

Wisconsin State Farmer, May 24, 2019

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Kurt Pechmann, German POW in Wisconsin Maker of Monticello's Veterans Monument

Kurt Pechmann and his fellow prisoners of war huddled around a makeshift radio in the basement of The Schwartz Ballroom, ears tuned to updates from the Eastern European front.

It was 1945 and the massive art deco ballroom, where the likes of Lawrence Welk and his orchestra played "champagne music," now served the U.S. government as "Camp Hartford" in southeast Wisconsin, one of 38 detention centers set up to house German prisoners during World War II.

Pechmann and his buddies kept the radio hidden beneath a pile of coal, and they tunneled their way, unseen, into a narrow space behind the ballroom's kitchen to listen. A crackling voice across the airwaves announced: "Allies advance across Europe" and "Axis powers lose ground."

The war in Germany was drawing to a close. Months later — as Pechmann passed the Statue of Liberty on his journey back to Europe — his eyes filled with tears, said his son, 62-year-old Gerhard Pechmann of Madison. He and his fellow POWs were leaving a country they had come to love to return home to cities and villages ravaged by war.

Like many a German farm boy, Pechmann was just a child when he was first conscripted into the Hitler Youth, and still a teen when he was drafted into the German Army. By 1945, he was 23 years old and had spent two years in Wisconsin as a prisoner — one of 22,000 German POWs housed in Wisconsin detention camps from 1942 to 1946.

Pechmann didn't know his future would bring him back to Wisconsin, or that he would make a name for himself. Sponsored by the friendly farmer he had worked for as a POW, he and his wife would later settle in Madison, where he worked as a granite cutter.

Today he is remembered for creating memorials and monuments honoring American veterans.



German POW's work in the kitchen at a detention camp in Door County during World War II. Prisoners were housed throughout the county, including Sturgeon Bay, Fish Creek and Eillison Bay to help harvest crops, and work in canneries. W.C. SCHROEDER PHOTO, COURTESY OF DOOR COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

“One of the things he was really proud of was that he could come here and be accepted, and that made him a very generous person,” said his son. “He gave back as much as he could to the people in the community.”

Wisconsin's unique and, to some, controversial connection with prisoners of war during World War II grew out of the state's German immigrant communities and its many connections to German heritage. Today, the state's POW camps are a mostly forgotten part of Wisconsin history. But their stories reflect a time when ordinary Wisconsinites forged a kind of separate peace with enemy soldiers across cultural (and literal) barriers. Relationships characterized by trust were starkly different from those experienced by American soldiers held overseas and by fellow U.S. citizens held in internment camps within the states.

During the war years, one-third of the state's population was of German descent, with many first and second generation families still speaking their native language at home. That was reason enough for U.S. military leaders to look to Wisconsin as a place to hold German POWs — that and a desperate need for help at farms and in canning factories. As the nation's military-age citizens went off to war, the agricultural labor shortage grew severe, especially for fruit and vegetable growers who depended on hired hands.

Wisconsin had three times more POWs working in rural farm fields than neighboring Minnesota. The captured soldiers labored side-by-side with their Wisconsin hosts and were largely credited with saving the crops during the 1944 and 1945 growing seasons, according to Betty Cowley, author of "Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WWII Prisoner-of-War Camps." The Eau Claire-based historian's work features more than 350 interviews and serves as a comprehensive history of Wisconsin camps.

Like Pechmann and the farmer, friendships were forged between prisoners and Wisconsinites that endured long past the war and left an indelible mark on their lives. Residents of rural farm communities soon came to learn the German prisoners were not Nazis at all. but young men and boys — who could have been their own blood — drafted into Hitler's reign of terror.

While Wisconsin's German population helped shape reactions to the POWs, other ethnic groups associated with the Axis powers did not receive such warm treatment. On the West Coast — beginning after the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor — 117,000 Japanese-Americans with no connection to the war were taken from their jobs and homes, rounded up and placed in internment camps for the duration of the war.

