

The Song of Stalag 1A: The Experience of French-Belgium Prisoners of War on the Eastern Front during and after World War II

Holly Harris

Henry Soderberg, a Swedish lawyer, acted as a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) representative during World War II. He stewarded Stalag 1A, located in modern-day Kaliningrad, in addition to looking after the famous Stalag Luft III camp of *The Great Escape*. The Germans imprisoned French, Belgium, Polish, and Luxembourgish prisoners of war (POWs) in addition to over 30,000 Russian POWs at Stalag 1A.¹ Soderberg's collection uniquely features hundreds of pages of a self-published newspaper from the camp entitled *Ceux du 1A*. *Ceux du 1A* centers on the experiences of the men imprisoned at Stalag 1A. Soderberg would collect all the newspapers over forty years—starting with the edition that recognizes his help during the war. However, the Stalag 1A POW condition would remain especially brutal during 1945, the last year of their five-year long captivity, since the men were more isolated from humanitarian aid in addition to being in an active war zone.

Paulin Foret, former Stalag 1A prisoner of war, captures some of the tribulations of the last few months of captivity on the Eastern Front when he states, "The Russians, not far from us, treated us to the skillfully orchestrated concert of Stalin's organs. A rain of iron, fire, lightning, thunder streaked the tall pines of the forest and fell implacable around us and on us. In our very precarious shelters, we waited for the storm to end, then timidly, we came out of our dens. Horrible spectacle that only the imagination can imagine! Dead people, injured people, all around us. And the priesthood of the living rushing to the slaughtered horses in search of a piece of flesh that we fought over knife in hand. Sad degradation of the human personality, reduction of man towards bestiality, due to circumstances."² These brutal conditions were unfortunately more the norm for POWs the last few months of World War II.

In combination with the newspaper, the French-Belgium POWs formed their own ex-POW association "The Friendship of Former Belgian Prisoners of War of Stalag 1A" after the war to commemorate and remember their experiences. Their membership even reached 1,000 people. Distinctively, these POWs had a special transnational bond. In addition to erecting monuments in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and eventually Kaliningrad, they held annual balls, fundraisers, and mass for their fallen comrades. Three key principles animated the ex-POWs of Stalag 1A and their Leon Florence Fund: friendship, faith, and generosity.³ They uniquely created their own songs of remembrance: "Dimanche 1992" and "March du Stalag 1A".⁴ These songs capture the

¹ Georges Smets, "Hauts faits des S.S. sur le Frische Nehrung," *Ceux Du 1A*, November 1967, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1, Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

² Paulin Foret, "Remembrance: L'Enfer de Stutthof, 8-9 Mai 1945," *Ceux Du 1A*, February 1968, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1, Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

³ R. Balibas, "Discours Du President R. Babilas" *Ceux Du 1A*, February 1968, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1, Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

⁴ Emile Noyer, "In Memorium Stalag 1A" *Ceux Du 1A*, June-July 1977, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1 (d), Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

deep emotion felt by the men about their captivity. The sentiments starkly contrast the songs from *The Great Escape* or *Hogan's Heroes*. During their annual days of memorialization and mass across the three countries, they would sing these songs in honor of their fallen friends. As stated in the 1968 Luxembourg Stalag 1A flag inauguration press release article, “we played our famous March du Stalag 1A in perfect execution, with flags in the lead, representing the sections of Brabant, Charleroi, Leige, and Verviers.”⁵ Their songs help bring forward meaning from the past to the present—especially as the distance from World War II grows.

You may be wondering: why care about the men of Stalag 1A or remember them at all? Well, the contributors to *Ceux du 1A* asked the same question. Their response in an article entitled “Pourquoi” underscores the importance of the archives and subsequently military history research:

“The past gives us a lesson, let’s share it with those who follow us even if some find themselves embarrassed and would prefer silence. Above all, young people must know what war represents. Not just the brilliant heroism that so many films have glorified; not just those exhilarating moments of combat, of victory, of liberation. But also, the bitterness of the retreat, the bombardments of defenseless cities, the terror of reprisals, the slow death where the spirit and the body slide imperceptibly into the torpor of annihilation. Let young people also know that the camps had their heroes, those who never capitulated, who knew how to resist asphyxiation, who believed until the end.

We know all this but who will tell them after us?”⁶

The Friends of the Air Force Academy advances this clarion call to action by supporting historical research like this, which allows for new insights into not only the military experience but also the human experience of war.

⁵ Nic Mathy, “Le Luxembourg a inauguré son drapeau,” *Ceux Du 1A*, April 1968, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1, Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

⁶ Maurice Mestrez, “Pourquoi,” *Ceux Du 1A*, June 1968, Call #: MS 25, Carton 6, Box 6, Item 1, Henry Soderberg Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado.