Langensalza POW Camp

The following account by Corporal Golding (235590) of the 8th Battalion Leicestershire Regiment describes the conditions at Langensalza POW camp and the killing of Private Berty Tucker of the 2/8th Worcestershire Regiment by the camp guards on 27 November 1918.

"I was captured on 28th May 1918 with about 40 other men of my regiment, the rest of my battalion having been taken prisoners on the day previous.

We were sent with a party of about 1,000 prisoners made up at Amifontaine and Hirson to Langensalza, where we arrived nine days after our capture on 6 June.

We were first of all put into an isolation camp, but the accommodation was abominable. One thousand men were quartered in three overcrowded barrack huts, and we suffered great discomfort. After a fortnight they moved us into the main camp, where I remained during the whole time of my captivity.

Towards the end of July I was put on the British Help Committee. The principal part of my duties was clerical work, such as writing letters, making lists, etc.

Captain Alexander was commandant at Langensalza when I arrived, and he continued to be in office until 9 November, when he was removed by the Soldiers' Council, and Sergeant-major Koch, who up to this time had been a Feldwebel, was elected commandant of the "troops" in his place. After the armistice was declared we never heard of Captain Alexander again or of General Scholtz, the general of the camp.

Whilst I was at Langensalza Captain Alexander was very strict indeed. We had been told that he was well disposed towards the British prisoners, but he allowed no indulgence or privileges of any sort to the British NCOs. In my opinion, he could have done a good deal to improve the conditions of the camp, and particularly the sanitation, which was very bad indeed. Had he wished to do so, I think also that he might have done something to relieve the British prisoners who came into Langensalza from working behind the lines. These men were in a terrible state of emaciation, without clothing, when the Help Committee were able to give them food, and although they nearly all went to hospital, the only medical comforts and food they got came from the Help Committee.

The day after the armistice was declared, Captain von Marschall arrived in the camp. He was called the commanding officer of the camp, but he seemed to have no authority at all, and every order he signed had to be counter-signed by Feldwebel Koch, the elected commandant of the camp. Feldwebel Koch seemed to be supreme, and if ever any information was required as to transport and repatriation by the prisoners, they were always referred to him. Before his election Feldwebel Koch was in charge, of a company of French prisoners, but I do not think he had been Feldwebel very long, and we were told that he had come back from the front quite recently. Koch could not speak English, and he seemed to have very little authority over his subordinates.
All arrangements for transport and repatriation were left to the bureau of the British company, which was responsible for making out all lists, etc. The bureau was in charge of Feldwebel Rost and a couple of German clerks, but after the armistice he was replaced by Sergeant Ludwig, a man who was civil to the prisoners, but quite unable to do the work of the bureau, so everything had to be left to the British NCOs. 

Feldwebel Rost was especially hard and brutal in his treatment of prisoners. In July 1918 I witnessed the following incident.

The prisoners were on parade, and many of them, being cripples, had difficulty in moving out of the huts. Rost rushed into the barrack, and, without giving the maimed men the time to get out, he caught hold of a private who was very badly wounded in the abdomen, and had to walk with a slick, by the back of the neck and threw him violently down the steps. This is only one of the many instances of his bullying; he was also responsible for sending many men to the salt mines who were quite unfit to go there. The full name of this man is Feldwebel Rost, 6th Company; he lived at Jena, and his occupation is students' servant.

On 27 November, at 1 p.m. we had just finished our dinner in the British Help Committee hut, and we heard an unusual bugle-call. Three of us went out. The hut was situated about 15 yards from the sentry box at the gate, which led to the tailors' and bootmakers' shops, and was about 30 yards from the theatre. The theatre contained dressing rooms, which had been put up by the prisoners, one for each nationality. At this time these dressing-rooms were being pulled down and prisoners used the woodwork for fuel. When I came out from the Help Committee hut I saw that the theatre was surrounded by a group of about 20 or 30 of different nationalities. There was no disturbance or riot of any kind, and the prisoners were only going in and out of the theatre carrying pieces of wood from their respective dressing rooms.

