

S u m m a r y

WOLDENBERGERS' UNIVERSITY: THE DOCUMENTS

During World War II, in the German town of Woldenberg, there was German prisoner-of-war camp for Polish officers called Oflag II C Woldenberg. The camp housed roughly 6,000 Polish officers and about 700 non-commissioned officers and privates. The above mentioned numbers fluctuated over time but to a relatively small extent. These are the people we call Woldenbergers today, though Woldenberg is now the Polish town of Dobiegniew, located in Lubuskie, north-east of Gorzów Wielkopolski.

Among the officers were nearly 800 teachers and a couple of hundred students who had attended various universities before the war. They decided to make use of their time in captivity by continuing their education. To this end, they sought the help of the academics held in the camp. More than 80 specialists decided to respond to the request and provide tutorials, discussion sessions, seminars, lectures, and finally also examinations. This group of specialists included two professors, five docents (a European title equivalent to an associate professor or reader), 18 doctors, and several dozen prisoners with masters degrees.

The initiative was soon followed by other projects. As a result, the camp was very quickly transformed into a major Polish educational institution; the largest operating during WWII. Educational activities were undertaken on every possible level. Privates (among whom there occasionally occurred at that time illiterate people) were able to complete primary school, others were able to graduate from middle and high school or take university courses. A variety of training and specialist courses were organised, including electrical engineering, construction, welding, PE teaching, school or public administration, qualifications for librarians, socio-agricultural studies, beekeeping, crafts of food and food trade qualifications, merchants, fisheries qualifications, aviation, driving courses, and many more.

University education was conducted under a dozen or so specialist sections, though some put the figure as high as twenty or more. These included: philology, history, archaeology, pedagogy, social education, commerce, political economy, law, agriculture and forestry, geography, mathematics, and technical studies. In 1944, 1,500 students attended the camp's university classes.

Students and lecturers were able to benefit from a library housing around 30,000 academic books, mostly provided via donations from the International Red Cross. According to the records I was able to access, social education was the most popular university course, followed by political economy and pedagogy.

Final examinations were conducted only by those lecturers who were qualified to oversee examinations prewar. All other exams were held in front of a board consisting of two, three

or even four persons. After an exam, the student was handed an 'examination note' to certify his achievement. However, the applied terminology was humble. The final examinations were called "revised material checks" and the examination notes – "certificates of revised material". This kind of vocabulary was used due to German restrictions: the German camp administrators did not allow any reference to "university", "studies", or of course, "final examinations". That is why the records mention training courses, going over textbooks, review courses, or revised material checks. In the records, the name for the whole initiative is also a bit bizarre: "teaching aids for academic candidates". However clumsy, the names do not change the core of the activities in question. The Poles knew what's what, they knew that they had a university, *W o l d e n b e r g e r s' U n i v e r s i t y*.

Three academics played a special role in the camp university: professor Kazimierz Michałowski, an archaeologist from Warsaw University, docent doctor Karol Górski, a historian from Poznań University, and docent doctor of classical studies Wiktor Steffen, from Poznań University. These scholars not only held lectures and seminars and tutored their respective student sections, but they also served until the autumn of 1943 as board members for the Culture and Education Committee, established by the Polish chief camp elder to manage and control all sorts of educational, scientific, cultural, sport, and recreational activities within the camp. From this position they exercised managerial control over the university studies in the camp. In the Culture and Education Committee they were the only academics to serve, representing the interests of both teachers and students. However, in 1943 K. Michałowski and K. Górski quit the Culture and Education Committee for political reasons. W. Steffen was then forced until January of 1945 to represent himself the university matters.

The university was founded as a bottom-up initiative. That is why, for the first couple of years, no academic authorities were appointed. The various academic sections were relatively separate. A student body called the Polish Universities Students' Association "Fraternity" was founded on the 20th of July 1943 and was the only structure common to all sections. Even the students' transcripts issued from the second half of 1943, were formally just their "Fraternity" cards.