In Wisconsin, Japanese, German and Italian Americans with connections deemed suspicious were at one point held at Camp McCoy, a military base in Tomah, Crowley said. But they were few in number and never reached the scale of what the Japanese Americans endured in Oregon, California and Washington — areas that were marked as military zones by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Over the duration of the war, the world changed in monumental ways. An estimated 70 million to 85 million people perished, about 4 percent of the 1940 world population, including 5 million prisoners. Those who survived faced homes where brothers didn't return from front lines; villages that were decimated; and the full scope of the atrocities humans can inflict in the search for power.

For Wisconsinites and the POWs who lived beside them, there were also memories of hospitality. Despite their countries being at war for vastly different reasons, some in the two groups recognized a common humanity in one another.

A preteen at the time of the war, David Rumachik, 86, of Oshkosh, remembers his father hiring German men and boys, some as young as 13, to pick 60 acres of tomatoes at his Kenosha farm. The harvest was shipped to Campbell's Soup Company in Chicago.

"My mother talked to them and set out bowls of fruit for them. They were people, just like us, so it was hard for me to look at them and think that they were the enemy," he said.

POWs worked side-by-side with farm families to bring in the harvest.

Marge Lind of Berlin was just a kid when her father hired POWs to help harvest peas on his farm near Ripon. The soldiers were housed in a large cattle barn near the Baptist Church and trucked in to work the fields, due to a lack of migrant workers, she said.

Wartime gas rationing had temporarily reduced the flow of seasonal workers into the state from Texas, Mexico and Central America, and as the war progressed, Lind said, farmers were being asked to produce more food with fewer and fewer workers.

The POWs cut and loaded pea vines onto a truck sent to the viners, where the peas were removed and shipped to the local cannery. At noon, the men gathered at the Lind's dooryard, where lunch was served.

"They were just teenage boys, nice kids that my mother baked bread for," recalls the 87-year-old Lind. "For years my folks got letters from some of the boys after they returned home. There was that kind of a connection."

German POWs first arrived in the U.S. in 1942 after the British asked America to take them, fearing the Nazis would airdrop weapons into England's prison camps. From 1942 through 1945, more than 400,000 Axis prisoners were detained in camps in rural areas across the country.

Camp McCoy imprisoned the worst of the worst. Kept under heavy guard were 5,000 Germans affiliated with the Nazi party's elite SS (Schutzstaffel) and the running of Hitler's extermination camps, wrote Bob Daniels, an adjunct history professor who collected anecdotes from Waupun residents for his book "World War II in Mid-America." The camp also housed 3,500 Japanese, 500 Koreans, and the notorious Kazuo Sakamaki — America's first World War II POW, captured during Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

The rest of the German soldiers — some 13,000 — were placed at 38 makeshift camps located from as far north as Bayfield to as far south as Janesville. They set to work harvesting potatoes, corn, apples, cherries and sugar beets — a critical commodity used for making the industrial alcohol needed to manufacture munitions and synthetic rubber.

In late 1944, Pechmann began work at a camp in Barron. Three years earlier, he had been drafted into the German Army part of a labor force tasked with digging ditches. His entrance into the military had been pushed back, as the government wanted him to finish cutting windows from granite for the Bundestag building in Berlin.

His infantry division was moved to Russia where temperatures reached 80 degrees below zero, said Pechmann in a 1996 interview with Wisconsin Veteran's Museum Research Center. The soldiers relied on the lice crawling over their bodies to keep them awake — and alive.

In 1942, Pechmann was treated for frostbite and then transferred to Italy, where he stole olives to survive, his son said. Within a couple of months, he was captured by British forces.

During interrogation a British captain asked Pechmann if he was a "convinced Nazi." He had spent most of his life under Hitler's rule and from a young age had been enrolled in the Hitler Youth, which he described as "nothing more than Boy Scouts." His answer was "yes."

