



The pair of German JU-52 Junkers transport planes in the background fly over the Oder Canal near Stalag III B Fürstenberg in January 1945. This photo was among a set taken by U.S. prisoner-of-war Conrad Geier during incarceration with a contraband camera and film obtained from a French laborer and concealed from prison authorities at Stalag III B. (Photo by Conrad S. Geier Jr.)

# Train

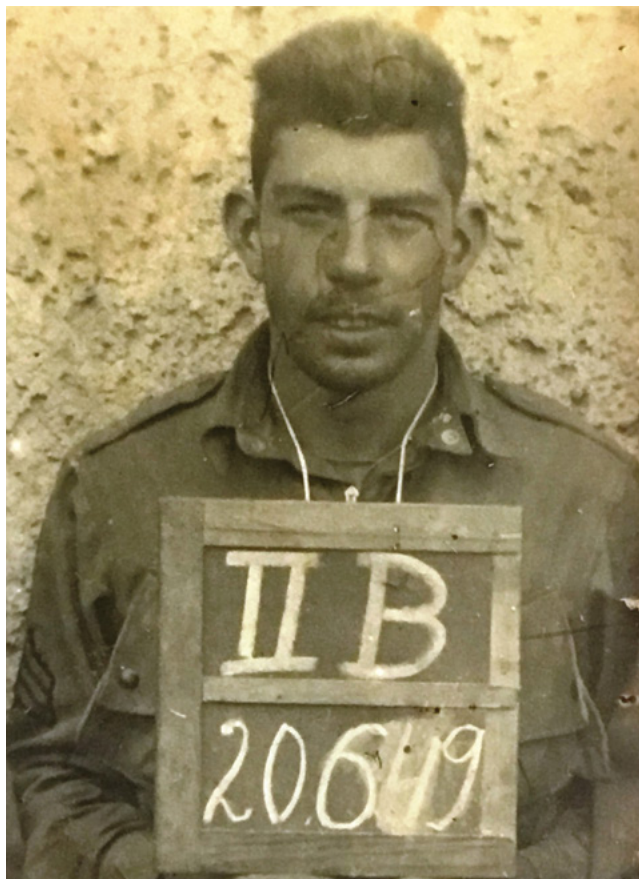
Sgt. Conrad S. Geier Jr.

**T**he late August morning was beautiful—warm, soft, and surrounded by a blue, blue southern Italian sky. Ponies, small loaves of white bread with thick brown crusts, were distributed at morning roll call. The ponies were traveling rations, one per man. A long line of three-abreast POWs were marched out of the main gate of the transit POW camp in Capua, Italy, to catch a train for Germany.

The Germans had flown us from Sicily where we were captured to Capua in JU-52 Junkers transport

planes with corrugated steel sides that shuddered like bellows when the planes were flying. What we didn't realize and what they didn't bother to tell us was that the train we were going to be taking was one hundred and thirty miles away in Rome.

Our meager belongings were rolled up and trussed on our backs. POWs weren't allowed much in the way of material possessions. Our German guards were young, tanned, and tough, fresh from the Afrika Korps. They marched on either side of the column. Once out



Prisoner number 20649: Sgt. Conrad Geier Jr. processed into Nazi Germany's POW camp system in September 1943 at Stalag IIB at Hammerstein/Schlochau (now Czarne, Poland). Mug shot from Geier's German-issued POW personnel record recovered after his liberation in April 1945. (Photo by Conrad S. Geier Jr.)

of camp, we swung onto the main road to the Appian Way, the same route tramped two thousand years earlier by Roman legions.<sup>1</sup>

During the day, the heat of the sun and the continual marching caused GIs to overheat. The troops littered the trail with discarded coats, hats, and various other items that grew heavy marching in the hot sun. And many soon regretted leaving items that later proved necessary in the cool of night.

Under the rules of war, the Geneva Conventions, POWs are not to march more than twelve and a half miles a day, unless to reach food or shelter. Little heed was paid to that nicety. Nights were spent in barns or other buildings large enough to hold us. We slept on concrete floors in our clothes, without the benefit of bedding except for perhaps a blanket, if a POW still had one. Bread and water were distributed at the close of the marching day.

