

## ***THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT REMEMBERED IN THE POLISH PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS OF 1944***

*by Sherwin Podolsky*

The XIIIth Olympiad was not celebrated by any candidate city elected by the International Olympic Committee. But it was celebrated by two Polish Prisoner of War Camps in Germany in the summer of 1944. D-Day, 6 June 1944 opened a new battle front against Hitler in northern France. His armies were being pushed back in Italy and Eastern Europe. Yet these two prisoner of war camps celebrated the Olympic ideals with a sport program and cultural events.

The Olympic Movement was also celebrated in the City of Lausanne in June and July 1944. Sponsored by the IOC and the Swiss Olympic Committee, that program honored the 50th anniversary of the International Olympic Committee and included sports and cultural events. Apparently neither the Polish prisoners nor the Swiss knew, about the other's activities.

The Olympic Jubilee celebrated in Switzerland was spread over 16 June through 3 July 1944 and was also commemorated by three postage stamps. (Figure 1). The widow, Baroness de Coubertin, was an honored guest at the celebration. Swiss athletes performed and competed at the various events. Interned soldiers from other countries were allowed to attend events.

It is perhaps the remembrance of the Olympic ideals in the Prisoner of War Camps in Germany that is a most dramatic, obscure and poignant chapter in Olympic history. Postage stamps and postal history created by these camps have spread the story that would otherwise be buried.

The two camps that celebrated the Olympic Games in 1944 were at Gross Born and Woldenberg in eastern Germany. The camps were among several constructed for Polish prisoners after the defeat of Poland in the German Blitzkrieg on September 1, 1939 that opened World War II. The dates of the operation were:

Woldenberg 12 May 1942 to 25 January 1942  
Gross Born 3 December 1943 to 28 January 1945

Olympic Games were celebrated in each camp as follows:

Woldenberg 23 July to 13 August 1944  
Gross Born 30 July to 15 August 1944

Let us now examine the structure and organization of the permanent prisoner of war camps in Germany. An understanding of the conditions will lead us to a better appreciation of how the Olympic ideals functioned in that environment.

There were three types of camps:

1. Soldiers camps (Stalags). The most numerous and largest of all the permanent camps. Used for slave labor, extermination and special projects.
2. Officers camps (Oflag) - Primarily for the Polish officers.
3. Internment camps (Ilag).

In addition, there were Sonderlags (punishment camps), Hulags (labor camps), and Heilags (POWs marked for freedom or exchange). Nationals tended to have their own barracks. The policy of assigning by nationality led to overcrowding and relocating the prisoners.

The Oflags developed organizations to establish an increasing number of social, professional and cultural activities to fill the aimless months of prison time. The intense communal life led to the organization of an internal postal system in the larger camps. However, correspondence from one POW camp to another was strictly forbidden.

The Intercamp Postal Service was sponsored by the Widow's and Orphans' Fund. All profits went to the Fund and the monies were channeled secretly to the Polish Underground.

### *The Woldenberg Camp*

The first POW camp to introduce a local camp post was Oflag IIC Woldenberg, built close to the town of the same name located on the German side of the 1939 German-Polish border.

The Woldenberg Camp numbered about 7,000 prisoners of war, of whom more than 6,000 were Polish officers. The camp consisted of more than 50 barracks, a score of administration and service buildings, and meeting halls, spread over 60 acres. It was the largest Polish POW camp in Germany and almost a town by itself.

Though there were professional postal employees and philatelists among the prisoners, the first postage stamps were issued through the efforts of the rank-and-file prisoners who mainly wanted to improve daily living conditions.

With the permission of the Camp Commandant, the Woldenberg POWs held their own Olympic Games from 23 July 1944 to 13 August 1944.

A colorful program was prepared. (Figure 2). It shows three stamps essays, designs never issued. The cover of the folded program depicts a crowned athlete. On the front and inside of the program is the calendar of events and names of competing teams. The program was folded into thirds.