Each section had its own scholar attendant who was achieved his position only when asked to step up by the students. This meant that the scholar attendant was an advisor to the students' organisation rather than its supervisor. In this manner professor Michałowski attended to the archaeology section, docent Górski – history section and pedagogy section, docent Steffen – philology section, doctor L. Taylor – political economy section, doctor W. Janowski – mathematics section, docent J. Roliński – polytechnic section, etc. Furthermore, professor Michałowski advised the management of the whole "Fraternity" in the camp.

It wasn't until July 1944 that the team of professors and docents decided to seize power of the Woldenbergers' University, creating a makeshift academic senate. Professor K. Michałowski was then named director of academic studies in the camp, effectively the university rector. As a result, on the 1st of August 1944 the Woldenbergers' University had an established management headed by the rector. However, the German command continued to refuse to acknowledge the very existence of the university and its authorities. The Culture and Education Committee was the only body recognised by the Germans.

The Woldenbergers' University was working in extremely difficult circumstances. The everyday life of both students and academic teachers was shaped by captivity, German harassment, exceptionally cramped conditions, a shortage of seminar halls, textbooks and stationery, as well as cold and hunger. And still, it worked! Despite everything, everyone involved did his best to keep educational standards high and maintain academic customs. Apart from scheduled classes, a number of so-called "common lectures" were organised. These lectures were open to all the prisoners in the camp. From 1942 the university even managed to hold ceremonial inauguration of the academic year at the beginning of every October, followed in keeping with tradition by an inaugural lecture.

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of Woldenbergers' University, considering it was the only Polish university which managed to work on a large scale during WWII. The University rendered it possible for almost 1,600 students and academic teachers to make something of their five years of captivity. Many officers took university courses there for the first time, while others were able to continue the education they had started before the war. After the war, all of them were able to graduate faster, and start working in their destroyed country, sooner. The initiative was beneficial also to the scholars, who selflessly worked in the university behind bars. Staying in touch with academic and research activities allowed them to maintain their intellectual potential at the highest level, which was so needed in the postwar period.

An opinion has been expressed and justified in the book that Woldenbergers' University should be at present reestablished in Dobięgniew as a small branch of a great university, e.g. of Adam Mickiewicz University. It would be an excellent monument to the Polish heroes of Oflag II C Woldenberg.

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The book consists of three distinct parts. The first of them includes only the introductory chapter which concisely summarises information about Woldenbergers' University.

The second part includes four further chapters (II – V), aggregating copies of various records which I was able to obtain and which concerned academic studies in Oflag II C. The most important of these are the documents of docent W. Steffen, gathered together in the second chapter. This chapter contains lists of nearly 500 final examinations which took place over the seven sections, and which docent Steffen drew up himself in handwriting in the camp. Today these lists are of great importance because they preserved numerous names of students and teachers. Unfortunately, the lists are incomplete as they do not include finals from other sections. W. Steffen simply did not have enough time to complete them. It is worth mentioning, that docent Steffen drew up also a Woldenbergers' University matriculation register, and a list of all graduate works prepared in the camp. However, these records have not been found so far.

The third chapter gathers records related to three, oneyear Academic Courses for Teachers, organised and directed by docent K. Górski. These include various minutes, student lists and finals. The fourth chapter contains students' documents such as their assignments, revised material certificates and transcripts of their academic records.

The final chapter includes copies of documents distantly related to the academic courses, but important for a full understanding of teaching activities in Oflag II C. It includes lists of members of various specialist clubs, and timetables of training classes from September of 1941. These records also preserve the memory of numerous persons active in the camp.

The third part of the book consists of a detailed index of names, providing a complete reference of the people occurring both in my text in the book and in the copies of records included in its second part. It lists around 2,900 names, making it easy to locate all mentions of names interesting for particular readers and to get information about the role played by individual persons within the camp.

*Translated from Polish by
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