people



In spite of misgivings about the content of many Hollywood films expressed by Alfred Thompson and the War Department Special Projects Division, the prisoners loved American popular culture, and even *Ride 'em Cowboy*, an Abbott and Costello potboiler, got rave reviews in Dorschel's diary: "very, very funny," he wrote. Private collection.



Marlene Dietrich autographs a GI's cast while entertaining at a hospital in Belgium. Born in Berlin in 1901, Dietrich became a U.S. citizen in 1935. Her war bonds promotion in a film shown at the Fort Robinson camp caused a disturbance among the German prisoners. Tuffie, 1944. National Archives and Records Administration 111-SC-232989.

who were forced to give all that up." Slapstick comedies and westerns also concerned Doerr, and he suggested that for those who wanted to use a film as a means to escape reality, "Let it be one of innocent minds like that of Grimms' and Anderson's tales." The American movies most likely to fit Doerr's prescription were primarily musicals and cartoons since both "demonstrated technical skill and were innocent in content."<sup>44</sup>

Other workers in the Idea Factory wanted to shelve the whole film program. Hans Werner Richter had a deep-seated fear of mass culture as the "opium of the masses" and considered film the worst of all. Richter believed that "movies left little room for reflection; they induced preordained, mindless, responses from audiences." But more important, Richter and others thought film would lower the intellectual tone of the program.<sup>45</sup> This point of view also failed to consider the ordinary, average prisoner who did not meet the higher academic or intellectual standards of many of those in the Idea Factory. Because of this failure to understand the mind of the average prisoner, the success of the program remained in doubt.

At Fort Robinson, however, Captain Silverman managed to locate films he thought the prisoners would find the most productive. According to a camp inspection report of February 27, 1945, Silverman planned to acquire several films from "American industrial organizations on technical subjects connected with those industries." Silverman also made it a point to acquire a German-language film from the YMCA about once a month.<sup>46</sup>

Dorschel writes on February 16, 1944, "The YMCA has loaned us a film in the German language. *The Big Poet* with Gustaf Froehlich, Karola Hohn, Otto Wernicke." Another German film Dorschel mentions is *Ich Liebe Dich* with Maricka Roeck, which he called, "very nice."<sup>47</sup> The German films added to Silverman's popularity with the men, leading Major Helmut Knoll to comment, "The prisoners of war seem particularly appreciative of such a picture and as a result considerable good will has been created between the prisoners and the Assistant Executive Officer by this one effort."<sup>48</sup>

No one could dispute the popularity of movies among the prisoners. Once the film section of the Intellectual Diversion Program was implemented in the late summer 1945, Fort Robinson PW Camp Commander Colonel Arthur Blain wrote a memo to the commanding general of the Seventh Service Command in Omaha, stating that a sufficient number of "standard 16mm motion picture projectors" were now under the ownership of the PW Fund to carry out the "provisions of the Movie Program." However, building space continued to be a problem. "The only building at this Camp available for showing of Movies is a converted Recreation Hall, which will only seat 220 persons. For this reason, it has been necessary to hold from 10 to 12



showings of each film shown and holding of film for approximately 5 days.<sup>49</sup> As attending films was not mandatory, this indicates how useful film could be in re-educating the prisoners.

Thompson also wrote of attending films, although he undoubtedly went to the army post theatre since it was forbidden for Americans and the German prisoners to attend films together. "I have just returned from the theatre, saw the picture 'The Clock' with Judy Garland," he wrote to his parents on April 10, 1945. "Although it did not appeal to me as a picture with a great deal of meat to it, yet there was enough simple good humaneness about it to make it quite enjoyable. It is not often that such a picture appears in war time; much of the subject matter concerns itself with war drama and war heroism, outworn long ago as far as the serviceman is concerned."<sup>50</sup>

