

## Philatelic Club in Oflag IIC, a World War II German Prisoner of War Camp for Officers

By Stanley Robboy (North Carolina) & Stanislaw Wekka (Poland)

Nicolaus Copernicus (in Polish, Mikołaj Kopernik) (1473-1543) was a Renaissance mathematician and astronomer whose scientific observations changed our understanding of our place in the heavens (a story for a forthcoming article). From a philatelic viewpoint, he stands out as one of the most celebrated of physicians of all times. This article tells of a place and time most unusual in which Copernicus was honored.

The prisoners that the Germans held during World War II in Woldenberg (then Germany and now Poland since the war's end), organized a philatelic club and issued their own postage stamps that could be used only within the camp.

The camp, built in September 1939, was initially called Stalag II C Woldenberg and housed 14,000 war prisoners (the term "Stalag", contracted from the German Stammlager, designated a prisoner-of-war camp). All prisoners there were ordinary soldiers and noncommissioned officers. Some nine months later, the Germans reorganized the camp, renaming it Oflag II C Woldenberg (the term "Oflag," contracted from the German Ofizierslager, indicated a camp only for officers who were prisoners-of-war). At its maximum, the camp held 6,000 imprisoned Polish military officers.

The camp was constructed just outside of Woldenberg (known today as Dobiegniew) and lies about 150 miles East of Berlin. The region was originally part of Germany and located at its then easternmost border, but it became Polish after 1945.

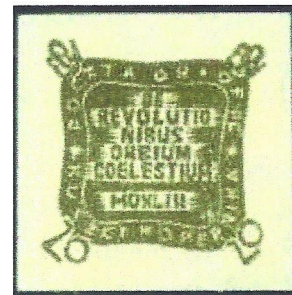
The Wehrmacht controlled the camp. In observing the international convention for prisoners of war, the International Red Cross provided prisoners with small parcels and letters from their families. Officers could not be required to work.

Some 80 officers who had been professors or teachers in civilian life, began cultural programs, which included classes in philosophy and law, as well as French and English. Some of the prisoners even completed full university courses that were recognized after the war. The camp prisoners began a theater and an orchestra. They also organized cultural clubs, including the Philatelists' Circle and a post office.

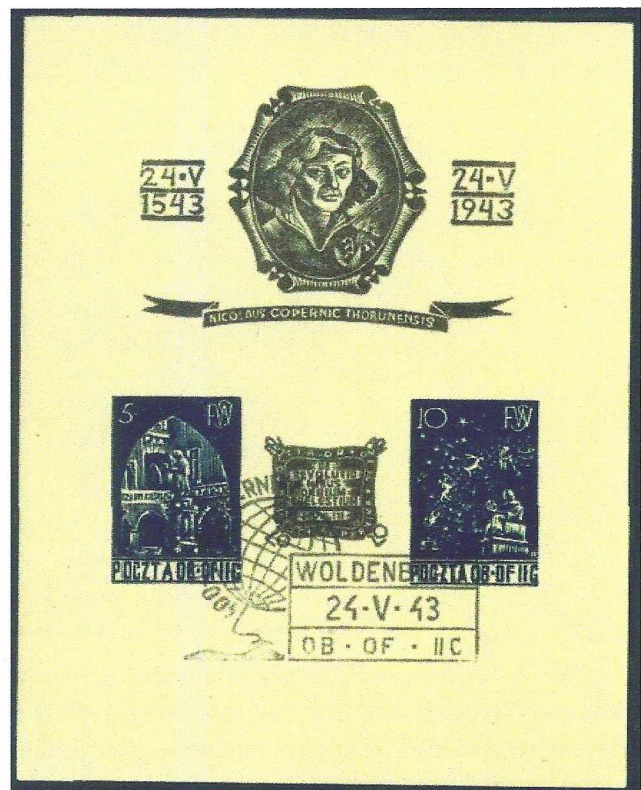
The Germans, when closing the camp in January 1945, transported the prisoners to Western Germany where they remained until the Allied forces from France, Great Britain, Poland, and the U.S.A. liberated them. It



Copernicus. (Fischer Woldenberg 19 (5f) & 20 (10f))



Copernicus. (Fischer Woldenberg 21 (20f))



Copernicus. (Fischer Woldenberg 35f (+65f) (about 500 in circulation) (image reduced)

was only then that the world learned of the philatelic club, and the stamps and commemorative cancellations they produced. The stamps were printed on recycled paper reused from incoming letters and parcel wrappings.

Stanislaw Wekka, a teacher of geography turned stamp collector and dealer in Bydgoszcz, Poland, estimates that the Woldenberg "Philatelists Circle" produced a maximum of 10 copies of its stamp catalog, of which he is believed to have the only known existing catalog list-

ing all stamps and cancellations produced and used. The catalog had 26 numbered pages tied together with prisoner shoe shoestrings. The club issued 44 stamps and 24 postal cancellations.

These stamps from Oflag II C (Woldenberg) are not listed by Scott in its catalog, but are listed in the Fischer Catalog of Polish stamps (*Katalog Polskich Znaków Poczтовых*).