

COMMENTARY BY TAMARA MINER HAYGOOD

*Prisoner of War Memoirs of World
War II: The European Theatre*

IN JUNE, 2007, *WAR, LITERATURE AND THE ARTS* added an annotated bibliography of memoirs by former World War II prisoners of war to its webpage (<http://wlajournal.com/POWMemoirs.asp>). This bibliography grew out of another project which had me haunting the aisles of used book stores and the virtual aisles of bookstores floating in cyber space, snatching up memoirs. At first I was delighted that grist for the historical mill was so easily available. After a year and a half, when I was still finding new memoirs on bookstore shelves, I realized the need for a master list of such memoirs, and the project began. Although the list is still not complete, its present form has grown large enough to be useful and its electronic format enables additions.

The bibliography contains published memoirs of World War II in Western Europe and North Africa written by members of the various combatants' armed forces who were captured and spent time as POWs. Despite these apparently clear-cut criteria, it is sometimes difficult to decide which books should be included.

The advent of numerous small presses has strained my original concept of "published." These presses have released to the world a flood of books often produced in small quantities and sometimes available new only from the author. I have included such books when I could find them, but I have drawn a perhaps arbitrary line excluding books available only online; that is, books intended to be printed from one's own computer. That said, I will confess to having printed several such books. They are stored neatly in three-ring loose leaf notebooks and are valued items in my library. Likewise the thousands of memoirs available only on various

websites are not included. Again, I have printed, read, enjoyed and used many of these accounts. I am grateful to have them.

My concept of what is a memoir has been seriously strained. I had thought of a memoir as a personal account written at some temporal distance from the events described and perhaps a bit embellished for literary effect. So far so good. What about diaries edited and expanded later? Anthologies of shorter personal accounts? Material written by the former POW with the assistance of a relative or other editor? What about Wolf Zoeff's *Seven Days in January*, a lavishly documented history of the Nordwind campaign in Alsace in January 1945 that also features his own activities during the campaign? I decided to err on the side of inclusiveness. I draw the line at books written by someone other than the veteran, even if that someone is a close friend or relative who had access to the veteran as well as diaries, letters, and other memorabilia. Such works are more properly biography than memoir. Novels, however, are included, if written by the former POW and clearly based on his wartime experiences.

Next, who was a POW? David Westheimer, author of *Sitting it Out* as well as two novels based on his experiences, clearly qualifies. He was an American flyer who was picked up by the Italians after his bomber ditched off the coast of Italy December 11th, 1942. He spent more than two years in Italian and German prison camps. Wolf Zoeff is again not so easy to classify. He was captured by US forces at the end of the Nordwind campaign and therefore spent a minimum of several months in captivity. His book describes the circumstances of his capture in some detail but spends no ink at all on his subsequent life as a POW. Again I have elected to be inclusive, but I have estimated what percentage of each book is devoted to experiences as a POW. Another special situation is that of captured medical personnel. According to the Geneva Convention, they are considered protected personnel rather than POWs, but they are included as well.

Finally, geographic boundaries. I am not including the Asian theatres or, in Europe, the Russian Front. Western Europe, yes. Italy, yes. North Africa, yes. Even this criterion proved less reliable than expected. For example, some German submariners prowled the North Atlantic but also visited Asian ports to which Germany had access through her Japanese allies, and some German submariners ended up interned by the British in Asia. Once again I have elected to be inclusive.

My native language is English, and I can do a decent job of reading German and French. I cannot read Italian. While Italian POW memoirs would otherwise qualify for inclusion, this inability on my part limits their inclusion.

Memoirs may be used and enjoyed on several levels. They may be read simply for enjoyment. In this vein two of my favorites are Robert Kee's *A Crowd Is Not Company* and Robert Jagoda's *Senzi, a Woman to Remember*.

A Crowd Is Not Company made its appearance in 1947, originally published as a novel. In a new edition appearing in 1982 the author explained his decision to call the book a novel and admitted that it really was his story and, despite some embellishment, was no more fictional than most memoirs. Kee was the pilot of a British Hampden bomber that fell victim to flak and crashed early in the war. Probably from a desire to emphasize the universal in his experience, Kee does not state exactly when or where he was captured or in which camps he was imprisoned. There are enough clues, however, to indicate that he made the obligatory stop at the Luftwaffe's interrogation center before his internment at Stalag Luft III in Sagan. He was included in a group of troublemakers who were shipped temporarily to Oflag 64 in Schubin. An escape attempt gave him several days of freedom but ultimately failed. He marched out of Stalag Luft III with the other prisoners when it was evacuated in front of Russian troops in January 1945, presumably spending the remainder of the war at Stalag VIIA in Moosburg.

Senzi, a Woman to Remember is, as the title would imply, primarily a testament to the author's friendship with Senzi, the daughter of the farmer for whom he worked while part of an Arbeitskommando in Bebenhausen, a small village in Swabia. Jagoda was an infantryman during the war who was captured in Italy 16 February 1944 by German troops when a sudden shift of the front line left him and his buddy marooned in a barn completely surrounded by Germans. Thus my two favorites to date are not very similar to one another. I do not claim to be a literary critic, but for anyone who would value an opinion, I have designated with an asterisk a few favorites. Nonetheless, I would suggest that readers sample a variety of these books.