In the pretty little town of Minturno, small clumps of women stationed themselves on the road's edge. Screaming and cursing, with faces contorted by hatred, they scurried like nipping dogs in between the guards to flail us with sticks and to spit on us as we marched by. Others stood back and hurled stones, staggering the unlucky POWs who were hit. One of the POWs who was hit on the head turned toward the women who were throwing the rocks with disbelief in his eyes. Rivulets of blood slowly rolled down his cheeks and dropped to his chest. Groups of women continued the abuse through the remainder of the picturesque town. Because we were the first Allied prisoners to be captured on Italian soil, the venom and hatred they poured upon us was understandable. Thankfully, Minturno was a small town. The German guards did nothing to stop the women. The guards didn't seem to mind the mistreatment.

The blood-spattered, beaten POWs could do nothing until they stopped for the night. The grinding weariness of the long march was nearing an end as the POWs passed a sign that said ROMA. Their sore feet had been pounding against the road for six long, daylight-to-dusk days. The POWs had two overwhelming wants, food and rest. Ten lovely naked dancing girls could have sashayed by without the slightest notice—unless they had trays of food and water. Fascinating that only when hunger and rest have been at least partially satisfied would women and sex be of interest. Survival was the only concern. The POWs were miserable in mind and body, and there was not even a cigarette to bring a bit of relief to the ordeal. Where were the POWs who had dropped out of the march, the guy who got hit in the head with a rock in Minturno, and the appendix attack in Sezze? They were probably lying

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Fellow "Kriegies" (left to right) Scotty, Bro, Grant, Sek, Miller, and Walker after liberation at Stalag IIIA Luckenwalde in April 1945. (Photo by Conrad S. Geier Jr.)

on clean white sheets, propped up in bed and being fed and ministered to and fussed over by a beautiful dark-haired Italian nurse.

As we limped and hobbled through Rome, we noticed a few fingers formed in the V for Victory sign hidden behind coats, covered signs quickly made and quickly hidden. We were marched to a railroad siding where a line of freight cars waited. The guards loaded us into boxcars, which were the famous "40 or 8"—forty men or eight horses—of World War I. Barbed wire covered two small windows high up in either end of the car. Prodding with rifle butt, bayonet, and curses, the cars were packed to the point that we could only stand or sit with knees drawn up tightly. When fifty-five men were jammed into a boxcar, fifty-five loaves of German black bread were heaved into the car, one per man, and the door slid closed and locked. How many humans had passed this way to concentration camps or stalags?

I was lucky. I one of the first into the boxcar, and I chose a corner under an open window crisscrossed with

barbed wire. One could only sit up or stand up. What a soldier chose as a sitting place would be his, and would be his for the days to come. A thin layer of straw covered the floor, insufficient to give comfort to hip bones thinly covered with red-blotched, lice-bitten skin.

We were no sooner loaded than air raid sirens sounded and the sealed boxcars on the siding became a target. We could do nothing. Several cars including the one I was in were knocked off the tracks. As soon as the air raid was over, workmen replaced the cars on the track and we were on our way.

In the center of the car opposite the doors sat a most unlikely latrine pail. This installation in a boxcar designed for animals thus made it acceptable for humans. The toilet seat was painted a brilliant blue. Within six hours, the pail was overflowing; the unfortunate POWs on either side of the pail had no place to move. They either stood or sat in the odorous effluent that slopped over and ran out under the door. POWs that had to use the facility were cursed and threatened by those in the



A "boy dressed like a girl act" staged by British prisoners of war in the tent compound at Stalag IIIA Luckenwalde before liberation in 1945. (Photo by Conrad S. Geier Jr.)

path of the overflow. There was nowhere else to go. By the following day, the entire midsection of the boxcar was saturated in the mixed filth of human waste, and stomped and matted bread and straw. POWs beyond loathing endured, hoping and praying that the trip would end. When the train stopped at sidings, and it did often since we had no priority, sometimes waiting hours for more important trains to pass, we asked the guards to let us empty the pail. They always answered the same. They just laughed and said, "Eat it!"

The waste defiled the straw on the floor of the car and ran out the doors on both sides of the boxcar. Men were to sit and stand in the smelly mess for five and a half more days and three more bombing raids. Allied bombers unknowing bombed and strafed our unmarked boxcars. The latrine was tipped and emptied, its blue seat torn free. The waste cascaded over shoes and clothes, the stench overwhelming. All this was forgotten and replaced by a gut-twisting fear of the bombs and bullets. Every time this happened, the guards took cover in shelters. We were the unintended targets left

to face the hell of war, locked inside the intended target. When would this seemingly endless nightmare stop?

