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Article Title: Letters from Home: Prisoner of War Mail at the Fort Robinson Camp during World War II

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Article Summary: A 1943 envelope illustrates the long and complicated process of sending and receiving mail between Nazi Germany and the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp in Nebraska.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Wolfgang Dorschel, Dietrich Kohl, Kurt Koehler, Fridrich “Fritz” Essenwein, Hans Klaus, Karl Deyhle

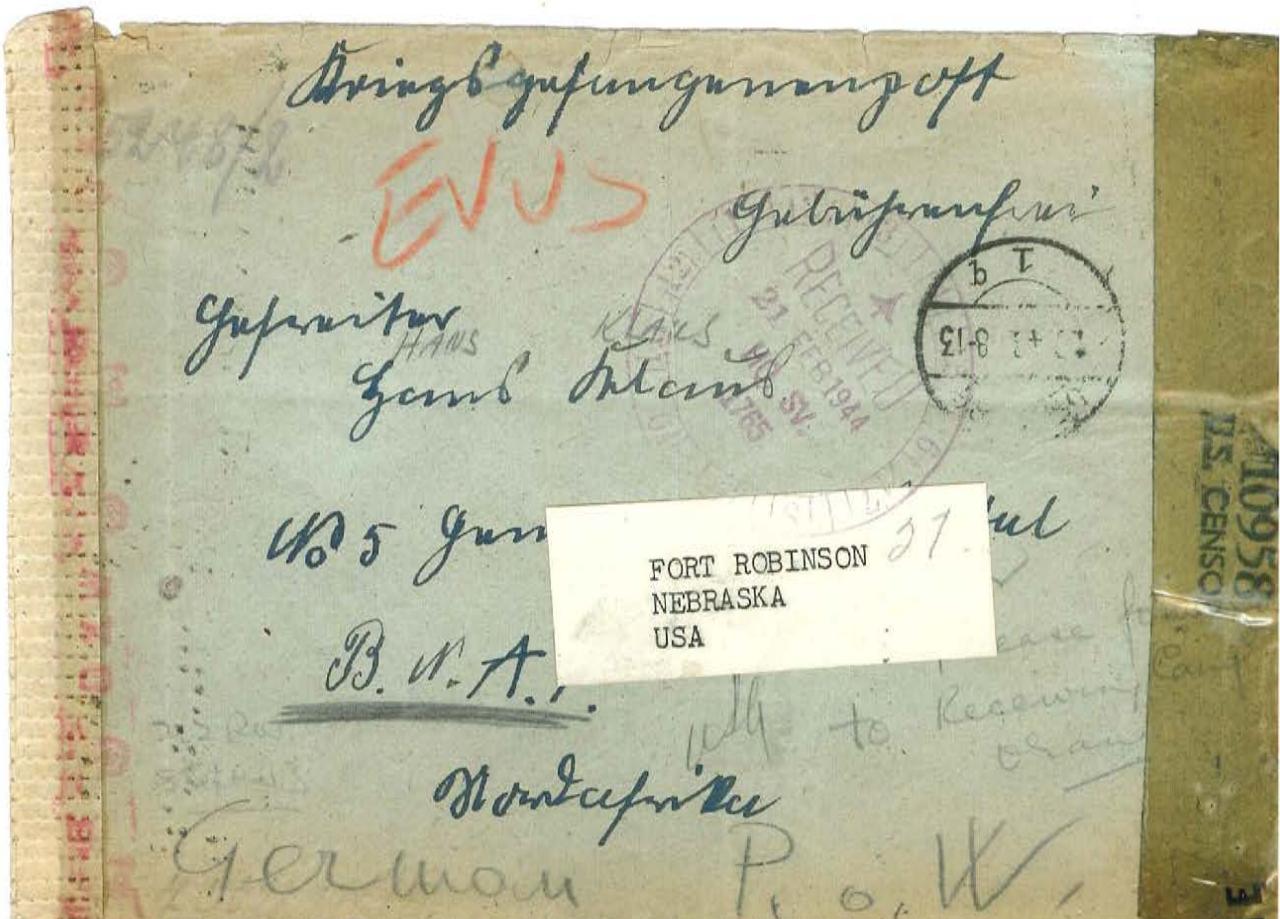
Nebraska Place Names: Fort Robinson

Keywords: Geneva Convention (1929), censors, Swiss Red Cross

Photographs / Images: envelope mailed from Germany in 1943 to North Africa and forwarded to New York City before reaching Fort Robinson, Wolfgang Dorschel, Dietrich Kohl, standard postcard provided by the army’s Provost Marshal General, both sides of a seasonal postcard sent by Fritz Essenwein in 1944, Essenwein at Fort Robinson, interior and exterior of a letter form sent by Kurt Koehler in 1944, standard information postcard reporting the health and Fort Robinson mailing address of Karl Deyhle in 1943



Letters from Home Prisoner of War Mail at the



Mailed from Germany in 1943, this envelope traveled to North Africa and New York City before reaching Fort Robinson, Nebraska, six months later. It bears the marks of both German and American censors. NSHS 11055-2710