“What would you do if you hear nothing but one-sided propaganda from the German government?” he said to the captain. “You hear nothing but ‘The Russians are bad’ Nothing but ‘The Americans are bad.’ Nothing (but) ‘The French and the British are bad.’”

Once in the U.S., Pechmann was struck by the differences in life. His first meal was smoked bacon and bread that tasted “like cake,” he said.

As he moved from camp to camp, Pechmann recorded his travels in a notebook his son still has today. They followed the harvest to Lodi, where the men picked and shucked corn and worked in the Waunakee canning factory. POWs on the midnight shift received coffee and chocolate doughnuts topped with sprinkles as a snack,

In Columbus, a truck brought a weekly keg of beer to the camp from Kurth Brewery, Gerhard Pechmann said. To reward the POWs for their work, one farmer served a “feast” and invited neighbors to attend. They complimented the Germans for their work ethic.

The majority of guards treated the POWs like human beings, Pechmann said. Many who took the job were farmers or GIs who'd been injured in war, wrote Daniels.

Gerhard Pechmann recalls stories his father shared of POWs waking the guard when the commander popped in for a surprise inspection, and guards giving POWs their rifles for target practice. The men were allowed to form soccer teams within the camps and in Hartford the POWs watched films, at first propaganda, but later movies starring Shirley Temple and Roy Rogers.

Few prisoners tried to escape, said Cowley, and those who did were usually in search of beer or women. They had no reason to leave, said Pechmann, who during his time as a POW gained more than 60 pounds.

Overseas, it was a different story for Allied forces. Kate Yarbro of Oshkosh described in an interview with the USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin her great uncle — an American GI who was held in a German POW camp — as looking like “skin and bones” when he returned to the U.S.

Photographer John Florea captured these conditions in the photo “Human Skeleton.” It shows Wisconsinite Joe Demler at 70 pounds after three months of starvation at the Nazi prison camp in Limburg, according to a 2017 profile of Demler published in the Racine Journal Times.

Not everyone was happy with the treatment the enemy received as war raged

World War II hero Lt. Col. James Megellas was under constant fire overseas when he penned a letter to the editor of his hometown newspaper, the Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter, upset over the good food and favorable treatment German POWs were receiving back home.

Life for American GIs imprisoned in German camps was “a living hell,” Megellas, now 102, said in a recent interview from his home in Texas. Allied POWs were subjected to harassment, beating and starvation — some died.

“On the day the camp was visited,” said a Commonwealth Reporter article Megellas read from a foxhole, “mess hall crews were baking huge pans of appetizing spareribs while kitchen crews were opening cans of sauerkraut especially purchased for the prisoners. Other German mess attendants were dicing a good grade of bacon for tomorrow’s soup.”

A Fond du Lac beer manufacturer was reported to have delivered 25 cases of beer shortly after the prisoners arrived and made deliveries every other day during their stay. Another

article concerned a POW missing from camp. He was located at a downtown bar, having “a few beers with the local boys.”

Women in the town baked pies and some POWs were treated to sit-down meals by the farmers and their families despite being sent to work with sack lunches. At times, women competed to serve them the best meal, in hopes of drawing the POWs back to continue their work, Cowley says in her book. These acts could have led to charges of treason, she said.

“That demoralized me at the time, and later, when we visited the Nazi concentration camps and viewed the atrocities and the dying,” Megellas said. “I suppose they were admiring them as individuals, even though our enemies had a different definition of ‘humane’ treatment. I knew what they’d been fighting for and believed in, and I saw things differently.”

Among Gloria Lettau’s keepsakes is a black-and-white photo of a POW smiling from behind a snow fence that separated Fond du Lac residents from the Germans. She was 14 years old when she rode bikes with her girlfriends to the fairgrounds and took a snapshot of a man, “handsome as ever, bare from the waist up,” she said. While working at a Rosendale canning factory, the 91-year-old North Fond du Lac resident had gotten to know some of the prisoners as together they loaded peas and corn into boxcars.