War dramas were a prevalent genre in America, and many were included on the "approved" list by the Special Projects Division. War movies emphasized the difference between American and German ideology, often portraying American soldiers exhibiting patriotism and the Germans acting out of blind loyalty. *The Story of G.I. Joe*, a film biography of war correspondent Ernie Pyle, demonstrated such principles. But even more

compelling was *The Sullivans*, a 1944 film depicting the story of five self-sacrificing brothers killed during the Battle of Guadalcanal. The film emphasized disobeying illogical or erroneous commands as four brothers refused to heed an "abandon ship" order while attempting to rescue the fifth brother, who was trapped in the ship's sick bay. The rescue attempt did not succeed. The film summary ended with, "The boys died as they had lived—the five of them together," a sentiment intended to emphasize the American ideology of noble self-sacrifice and the ability to think independently of military orders when they would jeopardize a comrade.<sup>51</sup> These were ideas the Special Projects Division considered key to reversing the effects of German military psychological brainwashing. Other war films on the "approved" list included *Gung-Ho*, *So Proudly We Hail*, and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.

One war-based series in particular found favor among PW camps. Frank Capra wrote *Why We Fight* while a major in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. The Army chief of staff, Gen. George C. Marshall, commissioned the film to help explain the government's policy to America's armed troops. The film, attendance mandatory, was shown at Fort Robinson with "remarkable results." According to Thompson, after the prisoners were told that



Varista, the prisoners' vaudeville troupe, entertained both prisoners and the American camp staff. The audience at this performance in Varista Hall, which doubled as the movie theater, includes Dorschel, left center, sitting beside Capt. Jason Silverman, the camp's popular assistant executive officer. NSHS RG3897-30

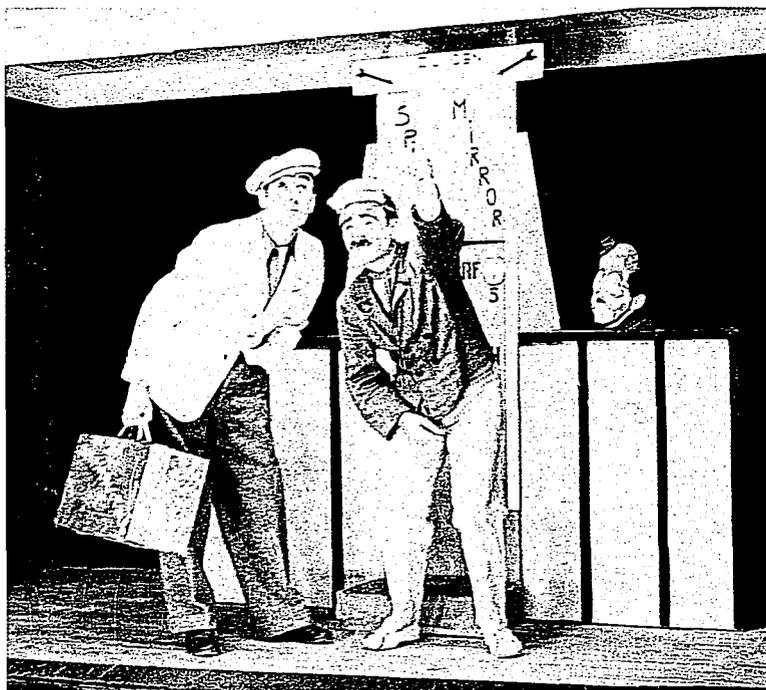
*Why We Fight* had also been shown to American personnel, "they were astounded at the reality with which the Americans approached the question of War in Europe."<sup>52</sup>

One of the Idea Factory screeners, Oskar Wintergerst, analyzed the series and came to a different conclusion: "The documentary film serves the prisoners as finger pointing to a future which will be hard but nevertheless worth living for, and it will educate them to become valid members in the community of nations." However, Wintergerst doubted that pro-Nazis would be affected by the Capra series. He argued that different cultures simply viewed film in different ways. Whereas Americans might view marching storm troopers with a mixture of fear and amusement because

visit to Fort Slocum, New York, for the re-education conference, Thompson had purchased the film at Macy's Department Store with money from the canteen fund. He showed it to the prisoners at Fort Robinson "with remarkable effect. I think the \$18.50 is completely worth its expenditure." Thompson also wanted to show two other films, the *Battle of Britain* and the *Battle of Russia*, that he hoped would elicit similar responses.<sup>54</sup>