Fort Robinson Camp during World War II

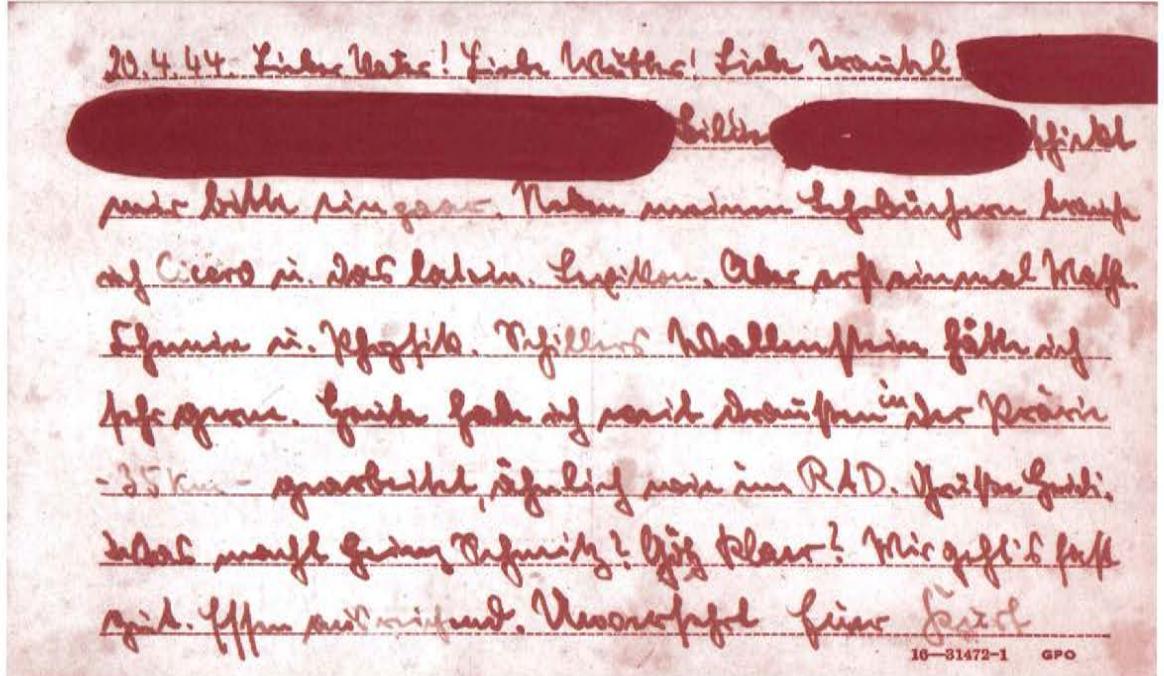
BY THOMAS R. BUECKER

One aspect of military life all soldiers looked forward to was receiving mail from family members and friends at home. The prompt and regular receipt of mail during wartime presented logistical problems that naturally caused delay in delivery. In the case of mail service between belligerent nations for enemy-held prisoners of war, delay was compounded due to other obvious complications. The Nebraska State Historical Society recently acquired a postal cover from a stamp dealer in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. At first glance, it appears to be nothing more than an envelope used during World War II to send a letter from a private citizen in Germany to a soldier of the Reich held as a prisoner of war in North Africa. After further analysis, the envelope (unfortunately minus the letter) tells the story of mail delivery from Germany to North Africa, to New York City, and finally reaching its addressee at Fort Robinson in northwestern Nebraska.

During the Second World War, some 430,000 Axis prisoners of war (PWs) were shipped to America, where they were confined in 155 base camps. Initially, over two hundred thousand German and Italian soldiers were captured when all Axis forces surrendered in North Africa. Tens of thousands of others were captured and likewise transported stateside after the Normandy Invasion. The purpose of bringing enemy combatants thousands of miles overseas was to supplement the depleted home front labor force, particularly to help with agricultural work. One of the base camps built for German prisoners of war was at Fort Robinson, an army remount depot near Crawford.¹



Wolfgang Dorschel kept a remarkable record of letters and parcels he received as a prisoner at Fort Robinson. He is pictured seated before the same painted flowerpot backdrop used for all of the first PW photos taken at Fort Robinson.
NSHS RG3897-7



The army's Provost Marshal General provided prisoners with standard postcards for shorter messages. Censor deletions are present on this example. NSHS RG1517AM

The issue of proper care and rights of captured military prisoners fell under provisions of the 1929 Geneva Convention, signed by many nations including the United States, Germany, and Italy. As a consequence the Geneva Accord provided the fundamental basis for War Department manual *Enemy Prisoners of War* (TM19-500). This document became the Provost Marshal's "bible" for treatment of enemy PWs held in the United States. Among a multitude of strict guidelines, it provided for sending and receiving of mail between war prisoners and their homelands.²