“One night I went to work and a German gave me a note with a picture of himself and he had written on the back: ‘you can keep,’” Lettau said. “Because I kept my hair in pigtails, he said he wanted a picture of me as well. I took his note to school and showed it to my teacher and she kept it. I never got it back.”

In Wisconsin, no civilians ever killed a prisoner of war, although there were instances in which lives could’ve been taken. Encounters are recorded of men returning from war and beating up POWs, said Cowley. One man who returned after being a prisoner in Germany took a walk to his local bar a few days after coming home. Inside, he spotted German prisoners sitting at the bar, drinking and enjoying themselves, along with their guard.

Rife with anger, he went back home, grabbed his loaded rifle, and charged into the bar. Ordering all the civilians to leave, he told the Germans and the guards to go against the wall. Before he could open fire, the bartender peeked out from behind the counter and told him the POWs came from the local canning factory. Instead of shooting them, the American GI escorted the prisoners back to the camp.

German soldiers created art in the midst of war

After school, 18-year-old Evelyn Beck’s afternoons were spent at the canning factory on State 44 in Pickett, where she loaded cans of corn onto a track.

One day in 1944, she arrived at work and was shaken to see men in fatigues putting cans of corn in boxes. A sergeant with a rifle sat nearby.

“Since when did the Army take over?” she asked. One of the men turned around and she noticed the letters “POW” emblazoned on his back.

The prisoners spoke English and the local employees conversed with them — but were only allowed to do so when a lieutenant was around, said Beck, 91, of Oshkosh.

The first time she spoke with a POW came after she dropped a can of corn on his foot. Wanting to apologize in a way he understood, Beck said, “I’m sorry I dropped it on your footz.”

“I don’t know what footz means in German, but he started laughing,” said Beck, who died Jan. 22, shortly after her interview with USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin.

The POWs helped the teen with her homework, from world history to algebra, physics and English. As she worked, the men would point to answers and nod if they were correct or incorrect.

One German — she recalled his name as Paul Zeigless — painted pictures, each canvas bearing the same image. Beck believes the paintings were a remembrance of his home: a thatched roof house with green shutters, surrounded by violet, red and white hollyhocks. A cobbled pathway leading to the door. Green trees standing tall against a bright blue sky.

Many wanted to buy his paintings, Beck included. The large size was \$12 so she opted for the smaller size and paid \$6 for the artwork, she said. In the corner, Zeigless signed the painting with his name and the date: August 7, 1944.

The POWs were there for a summer, but their impact on Beck's life lasted its duration. She held on to the painting and as years passed — when she invited her children to choose among her items — her son, Bruce Beck, took the Zeigless.

As the war ended, Pechmann and his fellow POWs were removed from factories and returned to Camp Hartford, where they were immunized and given new Army clothes. Items they had accumulated during their time spent in the U.S. were confiscated.

They were told they were going back to Germany. However, once they reached France, the POWs were put to work under much harsher conditions. They lived on legumes and meat fat and survived by stealing crops from nearby fields, he said.

In 1948 Pechmann returned to Germany, and knowing that his hometown was destroyed, he went to his girlfriend, Emilie, and asked her to return to America with him to make a new life. She agreed and they were wed in 1949.

The Pechmanns arrived in Lodi, Wisconsin in 1952 and went to work on the farm of his sponsor for nine months to pay back the farmer and begin their lives anew.

In the mid-1950s, they welcomed two sons, Alan and Gerhard. The skilled stone mason found work at Madison Monument Co. and in 1971, opened his own company: Pechmann Memorials

Around the time he opened his business, Pechmann began sharing his story with American friends and a Jewish Rabbi he came to know through his work with the Boy Scouts. Despite cultural so entwined in conflict, two became good friends and Pechmann did stonework for the Jewish temple.

“They were both intelligent enough to realize they were thrust into situations beyond their control,” said Gerhard Pechmann.

