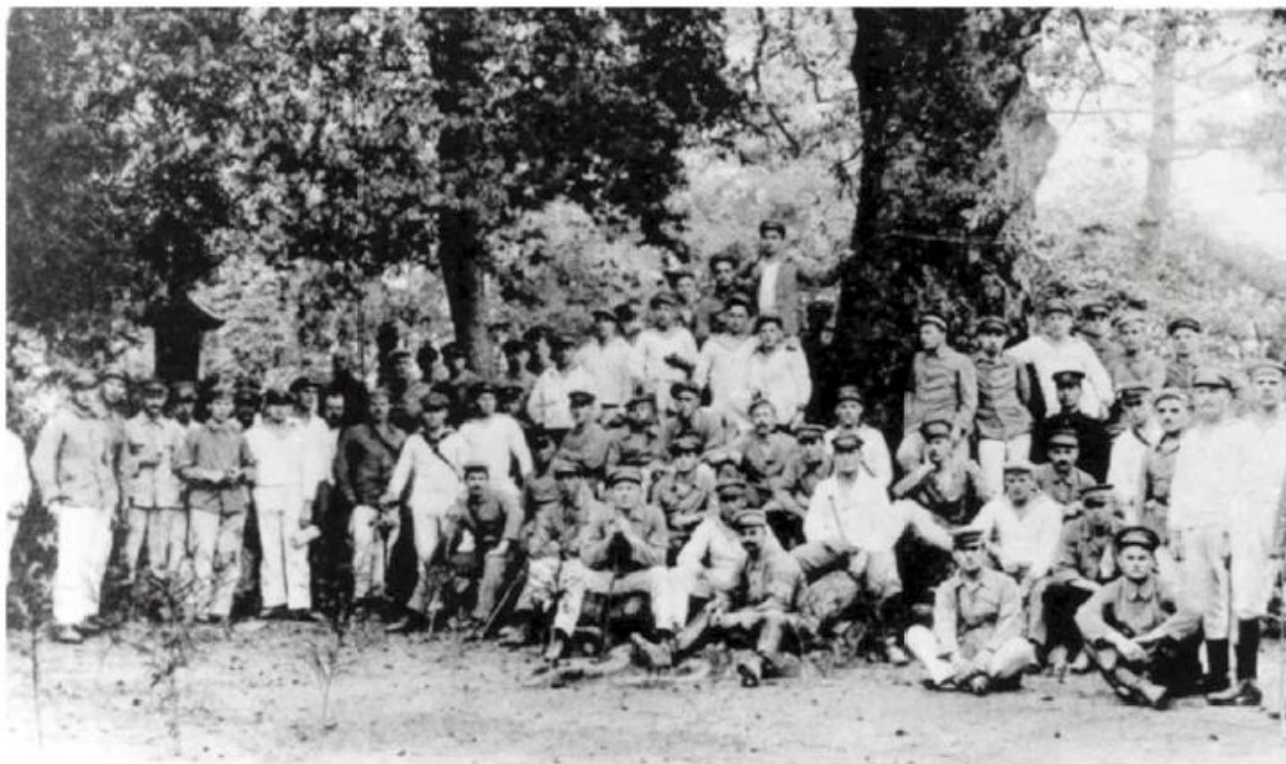


Kurume History Walks

No.11 Remembering German POWs ふりょ ドイツ兵俘虜の足跡をたずねて



Could you guess where the photo above was captured? They don't seem to be Asian. Then is it anywhere in Europe? But, if you pay attention to each person, you may find some Asian, Japanese people among them and also a small shrine on the back left.

It was at the Sasayama-jinja Shrine during the Taisho era (1912-1926) that they were photographed. At that time, over 1,300 German POWs* of World War I “lived” in Kurume.

*POW: Prisoner Of War



ACCESS to the Sasayama-jinja Shrine:
10 min on foot to the north from JR Kurume Station

◆ German POWs and Kurume

The reason why such many German POWs stayed in Kurume was that Japan had taken part in World War I. On the grounds of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japan declared war against Germany. On October 31st, 1914, Japanese forces opened to attack the German settlement at Tsingtao (China). It concluded with the surrender of the German forces. 4,791 of the soldiers were captured and 4,679 of them were sent to Japan.