According to TM19-500, prisoners were allowed within one week of arrival at their first stateside camp, to send a postcard home containing their current mailing address. Each enlisted prisoner could mail two letters and four postcards per month, but only on authorized forms issued through the army's Provost Marshal General. Letter length was restricted to one sheet containing twenty-four lines; postcards contained nine lines. Additional seasonal greetings postcards, designed by the Y.M.C.A., were authorized, particularly for the Christmas season. Outgoing PW mail was forwarded to the district postal center at New York for final U.S. censor review. When they arrived in Germany, letters mailed from the United States saw further censorship by the Nazi government.³

Prisoner of war correspondence had further restrictions. Writers could not make criticisms

pertaining to their care, government agencies, or officials, and could not include quotes from books or use any marks, ciphers, or codes. Letters and cards were to be legibly written in ink and prisoners were not allowed to write letters or cards for other prisoners. All outgoing camp mail was subject to censor examination before being forwarded to the censors in New York.⁴

As for incoming mail, there was no limit on how many letters a PW could receive, and inspected parcels were allowed. However, any mail sent between Germany, Italy, and the United States was not simply handed off. With war being carried on in earnest, an intercessor was necessary to complete delivery.

On May 13, 1943, all German and Italian forces in North Africa capitulated. The Allied powers were suddenly faced with a large number of war prisoners, ultimately destined for internment in America. Axis prisoners were held in large outdoor holding pens to await transport because the process of building facilities for stateside confinement took months to complete.⁵

Switzerland, with a long reputation as a neutral country, served as the go-between agent. Throughout the war, mail exchange between the warring nations was accomplished via the Swiss government. In addition, representatives of the Swiss Red Cross made regular inspections of PW camps and filed reports to the corresponding protective



Prisoners were permitted to send individual photographs home. Dietrich Kohl returned to visit the fort in 1991. NSHS RG3897-14

powers. Switzerland was thus faced with the complicated prospect of mail service between nations at war.