Along with creating tombstones, Pechmann worked with son Gerhard building monuments to American veterans. The first time was in 1986 when, just before Memorial Day, a war memorial in Forest Hill Cemetery was vandalized. He repaired it free of charge.

More followed across Wisconsin. The Pechmanns repaired a memorial with misspelled names in Monticello, built the Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and used 200,000 pounds of stone to construct the Stoughton Area Veterans Memorial Park. Other works can be found in Elkhart Lake, Verona, Waunakee, Monona, Sun Prairie, King, Columbus, Rio, Plover and Beloit.

Pechmann gained recognition through his craft, which earned him a letter from President Ronald Reagan and an honorary Purple Heart. His son says the medal was “his father's pride and joy.”

In 2009, Pechmann died at age 89, leaving the stone company to Gerhard and his son, Erich. Now in its 48th year, the business continues to create war memorials, carrying out the work the German immigrant was so passionate about. If its work is part of Pechmann's legacy, it is just one of many ways former German POWs left behind changes in the small towns where they lived and worked.

The summer of 1945 was a warm one in Wisconsin, when a teenage Ruth Barrette spent the season picking cherries with German prisoners — boys about her own age — in her family's orchard in Door County.

Meeting the POWs was the turning point of her life, says the 87-year-old Janesville woman. As pails filled with ripe fruit, the boys shared with her the longing they had of returning home to families torn apart by a war they never asked for, she said.

The realization hit, and remains with Barrette today, of the great sacrifices made by ordinary people who were called to pay the price of Hitler's rise to power.

“All my life I have heard talk of the war to end all wars and peace in our time. I still dream of peace in the world for all the brave men and women whose only wish is to live their ordinary, peaceful lives,” she said.

German POWs were just like our boys

USA TODAY NETWORK - Wisconsin

Earlier this year, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin began speaking with people across the state who had memories of German prisoner of war camps or could share memories on behalf of someone who was no longer alive.

The result was dozens of interviews with those who worked alongside the POWs, watched them over snow fences, or had stories passed down to them about the unique World War II experience.

Here is a selection of stories from those in Wisconsin:

“My dad went to Kiel to purchase shoes for the prisoners”

As a child living in Marytown, Sister Joveta Winkel, 85, of Briggsville was told not to speak with the prisoners as they worked the beet fields. But the town was German, so they talked, not about war, but about friendly things neighbors would talk about, she said.

“My dad went to Kiel to purchase shoes for the prisoners, and he paid for them himself.



German POWs build a structure at a detention camp in Door County. W.C.

SCHROEDER PHOTO COURTESY OF DOOR COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

My mother and the other ladies baked pies for them. The spirit was such that those prisoners were almost welcome because of their commonality with small town farmers," she said.

She recalls one time when the prisoners arrived at the fields by bus, they noticed the guard had forgotten his gun.

"You better go back and get it, the prisoners told him," Winkel said.

"_.. They'd get foxy ..."

Edith Kreger of Campbellsport worked with POWs at Green Giant Canning Company near Beaver Dam. While the vegetables cooked in large vats, the men would sit on benches and watch the "pretty girls" in the nearby packing department, the 91 year-old recalls.

"Once and awhile they'd get foxy and we got a water bath from their side while they were goofing off" she said.

"We were restricted and had no access to them, but I recall having fun at the job, though we had to keep busy."

"Climbing trees and singing while military police napped."

The notion of a woman supervising cherry pickers may have been controversial at the time, but Faye Isaacson's father Frank Logerquist insisted she fill the role at his cherry orchard in Sister Bay.

"I checked in the pails the prisoners brought in filled with cherries. They looked young and healthy and happy kids my own age," said the 92-year-old. "I will never forget them climbing the trees and singing while the military police napped all day under a tree."