Memoirs may also be used as primary sources for historical research. Indeed, I use them this way myself. I remind myself often that every soldier knows best what happened in his own foxhole. Every pilot knows best what happened in his own cockpit. Anything reported to have happened in someone else's foxhole or cockpit is rumor. It is not necessarily false, but beware. Some appreciation of reliability may be obtained by paying close attention to the source of information. Most believable are things reported to have been personally experienced or observed. Otherwise one may consider the closeness of the reported source. "My friend Joe told me that he..." is better than, "Later I heard that..." Of course, the latter may preface a perfectly accurate account of a rumor that really was circulating at the time.

One should also pay close attention to the author's introduction. He will often approximate how much and perhaps what parts of the book are accurate to his memory, what parts have been reconstructed from a combination of sources – typically memory, friends' recollections, and diaries or letters written contemporaneously – and what parts, if any, have been made up.

A factor of uncertain significance is when the memoirs were written. Paul Fussell, whose writings blend imperceptibly from literary criticism to history and back, wrote in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* of his preference for diaries as a record of individuals' experiences of historical events. When they are not available, almost as good are "accounts of events written soon after by intelligent participants." Some other historians have also noted a preference for memoirs written soon after the war compared to those written later. This preference is based on assumed accuracy and makes sense in two ways. One is that some memories will become lost or confused with the passage of time. We all observe that in our everyday lives. I can remember fairly well conversations I had today and yesterday. Many of those from two or three weeks ago are getting pretty dim. The second way in which the preference for memoirs dating from soon after the war makes sense is that the good stories tend to get told and retold, and just like the proverbial fishing story or a bottle of expensive wine, they may get "better" with time.

Despite this common-sense reason to prefer older memoirs over more recent ones, this reasoning is not without potential flaws. Memories of important or traumatic events tend to be relatively sharp and strong. They may undergo less change with time than more trivial information. For most of its participants, World War II was an important event, and for most POWs it was a traumatic one as well. As for the relatively trivial details that might go into a memoir, well, if details will fade after a few weeks, does it really matter if the memoir is written five years or fifty years after the war? Another reason for doubt is that situations that may have been too painful or embarrassing to discuss soon after the war might theoretically have been left out or glossed over in 1947 but might be more fully treated in 1997.

Besides the issue of accuracy, another difference between older and newer memoirs is writing style. Use of profane language, ethnic stereotypes and explicit sexual revelations vary considerably with the time of writing. Specifically, the more recent the memoir, the more likely it is to include certain earthy four-letter words that were in more common use in soldierly speech than in soldierly writing in the 1940s. Various sexual adventures enjoyed by the memoirists are also likely to be discussed more candidly in memoirs written in the 1990s, while those from the 1940s will either avoid the topic or use allusion. Alternatively, the older memoirs are more likely to include, rather unselfconsciously, outmoded or negative references to various ethnic groups or former enemies. Memoirs of any age may include graphic descriptions of the sorts of damage that bullets, bombs, and artillery shells can do to the human body.

Writing style also differs noticeably between nationalities. There are, of course, exceptions, but in general American memoirs tend to be written with a fairly simple style, while British authors are more flowery. Older British memoirs also

have a tendency to include quotations up to a sentence or two in French or, less commonly, in German, without translation. The authors patently assume that any educated person who might read the book will be reasonably fluent in French and probably in German. American memoirs usually include no French and only a tiny bit of German. The German is often spelled phonetically, leading to misspellings of fairly common German words. Memoirs by Germans tend to discuss more explicitly than British or American memoirs the author's feelings about events going on around him. There are a fair number of German memoirs available in English, whether originally written in that language or translated.

When using the online bibliography, you may search for specific books by any unique item in the bibliographic information - author's first or last name, title, key words within the title, even date of publication or publisher. Note, however, that many of the more commercially successful books went through more than one publication, with different dates and sometimes different publishers. I have included the particular publication that I held in my hands while making the entry, and that was at the whim of the bookstore or library. Also included are brief notations about the unique features or strengths of each publication.

In case you are interested in reading about people with specific experiences, I have tried to indicate the nationality of the author, his branch of service (US Army, RAF, Wehrmacht, etc.) and the prison camps where he was interned. Thus it should be possible to search out memoirs, for example, of British Army officers who spent time in Oflag IVC, Colditz. So far I have not included any memoirs by female prisoners, thus the consistent and exclusive use in this essay of masculine pronouns, but I have recently found one and hope to include it in the first update.

I have also consistently used the first person singular in this essay, but Lindsay Liles, who spent the summer of 2006 working on this project as part of a student internship, played a large role in organizing the entries, and William Newmiller is responsible for turning a spreadsheet into a usable web site. Several others also suggested many of the books that eventually found their way to this bibliography. Marilyn Walton, Diane Kessler, and Arnold Krammer each shared titles with me, and Brian Gordon Lett contributed several which will appear in the impending update.

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