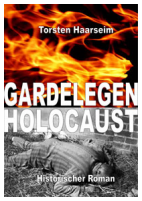

Over 1,000 people lost their lives in Gardelegen, Germany April 13, 1945, but with the help of artifacts, history records and individuals, their story lives on today.

After several years of research, 48-year-old Torsten Haarseim has completed a book recounting the WWII massacre which took place in his hometown, and the “Gardelegen Holocaust” book wouldn’t have been quite the same without aid from Elton Oltjenbruns of Holyoke.

“As part of my research, I received contact with Elton Oltjenbruns,” said Haarseim. “From 2011 to 2013, he wrote to me and told me about what happened. For that I thank him very much in this way.”

The first letter was sent from Haarseim June 16, 2011, as he pieced together the puzzle of the Gardelegen massacre. Since Oltjenbruns does not have a computer and Haarseim does not speak English, the two have been corresponding by mailing letters and other documents, with the German using the Internet to translate his writing into English.

“The letters have brought back memories that I would like to forget,” said Oltjenbruns in his second letter. “But memories of the war are hard to erase from one’s mind.”

This Holyoke boy was 22 when he was drafted into the Army at Fort Logan in October 1942. He was one of the first to enter the newly-organized 102nd Infantry Division.

By September 1944, Oltjenbruns was one of 8,000 on a troop ship landing at Cherbourg, France. As a medic and ambulance driver, he served with the 2nd Battalion aid station involved with care and evacuation. Oltjenbruns was in Europe about a year, being discharged Nov. 11, 1945.

After Haarseim's first letter of inquiry, Oltjenbruns, now in his 90s, confirmed he was with the 2nd Battalion of the 405th Regiment of the 102nd Infantry Division (the Ozarks), the first unit to come upon the massacre at Gardelegen.

In Germany in mid-April 1945, nearing the end of the war, U.S. forces occupied the Gardelegen area after a quick surrender by the Germans. An American lieutenant who had been captured led the Germans to believe the American tanks were upon Gardelegen, ready to blast the city. The surrender interrupted the Germans who were hastily trying to conceal the atrocity taking place on the outskirts of town.

At the beginning of April, an evacuation had been ordered for the political and military prisoners being held at the Mittelbau-Dora labor camp. They were driven west toward other German camps to escape the Russians.

Forced from the train about 12 kilometers from Gardelegen, the starved prisoners began their death march, with only 1,200 reaching Gardelegen, as many fell and were shot along the road.

Hearing the town of Gardelegen would soon fall, on April 13 the sick and weak prisoners, who greatly outnumbered the German soldiers, were taken to a large cement barn on the Isenschnibbe estate just outside the town before they could turn on their captors or give secrets to the Allies.

"I am sorry that I have reminded you of the awful experiences of war and in particular the massacre of Gardelegen," Haarseim wrote to Oltjenbruns. "I myself remember almost daily because I live on the surface of the former Remonteschule. From here the prisoners ran on the 13th of April, 1945 to the barn."

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