POW playing with machine gun

George Everson, 90, of Door County recalls the time at his father's cherry orchard a guard handed his Johnson sub machine gun to one of the POWs, who commenced to flip the gun around and stand at attention with it, to the horror of his mother. He was 16 years old at the time.

"I thought my mother was going to go into hallucinations, but he calmly handed the gun back to guard and everything went back to normal," he said. "They were great pickers, filled 20 pails a day, with no stems or leaves."

"It was the first time I ever saw men wearing shorts"

Maynard Chadwick, 86, of Oakfield, remembers being impressed by the POWs at the age of 12. They were the first men he had ever seen wearing shorts.

The "physically fit" POW's were from the Africa Corps, said another Oakfield resident, 74-year-old James Gelhar. His father managed the factory where the men canned sugar beets. The factory is now the site of Seneca Foods.

Despite their work around the public, the POWs didn't interact much with them. One of the only interactions Chadwick saw was between the POW's and the Lutheran minister, who traveled to the camp made of tents every Sunday to preach.

“They were good people. The same as our soldiers. But they were on the other side,” said Gelhar.

POW camp brings “an attraction” to Waupun

In Waupun, a nine-year-old Richard "Dick" Rens, now of Arizona, watched the POW's play with his rat terrier dog under a tree during a lunch break from turning hemp on his family's farm.

About a dozen came to their farm in 1944 to do the work which required turning the plant with a 20-foot pole.

As the POWs worked, Rens brothers fought. One of his brothers was stationed in the Aleutian Islands. Another was stationed in Cherry Point, North Carolina, but killed when he took his friend's place to go up in a plane. His friend escorted the body home.

Such a close personal connection to the war didn't dull Rens interest — or that of others in Waupun. Rens remember he and his family, as well as other community members, driving by the camp to see the men.

“There was kind of an attraction for people to look at it,” he said.

A lot of them did not want to go home

Merle Telloch's father owned Long Acres Stock Farm in the small town of Winchester, just north of Oshkosh, during the war. They also planted sugar beets, because it was a commodity that was scarce, and there was a ration placed on sugar. POW's were trucked in to hoe 25 acres of beets.

“At that time the war was still raging and we looked at them like they were evil people,” said the 83-year-old Oshkosh man.

A lot of the German did not want to return home, he said. He learned that from a good friend he did business with in later years who was a deserter of the Germany Army, and was captured by Americans. He eventually moved to the U. S., Telloch said.

Their country was left in ruins

Norman Irish, 89, worked for a farmer from Bavaria who raised potatoes near Antigo, with help from the POWs. After the war he was in the service as a telephone lineman for the Air Force. Irish was stationed near Munich and tasked with helping the country recover.

“Big cities were ruined, and people were living in hovels. There weren't many men left and women and children were starving, so we gave them the leftovers from our own food,” he said.

He met a girl from Leipzig, fleeing from the Russian takeover of her city. He almost married her, Irish said, but there were religious differences.

Neighborhood kids would stop and jeer

Barb Nett, 82, of Fond du Lac lived near the Fond du Lac County fairgrounds, where the POWs were housed during World War II. Every day, the prisoners would return to camp on a school bus after working in the nearby cannery.

“All the kids in the neighborhood would stop whatever games they were playing and run out to the sidewalk and jeer and boo as the buses went by,” Nett said. “The POWs would just smile and wave at us. They knew how good they had it.”

Lard sandwiches wouldn't do

Ruth Barrette, 87, of Janesville was 15 years old when her family owned a cherry orchard in Door County during the war. She roamed freely among the POWs as they worked and they shared with her their daydreams of dating girls and taking them for walks through the park back home, she said. One POW told her he wished he was the famous big band leader Harry James because he was married to the pin-up girl, actress Betty Grable.

“We could see that every day they brought lard sandwiches with them, so my dad would sometimes bring lunch meat and my uncle would bring them cigarettes and candy,” she said. “They all doted on my little brother, especially the ones who had a family of their own back home because he was very blonde with blue eyes.”