By the third day, everyone was out of cigarettes. A smoke could make the nightmare a bit more bearable. In desperation, Sgt. Cook took out the little pocket-sized New Testament that his grandmother had given him the day he left for the Army and said, "You don't suppose the Good Lord would object to using the Good Book to make a cigarette, do you?" to no one in particular. Slowly, carefully, he tore several pages from the pocket-sized Bible. With each page he read a couple of lines as he tore. Each POW took a sheet, folded it, and tore it in half, putting a half in his pocket for the future.

He cupped the paper and sprinkled into it a few grains of the powdered coffee, very carefully rolling the coffee into a cigarette. He wetted the edge of his paper with his tongue, smoothing it to stick to the paper and twisting the end to prevent the coffee from coming out. Once lit, he took the first careful and controlled draw. "Not that bad," he said. "Not bad at all but it sure ain't tobacco."

But anything would have been better than languishing in this mobile sewer without food or water, expecting to be bombed anytime. Plans were proposed and rejected, and finally one POW who was seemingly knowledgeable of the northern Italian countryside said that he thought there was “a little town called Ala on this rail line that is about twenty kilometers from the Swiss border. If we could get out of the car in the dark without being spotted we might be able to make it. It would be the best chance we’d have for a long time. Once that train goes through the Brenner Pass, our chances of escape would be mighty dim.” Plans were conjured, buddies chosen, straws drawn to determine who would go first. How to get out of the window? Feet first or head first? Better feet first; it would be a long drop to the roadbed. The barbed wire was stretched and torn away, enough to permit a body to scrape through. The train began to slow as it started to climb the Alps. This was the alternative: take it while possible. It may be the last chance before permanent internment in the German interior. Take it! Take it! The final opportunity for freedom. The mountain darkness fell rapidly. At dusk, everything was ready. We raised the first escapee over our heads, passing him stomach down on our raised arms to the window. He poked his feet through the window until his waist rested on the windowsill. His boots gently scraped the outside of the boxcar. He moved the rest of his body slowly through the opening, gave a quick wave, and dropped silently away into the dark. The POWs sweated as they quickly passed the escaping POWs overhead until nine men had gone through the window opening. The last and tenth man out emitted a scream as he dropped; he probably broke a leg or was caught under the wheels

of the slow-moving boxcar. The guard on top of the boxcar heard the scream, signaling for the train to stop and bringing it to a screeching halt. The boxcar door slid open, and we were ordered out. In the cold dark, all the cars were emptied out and a roll call was ordered outside each car.

Several POWs fell from the car doorway to the roadbed on legs stiffened from sitting for too long. They were helped to their feet with a rifle butt or a vicious kick. The numbing chill cut through our semitropical clothing; many took the opportunity to urinate while waiting to be counted. Our semitropical clothing was not suited to the foothills of the Alps.

We shivered and shook in the cold, clear mountain air; we were chilled clear through as we waited in ranks of five to be counted and recounted by disbelieving guards. It was finally noted, after much shouting, cursing, counting, and recounting, that ten POWs were missing from our boxcar. We were ordered back into our sewer and the door relocked. Train workers hammered coverings over the small windows in the boxcar—shivering, we hugged each other for warmth, praying that the men who had gotten away would make it. No one knew that we would be in that mobile prison for six days and nights—a nightmare that was unreal. The idea of being stuck in a box that permitted no exit and no relief was almost unbelievable, like we were animals.

On the sixth day, the train stopped, the doors were opened, and we were “helped out” with rifle butts, kicks, and curses. We were “home,” which was Stalag IIB near Hammerstein (now Czarne, Poland), near the Baltic Sea and sixty miles east of Berlin. Compared to the boxcar, the prison barracks seemed like the Hilton.<sup>2</sup> ■

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## Notes

1. The ancient Romans had completed the Appian Way (Via Appia) between Roma and Capua by 312 BCE. This most famous of the Roman Empire’s military highways left the city through the Servian walls at the Porta Capena—perhaps the only portal in this enceinte that bears the name of the place to which it led (Capua, near modern Naples).

2. The author CSG was processed into the German POW camp system at Stalag IIB at Hammerstein/Schlochau. On 7 September

1943, he was transferred to Stalag IIIIB at Fürstenberg on the Oder Spree Canal, about sixty miles southeast of Berlin. An entry in records at the National Archives indicates that American authorities received word from the German government that Geier was held at “Stalag 7A Moosburg Bavaria 48-12 (Work Camps 3324-46 Krumbachstrasse 48011, Work Camp 3368 Munich 48-11).”