After the bugle call about 30 soldiers, with an under-officer in charge, named Krause, came out of the Landsturm barrack, which was situated some 40 yards from the Help Committee hut and about 40 yards from the theatre. The soldiers surrounded the British Help Committee hut and the theatre in extended order. I was standing near the gate, about 6 yards away from the under-officer. He said to me in broken English, "What are you making trouble for?" I replied "There is no trouble at all." and I asked him why the soldiers were surrounding the theatre and our hut, but he made no answer. I remained where I was between the committee hut and the gate, and after an interval of three minutes I heard him give the order to fire. I am quite certain that he gave the order to fire, for I had often heard it given before when at the front. There must have been 15 to 20 prisoners standing outside the hut, and I should say about 30 others round the theatre. When the order to fire was given, I tried to get into the committee hut, but the door was so crowded by others endeavouring to do the same that I could not get in. At least 15 shots were fired in the direction of the committee hut, with the result that Private Tucker, Worcester Regiment, who was standing 8 or 9 yards from me, was killed instantly, receiving three bullets; Private Morey, East Yorks, standing 10 yards from the hut, was also killed, being shot in the head. Corporal Elrod, 6th Northumberland Fusiliers, must have been 60 yards away from the theatre, near the football ground; he was hit by a bullet in the spine, from the effects of which he died eight hours afterwards.
Two of the men who were trying to get through the door of the hut were wounded - Private F. Johnson, 4th Bedfordshire Regiment, and Private Haig, West Yorks - and there were three bullet marks in the committee hut door. Private Johnson told me that when the firing commenced he threw himself flat on the ground, and that when he tried to crawl into the hut he was fired at again by the soldiers.

When the firing was over, the under-officer (Krause) approached Private Haig, who was lying on the ground, and said to him, "Why did you not get out of the way when I told you to go?" Haig said, in reply, that Krause had never told him to do so.

Shortly afterwards Company Sergeant-major Thomas, Somerset Light Infantry, Sergeant. Major R. S. Finch, Northumberland Fusiliers, and I, went to the kommandantur, where we found Captain von Marschall. We asked him if he was responsible for the firing which had taken place. He said no, because he was away from the camp at the time. He was asked from whom the prisoners could obtain satisfaction, and he referred us to the officer of justice, Feldwebel Lieutenant. This officer typed down my evidence, which was interpreted by Dolmetscher Weither. Some days later I gave the same evidence to a judge, a civilian, who examined me, and again a few days after a major from the War Office took my evidence. I asked this officer to forward it to England, and he said that the evidence would go there through one of the ambassadors.

The under-officer Krause gave his evidence at the same time, and he denied that he had ever given the order to fire, but I am quite certain that I heard him give this order.

About a week after the occurrence I saw Krause in Langensalza Camp at liberty and in civilian clothes. I heard that he had obtained his discharge and was living in lodgings in Langensalza.

After the armistice we were allowed to go in and out of the camp, and I left on 12th January 1919.

** Examiner's Note **
Corporal Golding, who is a very intelligent witness, has made a rough sketch of the part of the camp where the shooting occurrence took place, which shows the positions of the soldiers, the position of the under-officer, and the spots where Private Tucker, Private Morey, Corporal Elrod were killed and Privates Haig and Johnson were wounded. He seems to be very positive that Under-officer Krause gave the order to fire.

3rd February 1919

** NOTES - Explanation about Feldwebel **
Feldwebel gained its widest usage under the German military beginning from the early 19th century. The highest ranking Non-Commissioned Officer until 1918, the Feldwebel acted as Company Sergeant Major or Regimental Sergeant Major.

From 1877 veteran NCOs could be promoted to the rank of Feldwebel-Leutnant. This Army Reserve Officer ranked with the Commissioned Officers, but was always inferior to the youngest Second Lieutenant.
Since 1887 the Offizierstellvertreter (Deputy Officer) ranked as kind of Warrant Officer First Class (more NCO than Officer) between Feldwebel and the Commissioned Officers.

There were three further NCO ranks: Vizefeldwebel (Vice Feldwebel, Senior NCO), Sergeant (Junior NCO) and Unteroffizier (Lance Sergeant or Corporal, Junior NCO). The Gefreiter was not an NCO as he had no powers of authority, and was a higher grade of private soldier.