Unfortunately, the timeliness of delivery was disrupted by the uncertain schedule of prisoner transport and distribution to camps in America, information not openly divulged to the German or Italian governments. At this same time, Allied and American prisoners held in German camps experienced the same deprivations in delay and uncertain receipt of mail and parcels.

The postal cover shown on p. 58 illustrates the long delays caused by the extended routes of movement and processing. On August 13, 1943, Helena M. Lorenlof wrote a letter to a friend or relative who was a German soldier in North Africa. On the back of the envelope she duly wrote her return address in Neudorf-Duisburg. Neudorf was a newer part of Duisburg, a heavy industrial center on the Rhine River in west central Germany. As a consequence, it became a primary bombing target for Allied air attack.

The envelope was addressed to Gefreiter (Corporal) Hans Klaus, who served in the Tenth Panzer Division, part of Gen. Erwin Rommel's famed Afrika Korps. Below Klaus's name, his holding camp was written, unfortunately obscured by a later applied forwarding label. The third line reads "BNAF," standing for British North Africa Forces, the area service command for theater administration, logistical support, and care of

Stille Nacht

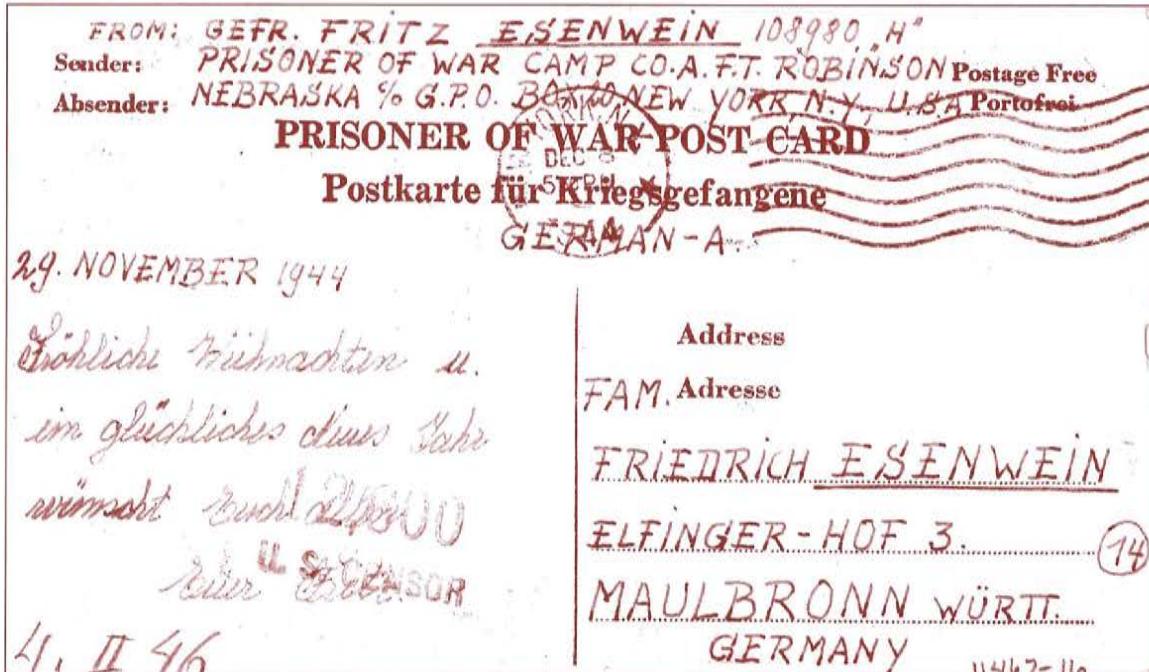


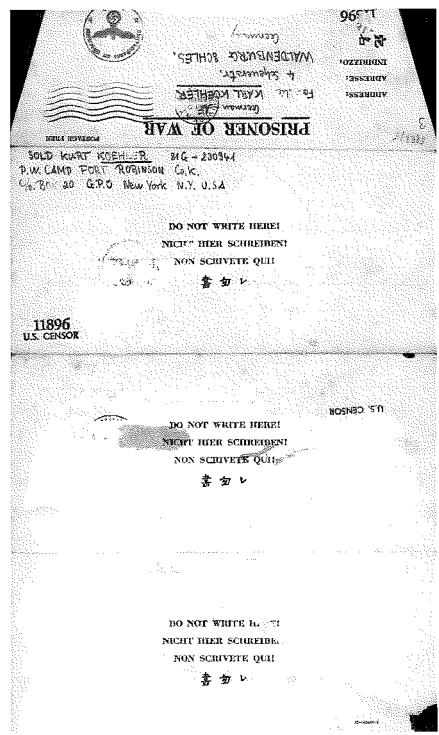
Heilige Nacht

Gedruckt von der Kriegsgefangenenhilfe G.V.J.M. (Y.M.C.A.)



Friedrich "Fritz" Esenwein
at Fort Robinson.
NSHS RG1882-1





**Letter sent by Kurt Koehler
on April 15, 1944. Before
they were sent, standard
letter forms were folded
and a mailing address
written on the back. NSHS
RG1517AM**

FAMILIE KARL KOEHLER
4 SCHEUERSTR.
WALDENBURG SCHLES.
GERMANY DO NOT WRITE HERE!

NICHT HIER SCHREIBEN!

NON SCRIVETE QUI!

書 勿 レ

13.4.44 Ende Mitterl. Lehr. Wah. - und 3. Februar mit 1. f. beginnt Sommer
in vielen Nord. Städ., weiter Westen. In der Lüder. Wiese fanden wir
