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Autor: Krause, Selina
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Military internment under review

Foreign soldiers in Swiss camps

Between 1939 and 1945 Switzerland allowed entry to about 300,000 refugees. This number included all categories of refugee. A third of them were military personnel from 38 different countries.

In June 1940 Switzerland was for the first time in the Second World War confronted with a large number of military refugees. In their flight before the German tanks about 40,000 soldiers of the French army crossed the frontier.

*Selina Krause **

The country was not prepared for such a huge influx, and the responsible military body was completely overwhelmed. It was because of this that the Federal Commissariat for Internment and Hospitalisation (EKIH) was set up. The new arrivals were first assembled in camps near the frontier and then transported to internment areas determined by the EKIH.

Switzerland was obliged by international law to let into the country and disarm any military personnel who crossed the frontier. In order to prevent such personnel taking any further part in the war our country had to provide supervised billeting, i.e. internment. Those interned were supposed to be looked after, cared for and provided for in the same way as our own troops. This was the task of the EKIH, which also detailed work for those interned. Polish soldiers, for example, made the footpath over the Tomül Pass which links the Safien and the Valser valleys.

Separated according to nationality

Foreign military personnel of each nationality had a separate camp. Most

were barracks with a village in the neighbourhood. They were under military supervision and commanded by a Swiss officer. Between 1940 and 1945 over 1,200 camps came and went. The highest number at any one time was 368 – in June 1944.

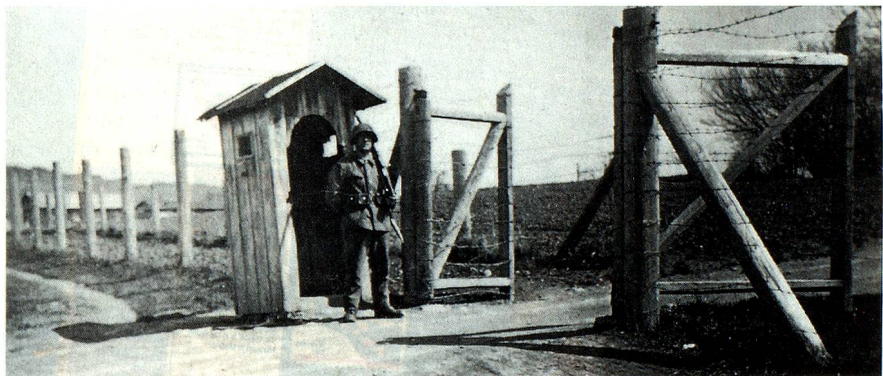
Four specific military events in Europe resulted in massive influxes of foreign soldiers into Switzerland as refugees. These were the invasion of France by the German Wehrmacht in spring 1940, the capitulation of Italy in

September 1943, the allied invasion of Normandy in summer 1944 and the collapse of the German Reich in May 1945. On each of these occasions the number of internees exceeded 40,000.

Repatriation

After the German surrender it became the job of the EKIH to organise the repatriation of those interned. Most of them left Switzerland between summer 1945 and spring 1946. According to international law Switzerland had the right to demand reimbursement of the costs of internment from each country. On the whole military internment should be seen as a positive contribution on the part of our country, even though criticism of camps such as Wauwilermoos (see accompanying article) is justified. ■

Almost forgotten: Wauwilermoos



(Archivphoto: sk)

In the context of the commemoration of May 8, 1945, the name of the Wauwilermoos penal internment camp, still infamous for some but forgotten by many, has been mentioned once again. Thanks to memoirs and other documents written by many eye-witnesses it is now possible to imagine for the first time what this camp was actually like.

Wauwilermoos is an idyllic plateau in the Lucerne countryside. In June 1941 the notorious punishment camp was set up there. It contained 22 wooden huts surrounded by barbed wire and could accommodate about 250 internees. Those sent there had either been found guilty of offences, had caused trouble or unrest in other camps or had tried to escape. Wauwilermoos had stricter regulations than the other camps. Its inmates had less freedom of movement and were not normally allowed out unaccompanied. Although the other camps were for one nationality only, internees from many countries were put

together here – which caused added problems. This easily led to quarrels and put higher demands on camp authorities.

The camp came under criticism already during the war and again after it. And it is true that the conditions there left a lot to be desired. Sanitation was insufficient, and hygiene was poor. The camp commandant, Captain André Béguin, was widely disapproved of. He is supposed to have been over-strict and maltreated inmates. Opinions differ on this, but he did have much to answer for. At the end of the war he was charged and found guilty of repeated misappropriation of funds and abuse of authority. Those responsible reacted far too late to the deplorable state of the camp. It was only in spring 1944 that living conditions for the internees were improved, and Béguin remained camp commandant until summer 1945.

SK ■

* Selina Krause, aged 21, is at the Literary Gymnasium in Lucerne and has made a comprehensive study of internment to coincide with this year's commemoration.