The Special Projects Division had goals for the film program that were more intellectual and less emotional. A May 8, 1945, Special Projects Division memo discussed the criteria a film shown to prisoners should meet: "Emphasis should be placed on subjects which give a true picture of United States history and traditions, the growth and

development of American democratic institutions, the great industrial and natural powers and resources of this country and American cultural achievements." A catalogue of more than six thousand films, classified according to subject headings, accompanied the memo. The Provost Marshal General had already drawn up a preliminary list, although none of the films had been officially screened for content. Among the more than fifteen approved subjects were: Biography: American Statesmen Series; Civics and Patriotism; Economics and Business; Labor and Labor Relations; General; Education; United States—Travel; U.S. Government Activities; Religion and Ethics;



Two Varista actors performing a skit—possibly a bilingual one, judging from the set decoration. NSHS RG3897-32

they simply did not understand blind loyalty to fanaticism, the scenes would excite loyal Germans. Since the Capra series was produced primarily for an audience of American soldiers Wintergerst did not believe it would change the German mindset. The series was "intended to arouse fear of the Nazi demon, rather than illuminate the inevitable hopelessness of the Nazi pipe dream."<sup>53</sup>

Although Thompson did not elaborate on his explanation of how the prisoners at Fort Robinson reacted to scenes of Nazi parades, he did believe they had responded favorably to other aspects of the films. The Capra series continued to be one of the frequently shown productions, as did another popular film, *The Defeat of Germany*. During his

U.S. History and Current Events, and American Literature.<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately, such films did not enjoy the large following that the Special Projects Division hoped for. Dorschel wrote in his diary on August 30, 1945, "A film *Life in America*. Very good, but unfortunately, not too many visiting films of that kind." Dorschel also mentions "three excellent films: *Courage*, *Mr. Penn*, and *Prelude to War*," films of the War Department.<sup>56</sup> While Dorschel, a progressive anti-Nazi and leader in the re-education efforts, attended these films, it appeared that many prisoners did not. The Special Project Division's disregard for the average prisoners' interest in popular movies probably made the film program

less effective than they had hoped. Since attendance was voluntary, Dorschel's diary suggests that many prisoners were not interested in "intellectual" movies.

However, attendance at showings of one group of films was mandatory—the Nazi atrocity films. After the defeat of Germany and the subsequent unveiling of the re-education program to the public, the Special Projects Division decided the atrocity films could be used as a lesson in "collective guilt" as well as a tool of re-education. The prisoners at Fort Robinson were aware of the films before they arrived. "As yet we have no news of Atrocity Films, but expect to have them in short while," Thompson wrote in June 1945. "Most of the internees await with anxiety their arrival and showing. News that other camps have already had opportunity of seeing them disturbs them no end, for they fear they shall be left out of the program."<sup>57</sup>

The films arrived a month later on July 31, 1945. Dorschel writes, "Showing a film from a *Konzentrationslager*. The film made a deep impression on the POWs."<sup>58</sup> But for some prisoners the Nazi ideology ran deep, and they refused to believe films showed what was claimed. Some were convinced the bodies of Jews killed by the Nazis were actually East Indians killed by the British.<sup>59</sup> Understandably, many prisoners might have refused to believe the films simply because they could not digest the fact that their own country and people were responsible for such atrocities.