sehr schwere Dörfer, darunter waren einige Leute in die für 4. Ringe
verpflichtet. Offen waren in den Dörfern, offen standen am Platz davor
die Kauzchen und den Vogelkästen, die alle Vogelkästen in Osterode
wurden aufgestellt worden. Nach Westen sind Lippengänge in Kreis-
f. Lipp. Lippe und Bistum angewandt. Rechte Seite meines Le-
bens. Kiepenkerl füllt sich ganz die Füße grünlich, wenn man in
der Herbstzeit - juckt es sehr - gegen sie. Will nicht bilden groß
Lippengänge? geben wir Menschen in den Händen Schreibstift, da
mit er versteht und weiß, was er zu tun hat. Auf dem Rücken sind französisch, da
wird ihm helfen. Ich denke befürchtet offensichtlich nicht soviel, da
diese jungen werden in den Reiseforst nachdringen, und soviel sie grünlich
finden. Weil ich den aussergewöhnlichen Kontakt zwischen ihnen
und mir nicht erwartet. Aber wenn sie grünlich, dann füllt
sie ganz grünlich. Wenn sie an Grünlich die Ringe aufhaben,
sind sie grünlich. Kiepenkerl geht es mit weissgrünlich, und es ist
alles dasselbe. Ich weiß nicht was für ein Reaktionen habe diese Leute, weil jetzt

MY ADDRESS IS: SOLDAT KURT KOEHLER 81G - 230941

MEINE ADRESSE IST WIE FOLGT: P.W. Camp FORT ROBINSON Co. K

H. MIO INDIRIZZO E: 1/2, BOX 20 G.P.O. NEW YORK N.Y. U.S.A.

住 所：
D. P. M. G. Form No. 4
June 11, 1943

prisoners held there for the British army. Below that, "Nordafrika," German for "North Africa." In lieu of postage, on the upper portion of the front she wrote "Kriegsgefangenenpost" and "Gebuhrenfrei," German for "Prisoner of War mail" and "Mail free," the franking privilege used to send mail to prisoners. Stamped on the envelope is the normal postal cancellation from Duisburg dated August 13; the letter was sent three months after Klaus became a prisoner of war. At this point, all similarity to the normal appearance of a German addressed letter envelope ended, as the near-epic movement typical for PW mail began.⁶

