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STEINBECK AND SHAW IN A PRISON-CAMP!

What Soldiers In Captivity Do To Keep Themselves Entertained

(Written for "The Listener" by D. RUSSELL RANKIN)



MANY New Zealanders have been prisoners-of-war for several years now, and one of the questions that their relatives will have been asking is "What do they do to pass the time?" One answer to that question is given in this account, by a New Zealand soldier recently repatriated from Italy (left), of the initiative displayed in organising entertainments in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. From modest beginnings they worked up to a full-dress, two and a-half hour presentation of Steinbeck's "Of Mice And Men"!



"Borrowed" sheets and crepe-paper helped to transform these two British prisoners-of-war at Camp 52, Chiavari, into Mrs. Higgins and Eliza Doolittle for a performance of "Pygmalion"

TIME drags when you are a prisoner-of-war, and soon after arriving in "Campo Concentramento per Prigionieri di Guerra Numero 52," situated not far from Chiavari on the Italian Riviera, I began to take an interest in the entertainment side of our life. It was a new camp, so we started almost from scratch; there was no place for recreation or concerts or games, and the library boasted only 80 books for 3000 men.

To while away the winter evenings we first arranged for lecturers to visit the various huts and talk on any subjects

with which they were acquainted. This scheme, run by an Entertainment Committee, produced remarkable results, and the subjects varied from a wrestler's experiences, by Percy Foster, the South African wrestling star, to the intricacies of the London telephone system by two English P. and T. men. An Australian padre not only attended to the spiritual side of things, but also proved able to recount from memory, in the minutest detail, the stories of *Dracula* and *Jamaica Inn*. My own contribution was to give more than 40 two-hour talks on Hollywood and the film industry!

Card tournaments also helped to pass the hours, and, as the camp gradually found its feet, we purchased musical instruments,—a piano, guitars, violin, trumpet, and so on—and concerts began to take shape. A mouth-organ band was also organised. As the weather improved open-air concerts became possible and later the Italians obliged by completing a recreational hall, which we converted into a theatre to accommodate 1500 at a pinch. Our entertainments gradually reached a pretty high standard, and this camp now boasts a 19-piece symphony orchestra, a swing band, an accordion band, a choir, and all the other requisites of a first-class concert party. Their achievements have ranged from full performances of *The Messiah* to a pantomime, *Dick Whittington*.

Play-Acting Under Difficulties

My own interest was in theatricals and I helped to form a dramatic society in the early days of the camp. The prospects at that time were not very bright, however, because we had no plays, no theatre, no costumes, and no actors.

Still, five kindred spirits got together and decided to do what they could. We had no plays, so we wrote to the Red Cross and Y.M.C.A. and in a comparatively short time, several volumes of these arrived, mostly of the one-act variety. In the meantime, we wrote our own. They were not outstanding examples of stagecraft—but better than nothing. We had no regular place to rehearse and were hounded from one spot to another; we had no costumes and no means of buying materials, but we looted sheets and scrounged old clothes in all directions; we had no furniture, but it is amazing what can be done with stools

and blankets; we had no properties, but an ingenious craftsman can work wonders with the residue of Red Cross food parcels.

The Turning-Point

At first we contented ourselves with one-act or two-act plays such as *Catharine Parr* and *The Old Bull*, and plays we wrote ourselves, adapted from novels such as *The Mouthpiece*, *The Time Factor*, and *Jeeves to the Rescue*. We even attempted Shakespeare, but *Richard II*, though it pleased our padres, did not find popular favour.

At this time our audiences averaged between 300 and 500 persons and were steadily increasing.

Then came the turning-point. Into our ever-growing library came a copy of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, one of the most successful plays staged on Broadway in recent years. Though the majority at first considered it impossible, we decided to go ahead with our most ambitious project—the production of a two and a-half hour Broadway show in a prison-camp!

And so we began. There were long hours of copying out parts—all done by hand, since we had no typewriters—and rehearsals totalling eight hours a day, while we learnt a little of what professionals go through. We spent five weeks rehearsing *Of Mice and Men* and then gave it the biggest "advertising campaign" possible, with the aid of effective "one-sheet" posters done by an R.A.F. pilot who is a commercial artist in civilian life.

The Italians Were Helpful

Finally, to create the correct setting of the Salinas River country required by the plot, we persuaded the Italian camp authorities to let us scour the countryside (accompanied by the inevitable guards, of course), and bring back a miniature forest of ferns and shrubs. A problem that now faced us for the first time was to make our "leading lady"

(Continued on next page)

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