

A WARTIME MEMORY OF CHRISTMAS IN MARKET HARBOROUGH

By Len Bale



It was Christmas, 1944 and it had been snowing – but we must go back in time for twelve to fifteen months for the start of this story.

On Farndon Road, about where the business blocks, AVP and the mobile home park are situated, there was a prisoner-of-war camp. Originally it was tented and with Italian POWs held there. The tents were later replaced by wooden huts and the Italians by Germans.

By 1943, with the influx of American troops, it became clear that there would be no German invasion of England and no hope of Germans escaping back to the continent and so they were allowed out into the town unescorted. They wore distinctive ‘uniforms’ with big coloured patches on the back. They worked on farms during the day for which they were paid. How much, I don’t know. They were allowed to go to the cinemas (we had two then – the Ritz and the Oriental) and to dances.

It was during this time that my parents met and befriended Leo. Leo Weisslammlé would come to our house at 41, Newcombe Street in the evenings. He had a fair knowledge of the English language, so it was not difficult to talk with him.

He told us about his family and his wife, Bertha, and how none of the ordinary working class Germans wanted to go to war, but he, along with thousands of others, was conscripted into the army.

He enjoyed his time with us and could not understand how and ‘enemy family’ could be so kind. When it was time for him to return to camp (there was a curfew for POWs) my father would walk back along Welland Park Road with him, taking the dog for a walk at the same time.

In early December, 1944, we invited him to come to us on Christmas Day but a few days later the German camp was moved to somewhere near Syston and we did not expect

to see Leo again. However, on Christmas Day, around midday, who should turn up but Leo. He had managed to get a lift into Leicester and had walked most of the way from there in order to join us for our Christmas meal. Around four o’clock he said it was time for him to be getting back. My folks wondered if it would be possible for him to stay overnight. The only way to find out was to telephone the camp. There weren’t many telephones around in those days the nearest to us being the telephone box on Northampton Road. Leo and Dad went off to make the call which was a bit nerve-racking because we didn’t know how to use a telephone!



HEAVY SNOW WINTER 1947.



GERMAN POW DRIVING COMBINE HARVESTER ON A FARM NEAR MARKET HARBOROUGH.

Anyway, they got through but sadly Leo was refused permission to stay. By now time was passing and the light fading so it was decided to get him on a train, at least to Leicester.

Remember this was Christmas Day! But in those days the LMS (London, Midland and Scottish Railway) ran trains - good old steam trains – even on Christmas Day.

After the war, Leo was repatriated and later invited us to Germany to visit him and his family. Unfortunately, I was unable to go, but my mother, father and sister went. They were met by Leo and Bertha who was crying tears of joy to be able to meet the English family that had befriended an ‘enemy soldier.’ They had been told that we were torturing prisoners of war.

So began a long and lasting friendship until, sadly, both of them passed away.



ITALIAN POWS WORKING ON THE LAND NEAR MARKET HARBOROUGH.