The left side of the envelope was slit open and then sealed with machine-applied paper tape, stamped with a row of small, wreath-encircled swastikas interspersed below the repeated letters, OKW, all in red ink. OKW stood for "Oberkommando der Wehrmacht," the supreme command of the German armed forces. This was the government censor before the letter left Germany. Other marks and notations provide clues to the letter's passage through the postal limbo of war. Written in pencil to the right of the original address is "Please forward to receiving camp at Oran." Oran, Algeria, was one of several collection points for German PWs prior to transport to America. Below the address, "German P.O.W." appears penciled in a different hand. Other unknown pencil notations are visible. The figure "5248/2" is probably the identification of the German censor. Above Klaus's name, the letters EVUS appear in red pencil, probably indicating "Evacuated United States." Eventually his letter reached the states.⁷

The right edge of the envelope was also opened and resealed, with celluloid tape bearing the identification of a U.S. censor in New York. At this point a small typed label was attached with a simple forwarding address, "Fort Robinson, Nebraska, USA." After long months, Gefreiter Klaus had been located and his letter from Neudorf-Duisburg reached its destination. Above the label an official date stamp records the letter's arrival at Fort Robinson on February 21, 1944, six months and eight days after Helena mailed it. Encircled in the date stamp is "SU 1765," identifying the 1765 Service Command Unit in charge of the Fort Robinson camp. Thus, prisoner of war Klaus finally received his letter.⁸

The successful delivery of this letter is only one example of a complicated process that incurred unavoidable lengthy delays in transit. An examination of PW correspondence received at the Fort Robinson camp and Swiss Red Cross visit reports provide further insight into this important component of the

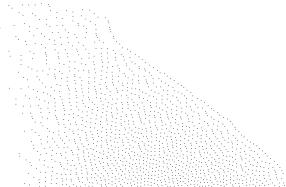
prisoner of war experience. The first visit, made in December 1943, reported general complaint about the lack of mail, and also no moving picture entertainment. A report six weeks later noted that seventy per cent of the prisoners still had not received mail. However, as time went on, stateside mail improved. An inspection on February 21-22 reported that nearly four hundred letters and parcels had arrived during the representative's visit. This was when Klaus received his letter. The representative added that some prisoners viewed the arrival of mail as coincidental with the Red Cross visit. Subsequent reports found the majority appeared satisfied with the mail as received. While some prisoners groused about mail service, others found delivery quite satisfactory.⁹

One apparently satisfied recipient was Unteroffizier (Sergeant) Wolfgang Dorschel, a decorated veteran of combat in Russia and North Africa, who later became camp spokesman. Dorschel kept a diary that included a remarkable record of letters and parcels he received.¹⁰ Until mail service to Germany was halted in May 1945, his mail arrived at an average rate of fifteen to twenty-five pieces per month. In addition to letters from his wife, parents, family, and friends, he received parcels containing books, toiletry items, and foodstuffs that included spiced cookies, roast goose, knockwurst, and Viennese liverwurst, the latter he unfortunately recorded "was no good."¹¹ Dorschel's diary also documents how the wartime mail service improved as time went on. Because of the earlier backlog, letters were commonly received nine and ten months late. By mid-1944, delivery time for more current letters was reduced to two months or less.