On the last day of the Games and at the conclusion of the Olympic program, the Woldenberg Camp Post Office released its Olympic Games 10 fen stamp. (Figure 3). It shows a runner breaking the tape at the finish line. The stamp was designed and engraved on pear wood by 2nd Lt. Edmond Czarnecki. The stamp was printed in red, imperforate and without gum, on white smooth Swedish paper donated by the International YMCA. There were 17,580 copies made.

The Federated Military Sports Club issued an embossed sheetlet with the Olympic symbol and six banners representing the six clubs of the Federation - Kresy, Orle, Warta, Lwow, Skra and Wabel. (Figure 4). The embossed sheetlets were produced by impressing the hand-engraved block onto a dampened sheet of paper. The postage stamps were then affixed and cancelled.

All mail processed on the closing day of the 21-day POW Olympiad, 13 August 1944, received a special cancellation. (Figure 5). It was designed by Tadeusz Plonczak and engraved on rubber by Roman Wiczorkiewicz. The date slot was permanent and all cancels have the same date. The design included the Olympic rings on a banner, four bombers flying over the mast, and tanks.

Another variety consisted of stampless postcards illustrated with a special cachet engraved on wood. (Figure 6). The cachet exists in the five Olympic *colors*: red, blue, yellow, green and black. However, shades exist because of the varying quantities of available inks. The green color is the most common and the black, the rarest.

An admission/invitation card was required to enter the special grandstands. They were produced by a rubber stamp and showed the five rings and laurel wreath with a torch. (Figure 8).

At the conclusion of the printing of the stamps, the die cliché was defaced with a vertical cut. One-hundred examples were printed in black and distributed. (Figure 9)

The Olympic stamps were valid until 31 October 1944. On 25 January 1945, the Woldenberg camp was evacuated, in advance of the Soviet forces. The prisoners were forced on a death march of 487 miles (784 km.) through various towns. Much of the philatelic material was lost. The 300 remaining prisoners were liberated by the American Army at Murnau on 29 April 1945.

### ***The Gross Born Camp***

At Oflag IID, Gross Born, three Olympic stamps were issued on 30 July 1944. (Figure 10). A second printing was issued a few days later and can be distinguished by color shades for the low values and paper thickness for the high value. Details are as follows:

10 fen	Indian red	5,135 copied printed
20 fen	Olive-brown	5,235 copies printed
50 fen	Green	4,702 copies printed

The stamps were perforated with a watch wheel and engraved by Włodzimierz Zieleniewski.

A 10 fen imprinted postcard was issued on 30 July 1944 in an edition of 3,025 cards. (Figure 11). Shades and sizes of the cards exist.

A souvenir sheet with the three Olympic stamps in changed colors was issued only on 14 August 1944 and only at the philatelic exhibition. (Figure 12). Nearly all the souvenir sheets were cancelled with the double ring exhibition canceller. In the center of the canceller is a posthorn with a number, representing the day of the exhibition. The exhibition lasted four days: 12-15 August 1944. The souvenir sheet with this cancel would bear the exhibition canceller containing the number "3."

The souvenir sheet sold for 1 lagermark above the face value. The surcharge went to the Camp Fund. The souvenir sheet was issued ungummed, perforated 16 by a watch wheel and measures 143 x 90 mm. 1,155 copies were issued.

There was also an Olympic pictorial postmark. (Figure 13). It shows the Olympic rings and dates of the Games on a banner. This Olympic postmark was a fixed design with no date slugs and was used for the duration of the Games.

The Olympic Committee solved a major problem of creating awards to the winners of the Games. Embossed, uncolored paper medals were made. (Figure 14) The embossing was accomplished by impressing a wood engraving against a dampened sheet of paper. The design featured the head of an ancient Olympic champion crowned with laurel leaves and encircled with the inscription: Olympiada Obozu IID 1944 and the Olympic symbol of five interlocking rings.

The stamps and souvenir sheets were valid until 28 January 1945, when the camp was evacuated due to the advancing Soviet armies. The evacuation march of the Gross Born Camp ended up at Sandbostel, after nearly 400 miles. Although the postal employees tried to carry their equipment and supplies with them, much of it was lost.