Sixteen POW camps were established around the country. In Kurume, at first, they were separately sent to the four different sites, such as temples, traditional restaurant, and arsenal building (1-4 on the map). And in June 1915, a new camp (5) was set up by reusing military hospital facilities in order to merge the existing sites. The Kurume POW camp interned all captives who had been in the other four sites, the Kumamoto and the Fukuoka camp. It became one of the largest, which held 1,319 soldiers at most, until it was closed on March 12th, 1920.

The word “POW camp” evokes images of the concentration camp of Japanese forces or the Nazis during World War II. However, the Kurume camp was managed under the Hague Convention, which regulated the humanistic treatment of the captives. The Japanese government paid them the salary based on their rank and permitted them to exchange letters, to take a newspaper, to play sports or music, and other activities with some limitation. They held a concert almost weekly and performed a theater with the real costumes.

People in Japan had learned the western culture and scientific technology from Germany. So, that many German people, who were captives, stayed in the country, was a splendid opportunity to learn their technology.

In our city, two manufacturers of rubber-soled socks (*tabi*) and a flour milling company employed them. Every morning they went to work by train with Japanese guards.

The people were welcoming them not only because they brought a positive economic impact, but also because the people admired their correct and smart behavior and their culture.



◆ Excursion

It is a great pity that the Kurume POW camp had a poor reputation. The quarters and the grounds were not enough spacious for many people. And it was located in town, therefore German soldiers and the Japanese force both had the psychological feeling of tension. In that kind of condition, the great enjoyment for them was to go on an excursion as a diversion and exercise.

They went, almost of the time, to walk in the mountain or to swim in the river, and sometimes, to see the cherry blossoms or to do the sightseeing in the towns near Kurume.

They took a lot of souvenir photographs. The one on the first page at the Sasayama-jinja Shrine was also one of these photos. A large tree in the background is always there.

Some photographers followed them, going on the excursion for making and selling postcards. There is a photo which was taken when POWs looked at a pond from the Mitarai Bridge on the way to visit the Kora-taisha Shrine. The bridge and a house in the background still exist today.



At the Kora-taisha Shrine



In the Chikugo River



On the Mitarai Bridge



They came to visit the memorial places of the POWs from the Japanese Cultural Center of Frankfurt.



ACCESS to the Kora-taisha Shrine:
10 min on foot to the east from the bus stop "Miimachi" of Nishitetsu Bus.

◆ Cenotaph for the deceased German POWs

At the Kurume POW camp, eleven soldiers passed away during five years and three months of confinement to prison. The first two died of the gunshot wound and the pyemia from the war in Qingdao, others were by the infection disease such as pneumonia and tuberculosis. But there was no death caused by Spanish flu that had been pandemic. It could say that the Kurume POW camp archived hygiene management to keep a level higher than a definite level.

After the Christian funerals, the bodies were buried at the army cemetery of Mii-Hatazaki. When all German soldiers were released and returned to the country, they brought the bones of their dead comrades - except two bodies which are still not known where those were buried.

This memorial monument seemed to be erected before their departure. German soldiers probably ordered to some Japanese stonemasons. It bears an inscription of the deceased soldiers' name and the condolences in German:

*SCHWERT ENTWUNDEN DURCH
SCHICKSALS MACHT GEFANGEN
GEBUNDEN SANKT IHR ZUR NACHT*
(Sword wrested by fate makes the prisoner
tied up for the night)

*ZUM GEDÄCHTNIS DEN KAMERADEN
DIE FERN DER HEIMAT STARBEN* (In
memory of the comrades who died far from
home)

In 1997, the monument was transferred to by the walking pass near the pond of the Shogen-ji Temple. In 1998, a Lindenbaum tree from Germany was planted next to the monument.



ACCESS to the Cenotaph:
5 min on foot to the south from the bus stop "Keijinjoguchi" of Nishitetsu Bus.

◆ The Naruto German House

The Bando POW camp, which was settled at Naruto City, Tokushima Prefecture, was said to be the most "exemplary" and is famous as the place where Beethoven's "the Symphony No.9" was performed for the first time in Japan.

The German House exhibits the pictures, the materials, and other things about their life in detention. The grounds where the camp used to exist was transformed into "the German Village Park". There is also "the German Bridge" and a cenotaph.

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