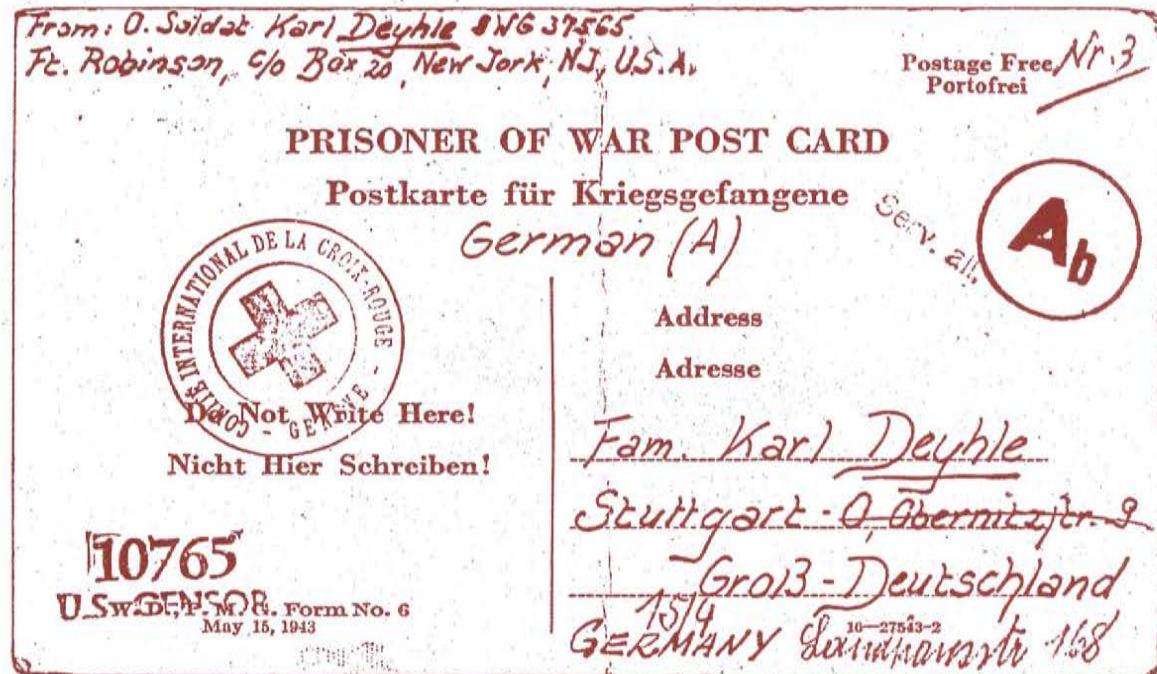
Dietrich Kohl, a fellow prisoner and comrade of Dorschel, remembers prisoners were allowed to write several short letters home while held in North Africa. He too remembered the later speedup in transit of mail from Germany stateside. Kohl wrote home about his experiences at Fort Robinson such as feeding horses, building fences, and shoveling snow. He also received parcels of new books bearing no marks or writing as stipulated by regulation. On one occasion he received a package that reminded him of prewar times: "Since as a youngster I liked to go as an armchair traveler; therefore my parents sent me as a surprise a German railroad timetable. Reading the timetables as a prisoner I did traveling thru Germany without leaving our PoW-Compound."¹²

In the American camps the Germans were continually impressed with the goods and rations they received. Fellow prisoner Karl Deyhle

Realizing the strain it caused his family, prisoner Karl Deyhle admonished his mother not to send him packages because he "had it all right here." That portion of his letter was struck by German censors.



The standard information postcard reporting the prisoner's health and mailing address. Karl Deyhle sent this card home one week after his arrival at Fort Robinson. In 1987 he and three other German veterans returned to visit their former camp. The opening lines of the card translate: "I find myself to be in an American Prisoner of War Camp. Condition of health is: Good." The following lines give the prisoner's birthplace and date, name, and serial number; the camp's unit and place; and the date. NSHS RG1517AM



Nr 3

Ich befinde mich in einem amerikanischen Kriegsgefangenenlager.

Mein Gesundheitszustand ist: gut

Geburtsort und -datum: Stuttgart. 30. 6. 23.

Name: Karl Deyhle

Kriegsgefangenen-Serien-Nr.: 8 WG 37565

Bezeichnung des Kriegsgefangenenlagers: P.W. Camp. Co. 'C'
Ft. Robinson G/o Box 20

Ort des Kriegsgefangenenlagers: G.P.O. New York N.Y. U.S.A.