The films received mixed reactions from other camps across the country. At a viewing of the films at Halloran General Hospital in New York, "a few men held handkerchiefs over their eyes, and one sat with bowed head and with hands tightly covering his ears for most of the film. The majority, however, remained outwardly unmoved." Some reacted with horror and shame, demonstrating their outrage by burning their uniforms, as at Camp Butner, North Carolina. Others voluntarily raised funds to give to the survivors of the concentration camps.<sup>60</sup> But the sheer horror of the films could not convince even some Americans. A guard at Camp Belle Glade in Florida told PW Horst Finke, "Don't believe that baloney." The Office of the Provost Marshal General took a survey of more than twenty thousand prisoners preparing for repatriation to ascertain what influence the films had. Only 36 percent of those surveyed believed the facts in the atrocity films were true.<sup>61</sup>

The popularity of the offerings of the film section of the Intellectual Diversion Program far surpassed any other aspect of the re-education

effort in PW camps throughout the country. Thompson called it "a worthy attempt to bring to the Prisoner of War a type of movie program which would show America in its true light on the one hand, and which would give him a rounded program of entertainment and experience on the other." But Thompson also believed it was "too little and too late." He cited several deficiencies in the program, including the difficulty in showing films in branch camps as well as in the main camps. Branch camp showings were infrequent not only because of their distance from the main camp, but "also in the interest and attention they received from the base camps. And, these were the camps, these were the men who most deserved and needed such relaxation, entertainment and education."<sup>62</sup>

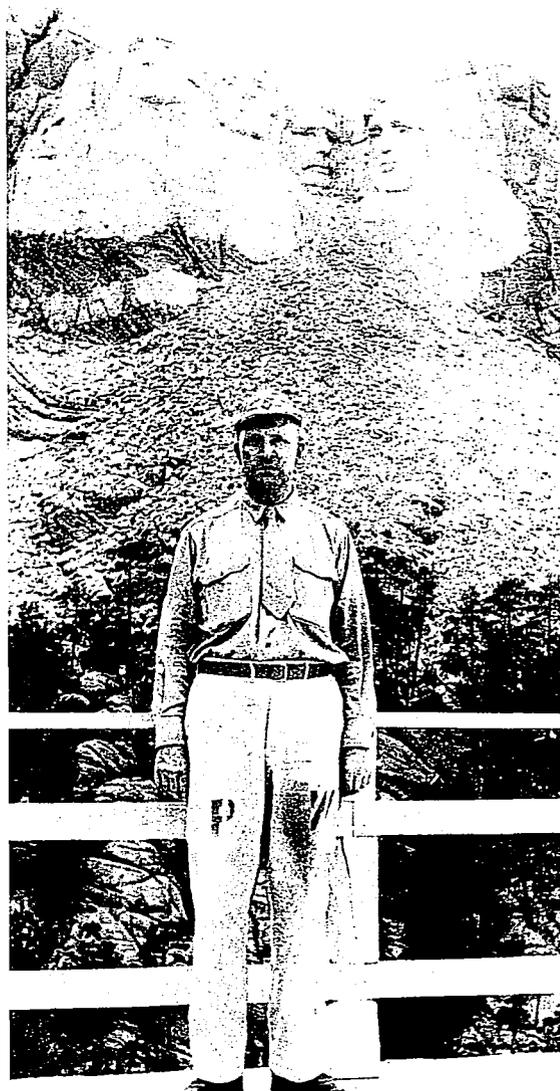
The language barrier posed another problem. Thompson acknowledged that the average prisoner had a good command of simple everyday English, but conversational language often was beyond them, making it difficult to follow the movies. "True, action often spoke the words as loudly as did the characters," Thompson wrote, "but this was the exception rather than the rule. Thereby, it was discovered that much of the 'meat' of the story went far over their heads and was missed, with the result that the moral value of the picture was lost."<sup>63</sup>

Other problems plaguing the film program included the lack of funds to buy sufficient film projectors. The machines often broke down and replacement parts were hard to come by. In regions with sweltering summers, it was difficult for the prisoners to sit through a movie in the heat. At Fort Robinson, summers were hot and dry. Thompson wrote of prisoners who would often "sit through a movie in. . .swimming trunks, and often less than that." When his two hours of entertainment were through, he often wondered whether such punishment were worth the price he paid "both in canteen checks and heat fatigue." The fragility of the film itself also was cause for concern. After multiple showings, German-language films loaned by the YMCA often had become badly damaged, and those on the West Coast, who received the films last, were usually very disappointed in the films' physical quality.<sup>64</sup> While Thompson's experience derives mostly from Fort Robinson, he also participated in the School for Democracy at Fort Eustis and was able to gather information from other assistant executive officers and prisoners from camps around the United States.

