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## *In Search of the Wind-Band: An International Expedition*

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By Daniel Rager

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***In Search of the Wind-Band: An International Expedition***

**By Daniel Rager**



*In Search of the Wind-Band: An International Expedition* is a new interactive E-book, exploring 16 countries. The first-of-a-kind, interactive encyclopedic e-book uses text, video, mp3 and pdf files to bring the history and development of the wind-band to life.

**The following pages contain a sample of  
Chapter 12:**

**Penitentiary Wind Music**

*(Prison, & WWI & II, Internment Camps)*

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EXCERPT CHAPTER 12

## In Search of the Wind-band

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## CHAPTER 12: Penitentiary Wind Music (Prison, & WWI & II, Internment Camps)

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Throughout the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, penitentiaries have had various types of music within prison systems. Documentation regarding prison instrumental ensembles was not always recorded or presumed not important enough to warrant recognition. Music in prisons has been used for a variety of purposes, depending upon the situation and prison system.

During World War I, for example, there were many types of musical ensembles from orchestras to bands set-up by the American YMCA (American Young Men's Christian Association), that helped organize welfare services for prisoners of war. Collaborating with the World's Alliance of YMCAs, based in Geneva, and various national Associations in combative and neutral nations, the YMCA mobilized on an international basis to assist prisoners of war. The first major WPA (War Prisoners' Aid) organization was set up in Russia in November 1915. More on this prison camp and its many musical groups can be found later in this chapter. Similarly, material on Police wind-bands (Germany & Mexican) can be located in subsequent chapters.



Prison Band  
Colorado State Penitentiary / 1890-1900?

Prisons in the United States often have educational programs or activities designed to keep prisoners busy. The State Penitentiary in Canon City, Colorado for example had a program designed by Warden Roy Best (1900-54), who believed activities, such as exercise and hobbies, should be encouraged as a reward for men who followed prison rules. From the late 19th century, Canon City Penitentiary had a band that performed concerts for both prisoners and the public.

Best was preceded by William Crawford (unknown) in 1930, who improved and remodeled the prison conditions by requesting money for new recreational grounds, which included baseball, basketball, football, track and supervised boxing matches.

By 1932, Best had completed the renovation project that included a prison chapel. This area had multiple uses and served as a place for social functions and religious services. It had a stage built into the room to present concerts and theatre shows. The prison also had an orchestra that gave concerts for the public as well as prisoners, who on occasion, could attend shows performed by entertainers from the outside. One such event was the 1934 New Year's Day minstrel show that was presented to the prisoners.

By 1933, the prison band had 34 members. In addition to playing in the newly built theatre, they performed every Sunday afternoon in front of the prison on the porch of the Administration Building. The concert season went from Memorial Day through mid-August and was attended by the public, many

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of whom traveled for miles to hear the band. The popularity of the band was wide-spread, providing opportunities to perform at the Colorado State Fair in Pueblo and the Royal Gorge Roundup Rodeo in Cañon City, Colorado. Concerts of the band remained popular, with enthusiastic attendance until 1950. The band continued performing until 1964 when it went out of existence.

Instrumentation was not well documented and varied over the years ranging from an all brass band to a mixed wind group made-up of clarinets, saxophones, cornets, trumpets, baritones, tuba and percussion.

Prison reform took on many characteristics in the early 20th century. James C. Sanders (1865-1922) was Warden at the Fort Madison Prison in Iowa. For a decade, from 1908 to around 1918, Sanders instituted changes to the prison that were unconventional for the era. He abolished the lock step and degrading uniforms of prisoners, established an orchestra and wind-band, and allowed recreational sport teams such as baseball and basketball.

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### **WW I Russian Prison Music**

During World War I, American YMCA (American Young Men's Christian Association) helped organize welfare services for prisoners of war. Collaborating with the World's Alliance of YMCAs, based in Geneva, and various national Associations in combative and neutral nations, the YMCA mobilized on an international basis to assist prisoners of war. The first major WPA (War Prisoners' Aid) organization was set up in Russia in November 1915. The camp was in Braunau-in-Böhmen (Bohemia) and held mostly Russian POWs. Because many soldiers lacked education, the YMCA developed educational programs to teach reading and writing in German and Russian. Other classes taught arithmetic, geography and woodcarving. Committees were created for each academic area. In February 1917, instruments were brought in and a music committee was formed. It was the most popular of all committees in the POW camp organizing five ensembles:

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Both the band and orchestra played at theater and motion picture shows in the camp and presented short musical programs of Russian and Polish folk songs in the reading rooms every evening. These groups also performed for funerals and took part in Russian Orthodox religious services on Sunday mornings and during the Christmas holidays.

### **WW II Nazi Concentration Camp Music**

During the reign of the Nazi regime, incarcerated prisoners were often forced to perform in musical ensembles. Whether it was singing or performing in an instrumental ensemble, the German Army used

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music as a way to torture prisoners and provide entertainment for themselves. Many concentration camps had a variety of musical ensembles ranging from string quartets, orchestras, bands to choirs. These groups were generally gender-oriented, being all male or female. Each concentration camp was different and musicians in groups changed over time as they were either transferred to other camps, died from a multitude of reasons or sent to the gas chambers.