Datum: 26. November 1943

★ U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1943 16-27543-2

admonished his mother not to send him packages from home. Realizing the strain this caused on his family back home, he recalled he "had it all right here," and wrote them not to send him things. Later he found out that portion of his letter had been stricken out by German censors.¹³ Deyhle sent his first letter home on November 29, 1943, and by that time had already received a letter and package from home. The reason was, he had been in America for some weeks before arriving at Fort Robinson, and was evidently in the system.

Soldat (Private) Kurt Koehler, who was captured on the Italian Front, wrote home requesting his schoolbooks be forwarded including his copy of Cicero and a Latin encyclopedia. He also asked if they had any relatives in America.¹⁴ PW Fritz Esenwein, who was a communications specialist in the Tenth Panzer Division, regularly wrote to his parents and a girlfriend in Württemberg.¹⁵ Besides asking about relatives and asking for books and other items, German PWs typically made comment, or complaint, on Nebraska's unpredictable weather. Some things never change. In a 1944 letter home, Private Koehler reassured his family, "... I have all things of the daily life also here in Nebraska."¹⁶

In May 1945 Germany surrendered, ending the war in Europe. On May 12, mail service for prisoners of war was stopped as Germany faced an uncertain future and the Allies made preparations for repatriation.¹⁷ Later, as fall turned into winter, the population of the Fort Robinson camp, which stood at three thousand PWs in December 1944, gradually decreased. In the spring of 1946, repatriation was in full swing. As PWs departed for home, camps were closed down, including the Fort Robinson camp, which closed on May 15. By mid-summer, German soldiers in America were gone.¹⁸

An interesting postscript might be added to the story. While in stateside confinement, many prisoners established friendships with military and civilian personnel they came in contact with, including at Fort Robinson. After returning to Germany, former PWs wrote back letters that expressed appreciation for the fair treatment received and described the challenging and melancholy situation they faced in postwar Germany.¹⁹ For the first time they were able to send letters from Germany to America, instead of vice versa. And the time in transit was far shorter. ■

NOTES

The author would like to thank Fred Beck, Falls Church, Virginia, and Dietrich Kohl of Lohr am Main, Germany, for assistance in preparing this article.

¹ The standard text of the stateside prisoner of war experience is Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein & Day, 1979). For more on the Fort Robinson camp, see Thomas R. Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American Century, 1900-1948* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 2002).

² John B. Moran, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *The American Journal of International Law* 39 (April 1945): 108-215. War Department, Technical Manual 19-500, *Enemy Prisoners of War* (Washington: G. P. O., 1943).

³ TM19-500, Section III. Letters and Cards, paragraphs 73, 76, 77.

⁴ Ibid., paragraphs 78, 79.

⁵ See Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War*, 2-9.

⁶ Fred Beck, phone conversation, March 3, 2008.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The continental United States was divided into nine service commands for administrative and logistical purposes. Nebraska was in the Seventh Service Command, headquartered in Omaha.

⁹ Reports dated 19-21 December 1943, 30 January 1944, 21-22 February 1944, 21 June 1944, Enemy PW Information Bureau, Subject File 1942-46, Other Inspection Reports, RG 389, Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Dorschel diary, Fort Robinson manuscript collection [RG1517.AM], Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS).

¹¹ Ibid., September 4, 1944. Before his death in 2006, Dorschel made three visits to Fort Robinson. He also collected papers, photos, and other camp-related items from former PWs that he donated to the NSHS.

¹² Dietrich Kohl, personal correspondence, February 12, 2010, Fort Robinson Museum.

¹³ Karl Doyle interview, August 27, 1987, Fort Robinson Museum.

¹⁴ Kurt Koehler postcard April 20, 1944; letter April 15, 1944, RG1517.AM, NSHS.

¹⁵ Fritz Esenwein collection, RG3897, NSHS.

¹⁶ Koehler letter, April 15, 1944, Dietrich Kohl translation, February 5, 2010.

¹⁷ Dorschel diary, May 12, 1945; Kohl correspondence, February 12, 2010.

¹⁸ Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American Century*, 128-129.

¹⁹ Several of these letters are found in the Fort Robinson manuscript collection, NSHS.

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