Whether or not the film program stimulated democratic thinking among German prisoners is



Alfred Thompson, assistant executive officer of the re-education program, was critical of films chosen by pro-Nazi camp spokesman Harry Heunmoerder, who selected movies Thompson said left a negative impression on the prisoners. NSHSRG2725-26



Wolfgang Dorschel, the "PW" stenciled on his trousers clearly identifying him as a prisoner of war, stands in front of Mt. Rushmore. The occasion was an outing to South Dakota. In his diary Dorschel called Gutzon Borglum's huge carving "the shrine of democracy." NSHS RG3897-38

hard to calculate. Other than the survey on the atrocity films, no studies of the film program itself were ever undertaken. Yet, according to the Office of the Provost Marshal General, between June 15, 1945, and January 31, 1946, a total of 8,243,035 admissions were recorded. On average, every prisoner saw thirty feature films. The program also generated money for the Central Prisoner of War Fund, bringing in a total of more than 1.2 million dollars.<sup>65</sup> It was obvious the film program was wildly popular with the prisoners. If some of those figures were more representative of the feature film programs churned out by Hollywood than the

*On average, every prisoner saw thirty feature films. . . It was obvious the film program was wildly popular.*

"intellectual" movies, the Provost Marshal General's office did not distinguish between the two.

Wolfgang Dorschel and Alfred Thompson worked closely together on the Intellectual Diversion Program and their friendship carried on well after World War II. The two attended a PW reunion at Fort Robinson in 1987. Both provided the Fort with invaluable materials, including lesson plans from the Intellectual Diversion Program and personal mementos from other former PWs held at Fort Robinson. Dorschel made the trip to Fort Robinson a total of three times. But the first was the most memorable. "Friday when I came back... for the first time in 42 years, I looked up at the buttes," Dorschel said. "My first impression was it was like being home again."<sup>66</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, Diary entry, Feb. 25, 1945, Wolfgang Dorschel File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Thompson, *Prisoners on the Plains: The German POW Camp at Atlanta* (Holdrege: Phelps County Historical Society, 1993), 236-37.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. War Department, Seventh Service Command Publication, *Handbook on Facilities of Posts, Camps and Stations*, Aug. 31, 1945, PW Camp Buildings File, Fort Robinson Museum, Crawford, Nebr., 220.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American Century: 1900-1948*. (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 2002), 111-12.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Provost Marshal General, Special Projects Division, "Field Service Camp Survey: Prisoner of War Camp Spokesman." Camp Inspection Reports File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Austrian Prisoners of War, trans. Alfred A. Thompson, "Letter to the War Department in Washington, USA" Camp Administration File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 183.