It is not the intent of this writer to go into detail on the music of the Nazi concentration camps because it is a subject so vast, there are libraries filled with books, papers, films and articles beyond the scope of any one book. This section provides a small sample of what is available and is the writer's hope that interest and additional information on the subject can be augmented given today's technology resources.

Prior to WWII and only 51 days after Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) took office, the Nazis built the first concentration camp for political prisoners which opened on March 22, 1933. Known as the Dachau Concentration Camp, it became the prototype for other Nazi camps.

Throughout the years, a wide range of musical activities developed in Dachau, both voluntary and forced. In 1938, Herbert Zipper (1904-97), an internationally renowned arts activist, composer and conductor was sent to Dachau. He arranged to construct crude musical instruments out of stolen materials such as wood and wire and formed a small secret orchestra that performed on Sunday afternoons in the unused latrine. Sheet music was scarce, so Zipper composed many of the compositions for his 14 member orchestra. He also composed many songs that were sung by inmates including the Dachau Lied (Dachau song), which he co-wrote with Jura Soyfer (1912-39), journalist and writer.

Throughout his imprisonment, Zipper used music and poetry to boost the morale and spirits of the prisoners. He said that the concerts were not meant for entertainment, but as a means of keeping some measure of civilization in their lives.

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Survivors described having experienced orchestral concerts, cabaret performances, church music, communal singing, and various choirs and forced singing. On the other hand, there were inmates who did not encounter any cultural activities. When the camp was visited by a high level officer or visitor, a band often stood upright in front of the canteen block and played marches.

Most camps had musical groups known as "Official Camp Orchestras." These groups contained both amateur and professional musicians. They were ordered or tolerated by camp administration to entertain the Nazi soldiers and visiting officials. The first band was created in Auschwitz in December 1940 on the orders of the SS. Upon notice, seven musicians had their instruments forwarded from their homes to the



Buchenwald concentration camp, prison band, April 11, 1945

camp. The first rehearsal began on January 6, 1941, in Block 24 of the main camp. Instrumentation of the first seven was violin, double-bass, accordion, trumpet, saxophone and percussion. With permission from camp authorities, the size of the group grew so big that it was divided into two sections. The first group became a symphony orchestra with 80 musicians, the second became a brass band with nearly 120 members. Bands were segregated and subsequently formed in the Birkenau women's camp, the men's Gypsy camp, the Theresienstadt family camp and in the Monowitz camp as well as others. Most of these bands were brass bands, although string and other instruments performed in them.

The repertoire of Auschwitz prison bands included parlor music, marches, dance music, film and operetta melodies, classical music including large works such as Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, opera excerpts and popular tunes of the day. All concert programs were approved by camp authorities including its personnel and rehearsal schedules. A juxtaposition was created by the use of such musical groups. For example, prison camp officials originally created prison bands because they had heard one in another camp and thus, wanted to have their own prisoner band for the sake of prestige and cultural expression. On the other hand, the administration party wanted to use the band(s) in daily camp operations. The operation of such a venture was not easy because they had to obtain musical instruments for prisoners, find music to play, obtain accessories such as music stands etc., locate or create rehearsal space and venues for the band to perform, if they were not marching, and most importantly, search out and find the musicians and conductors within the prison camp(s). Most musicians in a camp were concentrated into special labor crews and used common quarters. Unlike other prisoners, they enjoyed certain privileges with respect to housing, forced labor and rations.

The functions of prison bands were diverse. Prisoners marched to the beat of drums and music on their way to the laboring fields and then again at the end of the day when returning to their quarters. A contrasting example was a band playing Beethoven's Fidelio from his Leonore Overture while roll call was being performed in the summer of 1943. Music such as this gave prisoners strength and hope in a desperate time. The SS had unlimited power and often forced bands to play incidental and background music for public punishments or executions. Herman Sachnowitz (1921-78), holocaust survivor and trumpeter described his duties at the Monowitz camp: Every morning the band played as work crews departed and then again in the evening when prisoners returned to camp. They played for many occasions such as executions, which occurred on Sunday afternoons or evening. The SS may have intended the music to drown out protests or final curses of those being killed and often surrounded the band with loaded weapons. An additional assignment for camp bands was to perform for ceremonial celebrations, such as Nazi holidays or inspection tours. In the main camp, they entertained camp commandant SS-Obersturmführer Rudolf Höss, but on certain Sundays they played for inmates. Bands sometimes played adjacent to railway platforms while incoming prisoners were being selected and separated. Depending upon the nationality of the arrivals, the band would perform Czech, Polish or Hungarian music. This kept people both calm and deceived during their arrival.

View other instrumentation, videos, and mp3 

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For more information, or to purchase the *In Search of the Wind-Band*, contact Daniel Rager at [windbandhistory@gmail.com](mailto:windbandhistory@gmail.com)

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