### ***Conclusion***

The stamps of Gross Born and Woldenberg are listed in the Michel Deutschland-Spezial catalog. The stamps, their varieties, and the postal stationery are listed in other specialized catalogs. Because of their local, internet post nature, they are not listed in the Scott Standard Postage Stamp catalog commonly used in the United States.

However, all the philatelic issues are recognized as acceptable in national and international philatelic exhibitions. Collectors of Olympic memorabilia can fill the difficult void of Olympic Year 1944 with these stamps. Don't expect to find them at your local stamp shop. Dealers specializing in the philately of Poland would be your best source. Other sources would include the Polonus Philatelic Society and known collectors.

***Sources:***

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Collection of the author.

## 5.0 1944 POLISH OFFICERS POW CAMP AT WOLDENBERG

### 5.1 Internal Camp Post - Purpose of Issue

The Woldenburg Prisoners of War honored the Olympic Games with a sports program from 23 July to 13 August 1944. Permission was obtained from the Camp Commandant.

On the last day of the Games, 13 August 1944, the Woldenburg Post Office released its 10 fen Olympic Games stamp. It depicts a runner breasting the tape and Olympic rings.

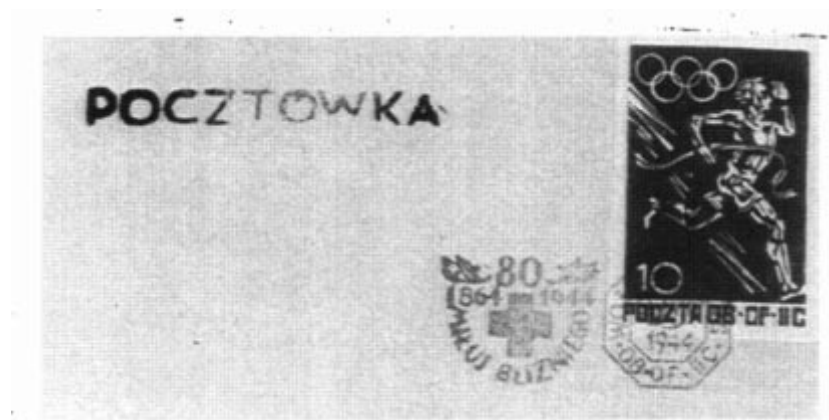


17,580 copies  
were printed.



When printing was completed, cliches  
were defaced by a diagonal cut. About  
100 proofs were made in black.

The stamps were printed on white paper donated by the Swedish YMCA, and previously cut into small sheets in the size of the stamp, 41.5 x 29 mm. Each stamp was printed individually with a band press by the Camp's Post Office Printery. The color is red. Light and dark shades exist.



Postcard with special cancel for the 80th anniversary of the Polish Red Cross.

## 5.0 1944 POLISH OFFICERS POW CAMP AT WOLDENBERG

### 5.2 Commemorative Postmark

On closing day of the sports program, 13 August 1944, a special cancellation was applied to all mail. The cancellation was designed by Tadeusz Plonczsak and etched on rubber by Roman Wiczorkiewicz. The date slug was not interchangeable. The cancellation was used for only one day.



The Olympic stamp with special cancellation, on an admission ticket which was required to enter the grandstands.



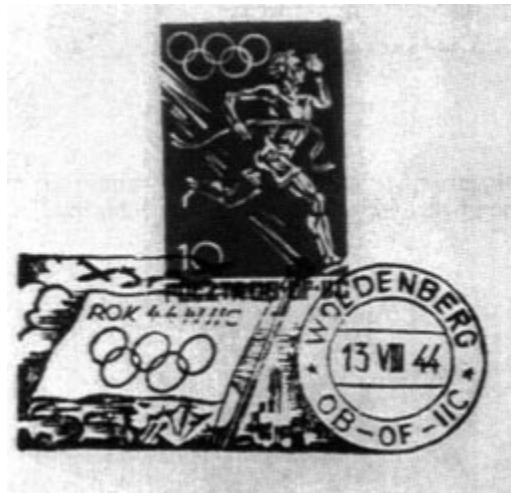
Design showing dates of the sports program, on reverse side of the ticket.