<sup>8</sup> "Austrian Prisoners of War," trans. Alfred A. Thompson, "Letter to the War Department in Washington, USA" Camp Administration File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Buecker, "Nazi Influence at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp during World War II," *Nebraska History* 73:1 (Spring 1992): 35.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Provost Marshal General, "Report of Visit to Camp, Prisoner of War Division, Provost Marshal General's Office, Dec. 19-21, 1943,"; Legation of Switzerland, "Visit to Prisoner of War Camp by Mr. Rudolph Fischer, Feb. 21-22, 1944,"; Office of Provost Marshal General, Special War Problems Division, "Visit to Prisoner of War Camp Memo, June 21, 1944." All in Camp Inspection Reports File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>11</sup> Headquarters, Fort Robinson PW Camp, "Memo to Headquarters RE: Transfer of Prisoner of War, July 12, 1944"; U.S. War Department, Captured Personnel and Material Branch, Military Intelligence Service, "Memo to Prisoner of War Division, Office of the Provost Marshal General, August 2, 1944, by Colonel Russell H. Sweet," all in Provost Marshal General Documents File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>12</sup> Headquarters, Fort Robinson PW Camp, "Memo to Headquarters RE: Transfer of German Prisoners of War, Feb. 18, 1944, by Colonel Arthur C. Blain with attached letter from German Spokesman Harry Huenmoerder, also dated February 18, 1944"; Headquarters, Fort Robinson PW Camp, "Memo to Headquarters RE: Transfer of German Prisoner of War, February 22, 1944." All in Provost Marshal General Documents File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>13</sup> Otto Ludwig, interviewed by Thomas Buecker, September 17, 1987, transcript, Fort Robinson Interviews of Former PWs, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Gansberg, *Stalag U.S.A.: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 180–81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>21</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur L. Smith Jr., *The War for the German Mind: Re-Educating Hitler's Soldiers* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), 67–69.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 201.

<sup>25</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, *Soldbuch*, Wolfgang Dorschel File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>28</sup> Liz Bennelan, "Witnesses to History: Former German POWs Return to Prison Camp," *The Newspaper of the Canadian Forces in Europe*, April 4, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. John Neumaier, "Former German PWs and GIs Meet" *The Northwest Nebraska Post*, October, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, Diary Entry of Feb. 26, 1944. Manuscript. Wolfgang Dorschel File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas R. Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American Century: 1900–1948*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Thompson, Letter of Feb. 13, 1946. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>34</sup> Young Men's Christian Association, "Report on a Visit to POW Camp, Fort Robinson. July 31, 1944 by Howard Hong." Camp Inspection Reports File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>35</sup> Alfred Thompson, Letter of February 13, 1945. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entry, Sept. 13, 1944.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, Feb. 13, 1946.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entries, Dec. 16, 1944, Jan. 5, Jan. 21, Feb. 10, 1945.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entry, March 18, 1944.

<sup>40</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Gansberg, *Stalag USA*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 108–109.

<sup>46</sup> Office of Provost Marshal General, Special Projects Division, "Memorandum for Director, Prisoner of War Special Projects Division: Report on Field Service Visit to Prisoner of War Camp, Fort Robinson, Nebraska, 14–15 February 1945, by Major Paul A. Neuland," Camp Inspection Reports File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>47</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entries, Feb. 16, 1944, Mar. 31, 1945.

<sup>48</sup> Office of Provost Marshal General, Special Projects Division, "Memorandum to Chief Prisoner of War Branch: Report on Intellectual Diversion Program, Prisoner of War Camp, Fort Robinson, 27 January 1945 by Major Helmut J. Knoll," Camp Inspection Reports File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>49</sup> Headquarters, Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp, "Memo to Commanding General, Seventh Service Command, RE: Motion Picture Equipment P.O.W. by Arthur C. Blain," Mar. 2, 1945. Camp Administration File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>50</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, April 10, 1945. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>51</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, June 30, 1945. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>53</sup> Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, June 30, 1945. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>55</sup> Office of the Provost Marshal General, Headquarters Army Service Forces, Special Projects Division, "Prisoner of War Special Projects Letter No. 11," Special Projects Letter File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>56</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entry, Aug. 30, 1945.

<sup>57</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, June 30, 1945. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>58</sup> Wolfgang Dorschel, diary entry, July 31, 1945.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas R. Buecker, "Nazi Influence at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp during World War II," 39.

<sup>60</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 210.

<sup>61</sup> Robert D. Billinger, Jr., *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 159.

<sup>62</sup> Alfred Thompson to parents, Feb. 13, 1946. Alfred Thompson Correspondence File, Fort Robinson Museum.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 210–11.

<sup>66</sup> Tom Allan, "World War II POWs Return to Fort Robinson: Freedom Improves Germans' View of Nebraska." *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 1987.