## 5.0 1944 POLISH OFFICERS POW CAMP AT WOLDENBERG

### 5.2 Commemorative Postmark

The one day special postmark was applied to an embossed souvenir sheetlet issued by The Federated Military Sports Club. The Olympic Kings at top center. At sides: banners representing the six clubs of the Federation: Kresy, Orle, Warta, Lwow, Skra, and Wawel. Bottom center: the letters Z-W-K-S, the initials of the Federated Military Sports Club.



Postcard with the Olympic cancel, to a prisoner in Barracks 23a. The stamp (7,680 copies issued) commemorates the 400th anniversary of Copernicus' death. Postcard exists in five Olympic colors, plus shades.



## 5.0 1944 POLISH OFFICERS POW CAMP AT WOLDENBERG

### 5.3 Postal usages

Handmade cover showing correct postage rate totalling 20 fen. Addressed to a prisoner in Barracks 6b.



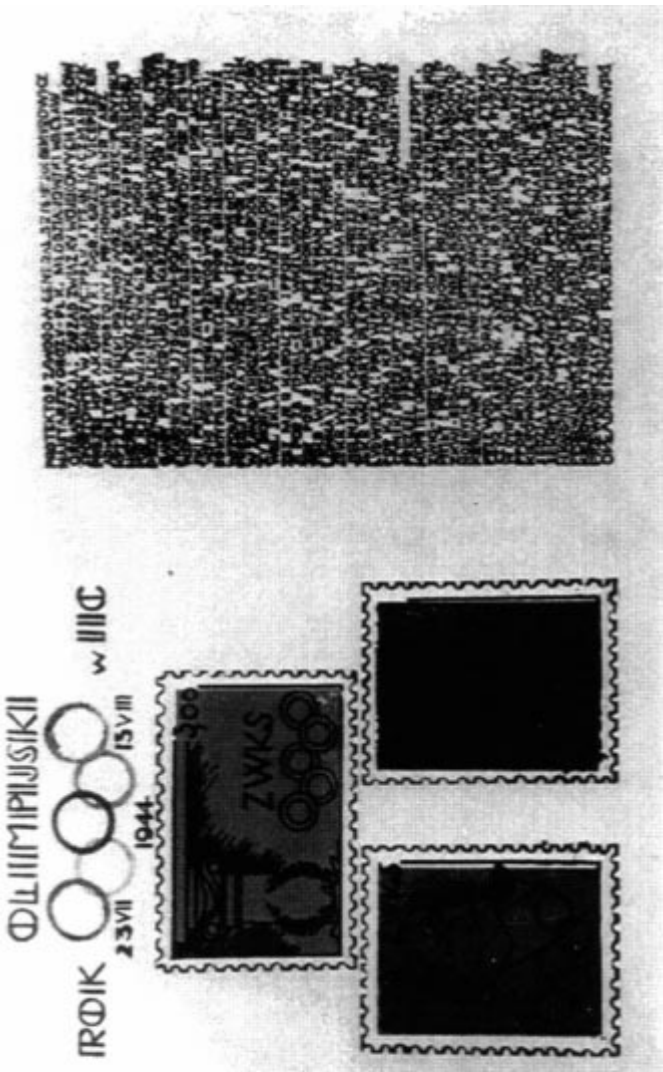
Handmade cover posted short 10 fen. Postage due charged at double rate, 2 x 10 fen. To a prisoner in Barracks 10a.





5.0 1944 POLISH OFFICERS POW CAMP AT WOLDENBERG

5.4 The Official Program with Essays



Above: Cover of the Program listing calendar of events.

Left: Inside showing 3 stamps; 1, 2, and 3 marks to finance the Games.

Below: Embossed paper medal awarded to the winners.

